

# **Never Fall Down Study Guide**

**Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick**

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## Plot Summary

Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick that tells the story of Arn, a young Cambodian boy who finds himself caught between two warring factions, changing his life forever. Arn is only eleven when the Khmer Rouge first came through his village of Battambang in 1975. He and his family are forced to leave their home and, like the rest of his village, are soon rounded up into large groups by the Khmer Rouge. First they are cataloged, during which process all those likely to revolt; those unable to work; those who are ill or disabled and those who are educated are weeded from the rest. They are taken and slaughtered, left in piles barely covered over, if at all. Those who remain after this cull are expected to work in rice fields for the good of all, given little if anything to eat, and constantly filled with the terror that they will be the next ones singled out to be beaten or worse. They are starved and still expected to work. The children are taken from the parents, boys going to one encampment, and girls to another. Arn has no idea if any of his family survives.

When the Vietnamese come to help Cambodia rid the country of the Khmer Rouge, Arn has been with them for so long that it is easy to convince him that the Vietnamese are the threat. He and the remaining children who don't run into the woods in the confusion are given guns and sent out to discover the locations of their 'enemies'. Arn manages to survive all of this, and eventually manages to get to the Thailand border where he is found and taken to a hospital. Sick and malnourished, he spends weeks there, befriending a man who visits often – Peter Pond. Peter takes a special interest in Arn and eventually brings him and two other children to New York where he adopts them and gives them a new life. The transition is far from easy, and Arn struggles with the things he has seen and was forced to do in Cambodia. Peter gives him purpose – a reason to live. He teaches Arn that he was chosen to survive, and to tell the story of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge to the rest of the world. In that way, perhaps he will save many. Now, the struggle to survive becomes the will to live.



# Chapter 1: Battambang, Cambodia: April 1975

## Summary

Arn is a young boy living in Battambang, Cambodia. In April of 1975, music is commonplace in his hometown where - whether rich or poor - music is the standard by which life is led. At night, the whole town is out, and Arn and his younger brother dance and sing for the crowd. Arn chooses a large woman in the crowd so that he and his brother can sneak into the movie house by pretending to be her children. Inside, they watch a war movie and afterward replay parts in the part; flying planes, shooting guns and acting as the heroes of their story. They hear a whistle and the sky in the distance turns white as the ground shakes beneath them and the palm trees quiver. Arn grabs his brother and they race to the little pond by their house, jumping in to stay safe.

The next day, life returns to normal and most of the fighting stays in the jungle. Arn worries about the prince and the American widow in China, but a high-ranking, bull-necked soldier at the market assures everyone who will listen that the government fighters are the best and the soldiers in the jungle are just peasants running around in black pajamas and sandals made out of old tires. He is sure the war will be over in a week. Deciding not to worry, Arn sells ice cream to make extra money. He soon learns valuable lessons such as to sell quickly before the ice cream melts and to do so during school hours when most rich kids are in classes. To do the latter he must sneak out of temple so he pays a monk to look away as he goes out, and spends his night at the corner gambling, but when his aunt discovers how much money he has, he is accused of coming by it dishonestly.

When Khmer Rouge comes through Battambang, Arn goes to his friend Hong's place, thinking they would watch for the return of the prince together, but Hong and his family are leaving town. The next morning, a bullhorn truck goes by instructing all people to leave as the American's are going to bomb the city. Arn thinks the idea of Americans coming is exciting.

## Analysis

Several themes emerge in this first chapter as the main character, Arn, is introduced, and his life is examined. Arn, his brothers and his sisters began life in relative affluence, their parents both opera stars who ran their own opera house. Compared to most, they lived a life of comfort in Cambodia until Arn's father is killed in a motorcycle accident. Unable to run the opera house alone, Arn's mother leaves her children with her sister while she seeks work in the city. Thus, the theme of poverty is examined from the standpoint of a child who works the streets in any capacity he can to earn enough



money for food for his siblings. Arn describes how he taught his brother to catch frogs, using little ones to catch the larger ones that are worth eating.

