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Book Review

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book review

Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors

Compiled by Dith Pran;

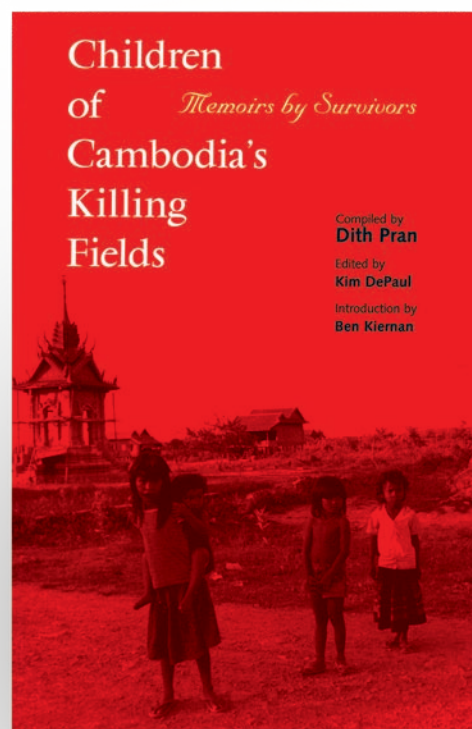
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reviewed by J. Holley Watts [Mine Action Information Center]



It is impossible to comprehend something as vast as the killing fields of Cambodia unless one can reduce it to the personal. Imagine the devastation wrought from the creeping irreversible loss of memory felt by an Alzheimer's patient. As the disease progresses with unrelenting tenacity, it obliterates any sense of family or community, leaving the victim isolated, frightened and powerless.

In a similar fashion, the Khmer Rouge set out to create a society without memory by destroying the very basis on which their culture stood—the family. Cambodia would become new, built on a foundation of isolation, fear and intimidation. They tried, but it didn't work.

Cambodia's Dith Pran told his story in the movie *The Killing Fields*. It was his intention in collecting these stories from that horrific time to allow the reader (as it says in the preface) to see "through the eyes of these Cambodian survivors who lost their childhood one sunny day in April 1975," the day the Khmer Rouge swept into Phnom Penh.

Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields is a book written more than 10 years ago, yet it is timeless. The 29 stories are different, because each is unique in its detail, yet alike because each is from the perspective of someone who

was a child at the time. Each story is also alike for the fact that each person relating a story was witness to or a participant in the murders, mutilations and mayhem, and somehow survived; because each person has miraculously created a new life with hope, purpose, accomplishment and happiness; and because each carries their memories and their nightmares with them every day.

This collection of memoirs allows each story to stand on its own as a testament to the indomitable nature of the human spirit despite the surrounding all-encompassing insanity, crushing humiliation and tremendous suffering.

In any high-school history class in the country, surely there are 29 students who could each read a chapter and in less than five minutes report aloud to the class. Hearing the sound of one's own voice might be just the thing that breaks through the sound barrier of our collective denial and makes us realize that these stories must not be forgotten. The book isn't light reading by any means, but it is a must-read. It was philosopher/poet George Santayana who said, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." We must listen to their voices or fear for the future of mankind.

Journalist Dith Pran died on 30 March 2008, from pancreatic cancer; yet this book stands as a tribute to this one man who, armed with determination and the truth, really did change the world. ♦



J. Holley Watts is Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Mine Action*, joining the MAIC staff in February 2008. Previously, she was a professional fundraiser for public TV and radio in Michigan and Virginia. In 2004 she wrote a memoir about her Red Cross 1966–67 Vietnam experience and most recently co-wrote and narrated a documentary about the program for release in 2008. Her interests include reading, writing poetry, public speaking, piano repair and traveling.

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