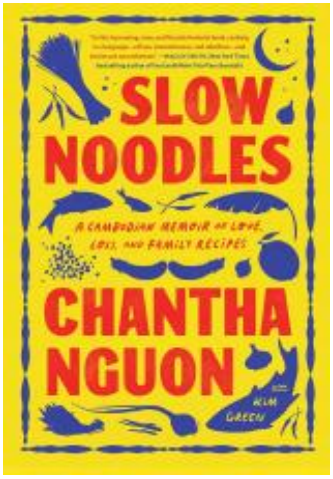
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Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes

by Chantha Nguon with Kim Green



About the Book

A haunting and beautiful memoir from a Cambodian refugee who lost her country and her family during Pol Pot's genocide in the 1970s but who finds hope by reclaiming the recipes she tasted in her mother's kitchen.

RECIPE: HOW TO CHANGE CLOTH INTO DIAMOND

Take a well-fed nine-year-old with a big family and a fancy education. Fold in 2 revolutions, 2 civil wars, and 1 wholesale extermination. Subtract a reliable source of food, life savings, and family members, until all are gone. Shave down childhood dreams for approximately two decades, until only subsistence remains.

In SLOW NOODLES, Chantha Nguon recounts her life as a Cambodian refugee who loses everything and everyone --- her home, her family, her country --- all but the remembered tastes and aromas of her mother?s kitchen. She summons the quiet rhythms of 1960s Battambang, her provincial hometown, before the dictator Pol Pot tore her country apart and killed more than a million Cambodians, many of them ethnic Vietnamese like Nguon and her family. Then, as an immigrant in Saigon, Nguon loses her mother, brothers and sister and eventually flees to a refugee camp in Thailand. For two decades in exile, she survives by cooking in a brothel, serving drinks in a nightclub, making and selling street food, becoming a suture nurse and weaving silk.

Nguon?s irrepressible spirit and determination come through in this lyrical memoir that includes more than 20 family recipes, such as sour chicken-lime soup, green papaya pickles and pâté de foie, as well as Khmer curries, stir-fries and handmade bánh canh noodles. Through it all, recreating the dishes from her childhood becomes an act of resistance, of reclaiming her place in the world, of upholding the values the Khmer Rouge sought to destroy, and of honoring the memory of her beloved mother, whose ?slow noodles? approach to healing and cooking prioritized time and care over expediency.

SLOW NOODLES is an inspiring testament to the power of food to keep alive a refugee?s connection to her past and spark hope for a beautiful life.

Discussion Guide

1. In the prologue, Chantha explains her ?slow noodles? philosophy in the kitchen and in life. What does that phrase, and the book?s title, mean to her?

2. Chantha writes that ?the Khmer Rouge informed the Cambodian people that we had no history.? What did ?Year Zero? signify to Pol Pot and his revolutionaries, and to the people who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975 to 1979?

3. Why did Chantha include so many food descriptions and recipes in her memoir? Why do you think there?s such a powerful connection between food and memory?

4. What sets Cambodian foodways apart from the cuisines of neighboring countries like Vietnam and Thailand? Why do you think Cambodian food has gotten less attention from food-curious Westerners than other national cuisines?

5. How does preserving Cambodian culinary history, something so important to Chantha, dovetail with the strength of women --- and their bonds --- in this memoir?

6. Chantha writes about the ?Rules for Women? (the Chbab Srey) and quotes a Khmer saying: ?Men are gold; women are cloth.? What do the Chbab Srey and the proverb have to say about women?s and girls? roles in the Cambodian traditions of Chantha?s childhood? In what ways does Chantha fulfill or defy those expectations in her own life?

7. On the surface, ?Silken Rebellion Fish Fry? is a recipe for rehabilitating a too-old fish using ?the art of culinary disguise.? What deeper truths about resilience and defiance does this recipe suggest? What does Chantha mean by the phrase ?silken rebellion??

8. When Chantha and her husband, Chan, were in the refugee camps, she saw a headline that said, ?Charity Gets Tired.? What does that mean? How can we avoid ?empathy fatigue? when there are so many refugees fleeing wars, revolutions and dire poverty, and so much uninformed rhetoric surrounding immigration policy?

9. A major theme of this memoir is the question of whether or not her mother?s middle-class values prepared Chantha to survive alone as a young, penniless refugee. She often calls herself ?spoiled? and ?soft.? Do you think Mae?s lessons, beliefs and recipes made Chantha too soft for a hard world or gave her the strength she would need to survive and

rebuild her life?

10. What does it mean to Chantha, her mother and her sister that she was born in the Year of the Buffalo? How do Chantha?s belief in astrology and her Catholic faith intertwine? How do her beliefs about fate and agency evolve over time?

11. What does the Elephant Fish fable say about a mother?s influence in a daughter?s life, even after the mother is gone? Why do you think Chantha ends her book with this story?

12. In the epilogue, Chantha?s daughter, Clara, writes, ?If there?s one thing I learned from my mother, it?s that losing everything is not the end of the story.? What does she mean by this? Do you find Chantha?s story of survival and resilience relatable or inspiring? Are there ways to apply her experiences to your own struggles and losses, even if your life is very different from hers?

Author Bio

Chantha Nguon was born in Cambodia and spent two decades as a refugee, until she was finally able to return to her homeland. She is the co-founder,of the Stung Treng Women?s Development Center, a social enterprise that offers a living wage, education, and social services to women and their families in rural northeastern Cambodia. A frequent public speaker, she has appeared at universities and on radio and TV news programs, including NPR?s "Morning Edition." She cooks often for friends and family, and for private events. An excerpt from SLOW NOODLES in *Hippocampus* was named a Longreads Best Personal Essay in 2021.

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