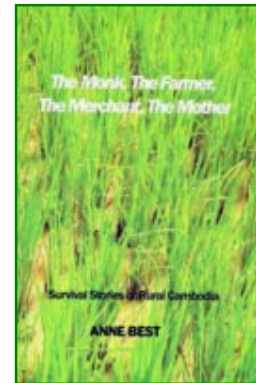


Survival Stories

The Monk, The Farmer, The Merchant, The Mother - Survival Stories in Rural Camodia

All proceeds from the sale of Anne Best's fascinating book go towards FEDA's House of Light and Knowledge (P'tea Ponleu Vichea) project, a community / youth centre in the village of Ksach Poy, near Battambang in north-west Cambodia.



The Stories of Four Ksach Poy Residents

The book tells the true stories of the lives of four respected elder residents of Ksach Poy village. Now old, they reflect on the events of their lives and talk about the traditions of Khmer village life. Mey Sampho tells of life in Buddhist monastery where he acts as Deputy to the Head Monk; Chhin Muon describes the techniques of rice farming upon which rural communities depend; Nun Chhuon talks of his impoverished childhood and his lifelong struggle to set up a number of successful small business; and Prom Tun recounts her dedicated and determined quest to train as a mid-wife and to bring safer modern techniques of midwifery to women in rural communities.

This is one of the only books which documents the lives of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime who stayed in Cambodia in their own words. It is also a significant anthropological reflection on Cambodian life over the past six decades.

Book Reviews

Cambodia Daily 12 Nov 2005 - Soojung Chang

VOICES OF EXPERIENCE - Anthropologist's Book Mines the Wisdom of Four Elderly Villagers

Mey Sampho, Chhin Muon, Nun Chhuon and Prom Tun have all spent most of their lives in Ksach Poy, a village of about 3,000 residents in Battambang province.

Like many rural communities there is no running water or electricity, incomes average about \$30 dollars a month and its residents, mostly farmers, have often struggled just to survive. The elderly subjects of "The Monk, the Farmer, the Merchant the Mother" may be presented as simply ordinary members of this typical rural village in Battambang district's Wat Kor commune, but their life stories as told to London-based anthropologist and author Anne Best, are hardly uneventful.

"These are extraordinary lives led by extraordinary people", Best said in a recent interview about the book, which was launched at Friends the Restaurant earlier this month, and was published with funding from oil firm BHP Billiton.

...The four narratives, using clear, simple prose, chronicle everything from the mundane details of daily work to personal struggles interrupted by fragments of Cambodia's tumultuous history. Some of the historical drama that makes its way into the narratives, such as the upheaval of the Pol Pot regime, are fairly universal Cambodian experiences while others are unique to the area, such as Thailand's occupation of Battambang province from 1941 to 1946. Mey Sampho, 75, or "the monk," speaks about the rules that govern life in the pagoda as well as his life as a married man before he was ordained. "the farmer," 84-year-old Chhin Muon, explains the cycle of rice farming and tells about the loss of his farm during the Pol Pot regime. The story about Nun Chhuon, the 77-year-old merchant, tells about growing

up in poverty and improving his conditions through commercial enterprises. And Prom Tun, 78, sheds light on the lives of women and her efforts of utilize western midwife training among the villagers.

Despite the part that history inevitably plays in shaping the stories the author emphasizes that this is not a political book. She did not wish to dwell on years of the Pol Pot regime. As so many other books about Cambodia do Instead, she wanted to capture the “small voices”. Her area of expertise [is] as an anthropologist who focuses on recording the oral histories of traditional cultures.

All the proceeds from the book will benefit a youth center that FEDA opened last Saturday in the village the project came about when Best offered to give the group one month of her time.

Astute readers may notice historical errors in the stories, which were intentionally left as they were recounted by the subjects of the book in order to preserve the authenticity of the stories.

“I took my own voice entirely out of the text” Best said. A group of village leaders chose the people who tell their stories, and the only requirement Best gave was that they be elderly members of the community. “It’s the old people who have all the knowledge,” she said “they were very very happy to talk”

Canberra, Australia- Melinda Smith

Amazing Survivors

I was extraordinarily touched by Anne Best’s book *The Monk, the Farmer, the Merchant, the Mother – Survival Stories of Rural Cambodia*.

This book contains the life stories of four longtime residents of Ksach Poy village in north west Cambodia, told in their own words. The stories present a rich picture of village life against the backdrop of Cambodia’s difficult 20th century: the French Protectorate, Thai occupation, civil war, the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese Occupation and the struggle for a free homegrown democracy.

Each story is very different, but each demonstrates the amazing resilience and resourcefulness of the villagers as they adapt in the face of incredible challenges. The fact that each story is told in plain, unadorned language serves only to increase its impact. Not only do all four villagers lose everything under the Khmer Rouge - suffering through backbreaking forced labour, family separation and the aftermath of near starvation and currency collapse - they also deal with other reversals of fortune over the course of their long lives. They lose parents, siblings, wives, children; they struggle with poverty and with just plain bad luck: two of the four storytellers had their houses burned to the ground by mistake (their homes were wrongly identified as arson targets). Neither incident happened under Pol Pot.

Through it all they just keep going, turning their hands to whatever they can to provide for themselves and their families. From rice farming to market gardening to shopkeeping, from fruit selling to ordination as a Buddhist monk, from taxi driving to fish selling, from weaving to professional midwifery to baking, the villagers keep bodies and souls together. It is a relief to hear Farmer Chhin Muon, 84, say, at the end of his story, ‘My life is quiet now’.

The Monk, the Farmer, the Merchant, the Mother – Survival Stories of Rural Cambodia makes fascinating reading and is a great introduction to rural Cambodia. I would also recommend it as a wonderful gift for anyone with loved ones in Cambodia, anyone about to travel to the country, and anyone with an interest in the human condition.

Andy's Open Door - Thursday, June 01, 2006

Oral rural history from Ksach Poy

A big thank you is due to Dickon Verey. A couple of days ago, he sent me a copy of a book titled **The Monk, The Farmer, The Merchant, The Mother**, which I have just this minute finished reading. I found it captivating in its simplicity. Dickon has spent the last couple of years raising funds to build and equip a community centre in the village of Ksach Poy, some six kilometres southeast of Battambang, in northwest Cambodia. The centre was the brainchild of the grassroots NGO, FEDA and has become an integral part of the village community.

One of the ways to raise money was to produce this book, compiled by Anne Best and containing the oral histories of four elder statesmen of the village, all in their late 70s or older. Their true life stories provide an absorbing glimpse into a Cambodia that has seen cataclysmic changes, though the fundamentals of village life is much the same today as it was in their youth. Simple but always a struggle. Mey Sampho tells of his life as a monk; Chinn Muon describes in detail how to farm rice; small businesses have been the lifeblood of Nun Chhuon, whilst Prom Tun was a dedicated midwife and mother. All four stories were fascinating, sincere and told with great dignity. I loved them.