The theme of poverty continues as Arn describes the disparity between himself and the 'rich kids' including the differences in their access to education. Arn is educated only slightly by the monks in the temple while the rich kids can attend a school with structured education. The reader is acutely aware here that Arn would have been one of those affluent children not so long ago. Now, he struggles to learn letters and numbers by looking through the windows of the school until he is chased away by a teacher.

Another theme introduced in this chapter is war and the impact it has on the residents of the town of Battambang. For the most part, war passes Battambang by, the noise of shelling heard only in the distance, and the occasional shot close enough to make the ground beneath them shudder. When that happens, Arn grabs his younger brother and heads for the pond near their home. Jumping in, Arn is sure that hiding there in the water up to their noses, they will be safe. When the war began, one soldier in the market brags about the strength of the government soldiers, insisting they will beat the peasants in black pajamas in a week. The war theme continues as a parade of soldiers comes through town to announce that the war is over. The radio tells residents to support the soldiers, and give them anything they require, and they do despite having so little themselves. When the black pajama soldiers arrive to announce they are Khmer Rouge – Red Cambodia, they claim to be the government's soldiers and announce that the prince will be returning soon. They invite all soldiers in the town to join them, and soon there are many who come out of their homes wearing uniforms. The soldier who insisted the war would only last a week buries his uniform in the back yard.

The next theme introduced is friendship. When Khmer Rouge comes to Battambang, Arn heads to his rich friend Hong's house whose mother has insisted they must leave town immediately. Hong asks his mother if Arn can come with them, but Arn notices her glancing at their meager food rations and tells Hong that he wants to stay to see the prince, saving her the embarrassment of explaining why he couldn't join them. Feeling guilty, Hong's mother gives Arn more money than he could make in two months selling ice cream.

The theme of family is also strong in this first chapter as Arn recognizes the impact of the burden that his aunt copes when he and his siblings are left with her. She does her best, loving her sister's children like they are her own, but Arn realizes that they are a financial strain, and often stays with the monks at the temple to make things easier. Arn also learns to hustle the streets for extra income so that he can bring food to his siblings that they would otherwise not be able to afford. His aunt and older sister don't understand how he came to have so much extra money, and take him to the monks for an explanation. The monk Arn paid to look the other way when he left the temple to work the streets is no help despite payments made.



## **Discussion Question 1**

In which ways does Arn try to help his aunt look after his siblings?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How has Arn's life changed since the death of Arn's father, and what does Arn appear to miss most?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What do the Khmer Rouge want the residents of Battambang to do, and why?

## **Vocabulary**

grenade, celebrate, bullhorn, peasant, chaotic, excitement



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Before going home, Arn stops at the neighbour's house to try to catch a glimpse of the girl who lived there. She had been making faces back and forth with him, and Arn wasn't sure how he felt about her. By the time Arn gets home to tell his aunt about the Americans, she is frantic and begins directing him as to things he needs to carry. It seems to Arn as though the entire country is on the road. A boy Arn recognizes catches up with him and tells Arn that his father went to the airport with Khmer Rouge with the rest of the soldiers who joined them from the town, and his brother watched from the bushes as the Khmer Rouge shot them all.

They walk through town and see a big fire in the park. Even hospital patients walk until they drop. Arn is jostled away from his aunt and siblings and is carried in the throng over the bridge to where he finds himself alone. He puts the washtub he carries on his head, and walks alongside a pregnant woman and her husband. After a while, she leans on Arn, and he tries to be tough and help, but soon she slips to the side of the road. Her husband tries to get water from a soldier who uses his gun to club the man across the face. Arn learns then and there to avoid contact with Khmer Rouge as much as possible. More and more people are left behind as they collapse on the road and by the end of the first day, Arn realizes that he has gotten used to seeing the bodies. When it gets dark, the soldiers tell them to stop and Arn finally finds his aunt and the rest of the family. She almost cries with relief.

The next day they walk again until they come to an empty village where the soldiers begin settling everyone in fields of about a thousand. Arn and his family stop in the second group. The soldiers tell them to use whatever the farm has; claiming the owners are rich and can afford to dedicate their riches to the Revolution. Arn doesn't know what that is, but he does know that typically rich people didn't share, poor people did. Day three comes and goes, and they are not allowed to go home. A week passes. Munny asks a soldier when they can go home, and he tells Manny three days. In three days he tells Manny it'll be three days. Still no bombs have been dropped by the Americans either.

