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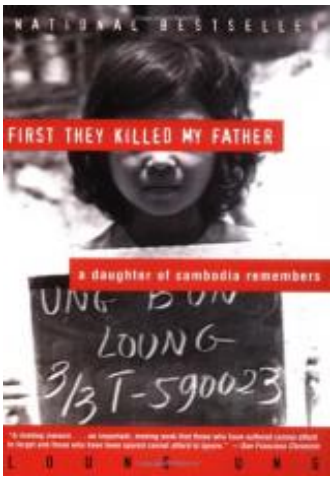
First They Killed My Father

by Loung Ung



About the Book

Until the age of five, Loung Ung lived in Phnom Penh, one of seven children of a high-ranking government official. She was a precocious child who loved the open city markets, fried crickets, chicken fights, and sassing her parents. When Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge army stormed into Phnom Penh in April 1975, Ung's family was forced to flee their home and hide their previous life of privilege. Eventually, they dispersed in order to survive. Loung was trained as a child soldier in a work camp for orphans while her other siblings were sent to labor camps. Only after the Vietnamese destroyed the Khmer Rouge were Loung and her surviving siblings slowly reunited.

Bolstered by the shocking bravery of one brother and sustained by her sister's gentle kindness amid brutality, Loung forged ahead to create a courageous new life. Harrowing yet hopeful, insightful and compelling, this family's story is truly unforgettable.

Discussion Guide

1. What fundamental problems existed in the Khmer Rouge's plan that caused the destruction of so many lives? Were there any values that the Khmer Rouge claimed to hold that you share?

2. What impact did the narrator's child's voice have on your experience as a reader? How would you characterize the transformation that takes place in her narrative voice throughout the story?

3. How did it affect your reading of the book that you were aware of Loung's father's impending death long before her?

4. Would you describe Loung as a feminist? How did the experiences of the Ung family differ during the war because of gender?

5. What was your impression of the final separation, both geographic and cultural, that Loung had with her surviving family? Did you sympathize with her eventual desire to assimilate into American culture, or had you expected her to be more aggressive about pursuing her family relationships earlier on?

6. Loung saw herself as a "strong" person, as did many other people in the book, and was eventually drafted into a soldier training camp as a result. What are the qualities of a survivor? How does one reconcile compassion with a will to survive? What qualities enabled her gentle sister Chou to survive as well?

7. With armed struggle a reality of life for people all over the world both past and present, how does one draw the line as to which means are ethical and unethical for coping with it, such as the author's current campaign against the use of landmines? Are there other tools of war that you believe should be broadly banned?

Author Bio

Loung Ung is National Spokesperson for the "Campaign for a Landmine Free World," a program of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. VVAF founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines which was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Ung lectures extensively throughout the United States and appears regularly in the media.

Critical Praise

"[Ung] tells her stories straightforwardly, vividly, and without any strenuous effort to explicate their importance, allowing the stories themselves to create their own impact. "

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