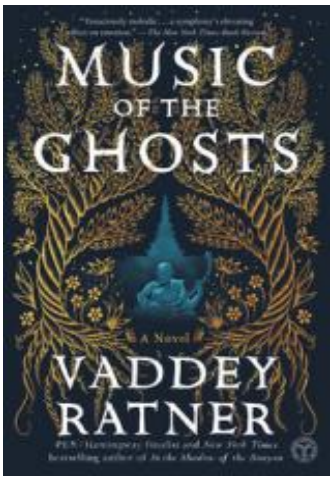
Music of the Ghosts

by Vaddey Ratner



About the Book

This ?novel of extraordinary humanity? (Madeleine Thien, author of DO NOT SAY WE HAVE NOTHING) from *New York Times* bestselling author Vaddey Ratner reveals ?the endless ways that families can be forged and broken hearts held? (*Chicago Tribune*) as a young woman begins an odyssey to discover the truth about her missing father.

Leaving the safety of America, Teera returns to Cambodia for the first time since her harrowing escape as a child refugee. She carries a letter from a man who mysteriously signs himself as ?the Old Musician? and claims to have known her father in the Khmer Rouge prison where he disappeared 25 years ago.

In Phnom Penh, Teera finds a society still in turmoil, where perpetrators and survivors of unfathomable violence live side by side, striving to mend their still-beloved country. She meets a young doctor who begins to open her heart, confronts her long-buried memories, and prepares to learn her father?s fate.

Meanwhile, the Old Musician, who earns his modest keep playing ceremonial music at a temple, awaits Teera?s visit. He will have to confess the bonds he shared with her parents, the passion with which they all embraced the Khmer Rouge?s illusory promise of a democratic society, and the truth about her father?s end.

A love story for things lost and restored, a lyrical hymn to the power of forgiveness, MUSIC OF THE GHOSTS is a ?sensitive portrait of the inheritance of survival? (*USA TODAY*) and a journey through the embattled geography of the heart where love can be reborn.

Discussion Guide

1. Teera feels sure that Amara has had to live with a ?divided self? since fleeing her homeland and coming to live in Minnesota. In what ways does Teera, herself, live with an incomplete sense of her identity?

2. When she first visits Wat Nagara, Teera panics, feeling sorrowful and isolated. ?She wanted to be alone with the ghosts, to seek communion with her loved ones. Instead she came face to face with her aloneness, saw it reflected wholly, indelibly, in the engraved invocation.? Compare these two kinds of solitude. Why is one so much more painful for her than the other?

3. Among the many parallels between the musicians? lives, both Sokhon and Tun abandon their young daughters on the eve of war. Review each father?s reasons for doing so. Is this abandonment more cruel or more kind?

4. Compare the ways in which the novel?s three main female characters, Channara, Amara and Suteera, deal with the trauma of the Cambodian genocide. What are the ?breaking points? for their grief? Would you characterize some of the women as stronger than others?

5. How does Mr. Chum become a father figure for Teera during her visit to Cambodia? Describe the many ways the novel invokes the meaning of family, disrupted and recreated.

6. ?The hues of one love simmer in another.? There are many layered relationships in the novel, in which certain figures become stand-ins or foils for another. Choose a few pairings to discuss. Some ideas include: Channara/Teera, Sokhon/Tun, Teera/Sita, Teera/Lah and Narunn/The Old Musician.

7. Several times in the novel, Teera?s first encounters are infused with questions from the past, as in her descriptions of meeting the Old Musician and Dr. Narunn. How does the author?s writing convey this interplay of perception, hope and memory? What does it reveal about the characters?

8. Much of the novel explores how we adapt to and survive in the face of inhumanity. Still, it doesn?t sugarcoat the lasting effects of fear, desperation, and ruthlessness on its characters? psyches. Would you say that MUSIC OF THE GHOSTS has an optimistic message?

9. ?Foreigners have often said ours is a ?culture of impunity.? An English phrase, as you know.... What does it really mean?? Discuss the abbot?s question. Judging by Ratner?s description in the book, would you describe the Cambodian culture as such?

10. One of MUSIC OF THE GHOSTS? most resonant themes is that of justice: what it entails, and what its limits are. What is your definition of justice? Is there a difference between justice and retribution, as the Old Musician suggests?

11. Consider the modern children in the book: the young monks, Lah, and Makara, the young addict-turned-novice. How are they affected by the legacy of the war and genocide?

12. The Old Musician feels responsible for Sokhon?s fate, and a single question has tormented him for decades. Was he right to do what he did in Slak Daek? What would you have done in the same situation? The question is a good one for debate.

Author Bio

Vaddey Ratner was five years old when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Having endured four years under the brutal regime, she arrived in the United States in 1981 as a refugee not knowing English and eventually went on to graduate summa cum laude from Cornell University, where she specialized in Southeast Asian history and literature. She lives in Potomac, Maryland.

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