Arn's family make a hut using a sheet over a banyan tree with blankets spread below. Two of the Khmer Rouge came with a book to make a list of who was in each group and what their occupations were before. Then they announced that everyone would now be farmers. It quickly becomes clear to Arn that the world has turned upside down when he realizes that the Khmer Rouge are exterminating all of the upper class people of importance. They also took watches, jewelry, and valuables from everyone before they finally came and took everything, telling them that Angka will provide for them now. Jorami stops wearing her glasses, knowing that an imperfection like that can get her killed. Arn watches his siblings wither from lack of food and lack of hope. Everything is organized by the Khmer Rouge. Then they announce that all people will be separated





by sex and age. They are to take only the clothes on their backs, but they will only be gone three days.

## Analysis

The overriding theme in this chapter is survival, and humanity's capacity to do so against overwhelming odds. Entire towns are evacuated by the Khmer Rouge, pushed inland by threats of imminent American bombing raids which never happen. Carrying only what they can, Arn walks with his siblings and his aunt for days before they are finally resituated on a farm and expected to grow rice. Despite the fact that Arn's family were never farmers, and were not used to the rigors of that kind of lifestyle, they do as they are told, understanding that if they argue, or cause trouble, they simply vanish.

The Khmer Rouge are ruthless, working towards the harmonized blend of Communism by stripping everyone down to nothing, taking all they own. Only dedication to the cause will bring peace in their minds and the restructuring is without mercy. The weak are killed, as are the over educated, the teachers, the bankers and affluent of all other kinds who may be intelligent enough to balk at such restructuring. In order to enforce the new regime of Communism, the Khmer Rouge must first eliminate even the idea of any other form of governing. What remains of the populace is stripped of their remaining belongings. Forced to relinquish even their clothing, they are then provided with the homogenous black pajamas everyone else is wearing, and told once again that Angka will provide, although no one really understands who or what Angka is. Finally, they are all separated into sexes and age groups to be farmed out for different tasks. All of this creates a dependent and weak populace who will allow themselves to be led, directed, and controlled.

The theme of family is dismantled by the Khmer Rouge, and in this way, the last stronghold of resistance removed. While some parents may have tried to leave to save their children before, once separated, the fractured family members can do little more than obey, survive, and hope to see their loved ones again when the nightmare is over.

## Discussion Question 1

What kinds of things does Arn witness or hear of the Khmer Rouge doing, and how does that affect his opinion and behavior around them?

## Discussion Question 2

What lesson does Arn learn quickly on the road, and what events shape his education?



## Discussion Question 3

What seems to be the main reason the town of Battambang has been relocated and how does that differ from what the residents were initially told?

## Vocabulary

wayside, invisible, revolution, professional, comrade, latrine, megaphone

## Chapter 3

### Summary

The children in the group Arn is put in walk for three days, many dying along the roadside. The days are very hot, and the nights are cold. They walk to a temple where they are told to sit, and the realities of their new lives are explained to them. Since Arn is the oldest in his group, he is put in charge, and told to report anyone who is of poor character. The work is harder now as they are roused before sunrise to work in the rice fields all day without tools, pulling the plow and pounding the rice. Every night they attend meetings to talk about rice and water canals, and about how to become pure. Those who get sick are told they have weak character. When the rice is finally harvested, a truck comes and hauls it away leaving them with little or nothing to eat again.

Hunger is a constant companion and many kids just die in the field. Many more are reclassified every day; by the color of their skin, by the shape of their eyes, and the length of their noses. Arn thinks of his family, but keeps his thoughts to himself. One night he watches the rain as four Khmer Rouge soldiers push a man into the rain. They beat him until he no longer moves, and then prop him against a tree in his helmet with a lit cigarette. Hunger is a constant companion for all of the children and many eat whatever they can find from spiders to plants. Arn eats the tamarind fruit, even though it gives him diarrhea. Soon all the children have diarrhea, some of them dying as well. Arn sneaks out at night trying to catch frogs or crickets, eating them raw quickly before going back to his bed. One night, he heads into the mango grove and finds a large pile of dirt that smells very bad and has him running back to bed. Sometimes Arn tells the soldier in the field he has diarrhea when he doesn't, just to get a break from working. He thinks no other kids have thought of this, but then one boy tells 'Frog Face' that Arn is lying and faking his bowel trouble. The Khmer Rouge soldier decides that he has bad character and sends him to sleep for three nights in a manure pile to educate him. Too afraid to defy them, Arn stays there despite his fear of ghosts and the feeling of bugs crawling all over him. When he is allowed to return, there is a meeting and they are asked if any of them can play music. They choose boys when no one volunteers, and take them to a man who is to teach them to play the instruments they have in five days. Arn is given a khim, but struggles to learn the delicate touch needed to play it. Arn works hard at learning, the teacher saving his life but unable to save his own once the songs have been learned. Other boys come along with a new teacher and they practice together every day. The musicians no longer have to work in the field.

One night, Arn is given a different job, taken to the mango grove where the large pile of dirt is. Fifteen or twenty people are kneeling and a high ranking Khmer Rouge stands behind them. One at a time, he hits them over the head with an ax cracking open their skulls. Then he tells Arn to put them in the ditch whether they are dead or not. Arn does, and keeps his face neutral so that he will live.



## Analysis

The prevailing theme of hunger continues as Arn and others his age are marched away. Many simply collapse along the way; unable to continue but Arn scarcely sees them anymore, immune to the sight of so much death. They are given little in the way of food, and must resort to catching spiders and bugs or eating plants. Arn sneaks out occasionally to catch frogs and crickets at night, but is forced to eat them raw as cooking them is not an option. The children grow ever thinner, bellies protruding and ribs showing.

Death is also a prevalent theme in this chapter as the soldiers continue to wean the group into a smaller core by eliminating certain skin colors, eye shapes, nose sizes and using criterion that makes little sense to Arn who does his best to simply blend in. Anything beyond the ordinary is enough to cause his death and Arn is acutely aware that those who are taken or culled from the group are simply disposed of. He confirms his own suspicions one night as he goes into the mango grove and finds himself facing a hill of dirt barely covering the bodies dumped there.

The author makes use of irony, soldiers telling children to love Angka or be judged to have poor character while in truth the soldiers themselves behave with questionable character as they follow their leaders blindly, and kill in their name regardless of how little reason there is to do so, laughing as they announce that lazy children work in the field continually but now they do so as fertilizer.

Music is introduced as a way to survive the soldiers and Arn is determined to learn, warned that if he doesn't, he'll join those in the mango grove. Even the man who is tasked with teaching them insists that if they learn, he'll be shot because he is no longer useful, and if they don't learn, he'll be killed because he is a lousy music teacher. Arn learns a stringed instrument, and becomes part of a group that is no longer expected to work during the day. They will be expected to perform instead for high ranking soldiers.

### Discussion Question 1

How is Angka explained to the children in Arn's group and what responsibilities is he given in the new camp?

### Discussion Question 2

What two things has Arn learned not to do and why?

### Discussion Question 3

What groups of children are further segregated and what is the logic behind the criteria used by the Khmer Rouge to classify them?

## Vocabulary

bayonet, consciousness, explanation, imperialist, sacrifice, lackey



# Chapter 4

## Summary

The new music teacher is so wrapped up in his own misery that he does little teaching, and to make sure the other kids aren't killed for not learning fast enough, Arn fills in by instructing some of them in the same manner as his first teacher had instructed him. For a few days, there has been no rice, and skeletal children die frequently. One night, they are promised a special dinner which turns out to be pig fodder – rice husks, banana peels, and other rotting foods, but the kids are so hungry they eat anyway. The band sings about blood spilled to make a new beginning, and Arn tells them to smile and sing loud to show they love Angka. Kha copies whatever Arn does, but Arn can't teach the instruments he doesn't know. When the soldiers ask Arn how the band is doing, he tells them it is great and the new teacher is excellent. The soldier makes Arn promise to tell him whether or not the teacher has bad character. Finally Arn is frustrated enough to sneak out to the teacher's building. He shakes him, warning him that he will be killed if he doesn't teach them well enough, but the teacher doesn't care. His family is dead and he is ready to die too, but Arn tells him that if he dies, they will all die too, and for the first time the teacher seems to care. After that, he tries and the band really begins to improve. Arn asks the teacher his name, learning it is Mek.

Every night, Arn shares a little of his food with the other band members. They think he is crazy, but Arn believes if they eat better, they'll play better which means they will all live. If they don't, no one will survive. One day before a big meeting that the band is expected to play for, the leader gives them all a bowl of real rice for dinner so that they will be strong and play well. Most eat it quickly, but their stomachs cramp and their bowels explode. Kha cries when he loses all of his rice so quickly, but Arn wakes him later and gives him some of what he had saved, telling him to eat slowly.

The next night is the big meeting and the band is taken onto a stage. Mek asks Arn to lead, and he does. When they have played all of the songs, no one claps, but they are not killed either. That night, Arn sneaks to Mek's building and tells him he saved the kids but he insists Arn saved him too. New rules are given. Now they are not allowed to hunt for food; and boys and girls are not allowed to fall in love either. Arn watches the boys work outside as they practice, and sees the boy who told on him causing his nights in the manure pile by telling the leader he was of low character, and watches a soldier berate him for being lazy. When he falls in the mud, Arn feels vindicated for just a moment before he realizes that he is becoming a monster like them.

One soldier from their old town comes to the camp and offers information about his family if Arn will give him his food; and tells the girls they can have messages sent to their family if they come into the woods with him. Arn gives him the last of the rice he'd saved, and gets a letter from Chantou in return, learning that she and Maly are together in a mountain camp and working hard. Of the rest of the family, there is no word. Arn



can smell the food the soldiers are eating. They are fat and well fed compared to the children who are working all day.

Every day the schedule is the same. Even killing is done to a schedule, and soon the band is expected to play all the time for the camp too. It isn't long before Arn realizes that they are playing to cover up the sounds of people being killed.

## Analysis

Hunger, starvation, and death are ongoing themes in this chapter. The children are barely fed, most days getting little more than a few grains of rice swimming in water. Weak and skeletal, many die each day, falling over in the fields as they work.

Survival is also a strong theme in this segment as Arn foregoes his own comfort to ensure the survival of them all by sharing his food with his fellow band mates. Each night, Arn gives his food to another band mate, rotating through them all, simply hoping that if they are full they will play better and everyone will live another day. No longer allowed to hunt for food, Arn's generosity is even more important. Arn even shares the last of his rice with a man who obviously escaped the Khmer Rouge. He also saves his second teacher Mek by shaking him out of his self-pity and breaking through the misery that threatened them all. He reminds Mek that if he doesn't do well as their teacher, they will all be killed. From then on Mek tries harder and the band improves enough to stay alive, even rewarded with extra food on occasion.

Every day more people are killed by the soldiers, interrogated and beaten until they are willing to confess to anything. Hopelessness and futility are common themes and cause many to give up.

The ongoing theme of Communism is employed in this segment as everything becomes a routine of sameness and more rules are imposed. The children are forbidden to hunt for food, or to care too deeply about anything other than Angka who supposedly will look after their every need.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Arn do to improve his chances of survival?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is the band important and what are some of the reasons that they play?

## Discussion Question 3

What new restrictions are placed on the survivors in camp and why?

## Vocabulary

xylophone, personality, suspicious, cardamom, character





# Chapter 5

## Summary

When new prisoners arrive Arn tries not to notice, especially if there is anyone from his hometown in the group. He doesn't want to recognize anyone for fear that if he does, he will be linked with them and accused of having bad character.

One day the leader of the camp tells the band that they are going on a trip. They all know the Khmer Rouge never admits they intend to kill you. Instead, they ask for help with a cart, or say they are going somewhere new. Even Mek hangs his head when he learns. They are driven to an empty field assuming it is the end but then they see the workers come. They sing for men who clap in unison like automatons and for days they travel to different camps, some of men and some of women or women and children. At night, they are bound together, so escape is impossible.

Back at the temple, a girl in the kitchen gives Arn extra food and talks about how famous he is for playing the khim. Arn sits on a sack of rice and flirts with her while poking a hole in the bag so that he can put a handful of rice in his pocket. She tells Arn that the leader of the camp likes her and is very jealous so if he sees them together, they are both dead. Arn uses the rice he steals to feed a small child who cries nightly for his mother, feeding him one grain at a time.

A new leader comes to camp, and with him new meetings begin. In the meetings each captive must confess their bad character or laziness to the others. A new child arrives who can dance, march and sing about Angka. Arn learns the steps too, hoping that he can gain enough notoriety that the Khmer Rouge won't kill him. They practice for days. One large guy keeps putting the flag he carries in front of Arn's face at the end. Arn asks him to stop, and he apologizes, but it continues. The girl in the kitchen gives Arn extra food when she can and he shares it with the big guy, hoping he will remember the kindness.

That night, a new guy lines up ten captives while six soldiers watch. He uses a bayonet, and quickly slices their midriff and pulls out their livers. The man who delivered mail is also new, the previous one having forced himself on the daughter of a high ranking soldier. Arn learns that Chantou has died of sickness, but he doesn't believe it was in a hospital like he is being told.

The next day the girl in the kitchen gives Arn extra again, and that night she comes to get him. She takes him to the building she sleeps in and kisses Arn, and handles him in a way no one has before. He lets her, and when she is finished, she gives him a lump of sugar. Arn sneaks over to Mek's tent when they are done and shares the treasure with him. They sleep side-by-side until morning when Arn sneaks back to his own bed.



The next day, Arn is the cook and a soldier comes in with a piece of meat stuck on the end of his bayonet, asking Arn to cook it for him. Arn knows what it is, but does what he is told, and the smell makes his mouth water despite the fact that it is human flesh. That night, he sneaks out to tell Mek about it, but a soldier hears him and stops him. When he realizes that Arn is the khim player, he simply sends him back to his bed.

The big guy gets smaller without enough food and falls down with the flag one day. Siv is told to come with a soldier to discuss his behavior. Arn sees the fear in Siv's face and tells the guard it was his fault – that he accidentally tripped him, and saves Siv's life.

## Analysis

Arn's life as a captive continues. He buries his fears and hides his feelings, stuffing them down as far as he can so that his captors believe he is compliant and beaten. When he notices captives from his home town, he pretends not to know them for fear that he is branded the same as they are, although Arn doesn't understand why he gets to live when so many die. The survival theme continues as Arn makes himself indispensable to the Khmer Rouge by playing the khim with flair, and adding dancing to his repertoire. Music continues to be the theme that saves Arn from a fate much worse. He no longer works the fields, but instead travels and plays for other workers and soldiers. By doing so, he is reasonably sure that they won't kill him. Food is also part of that survival, and Arn steals rice from the bag in the kitchen.

Arn learns to use his new position of notoriety as the khim player everyone has heard of to save others from certain death; feed those who struggle the most; and excuse himself when he is caught in places he does not belong. This power, Arn recognizes, will keep him alive. Selflessness has Arn continuing to feed those who can't help themselves, even sharing his own food and whatever else he can steal with the weakest of the bunch.

Death is still a constant theme as well. Arn and the other captives live in constant fear of being taken to the 'mango grove' or somewhere like it, knowing that it is the end of the road for anyone who goes. The Khmer Rouge never admits that they are taking you to your death. Instead, they claim you are going for a ride, or playing somewhere else, or getting medicine, but Arn knows that those who are taken do not return.

The soldiers continue to push the oneness of everything. They are part of the machine now, working to feed the soldiers and to serve Angka. The kids in the band sing about Angka, praising a religion and a God they don't know or understand, but they sing as though their lives depend on it, because they do.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the content of the songs Arn's group plays, and what is the likely purpose of the band?



## Discussion Question 2

How do Khmer Rouge communicate that you have outlived your usefulness, and what exceptions are there?

## Discussion Question 3

What logic compels Arn to help those that he has a conflict with, and is the outcome what Arn hopes for?

## Vocabulary

democratic, explanation, confession, suspicion, volunteer, bayonet, challenge



# Chapter 6

## Summary

A less than perfect crop is blamed on the efforts of the workers and food is reduced still further. In the two years that Arn has known them, many of the children not only have swollen bellies from lack of food, but also swollen knees and elbows. Some have hair that is falling out or has turned yellow, and have gone without food for so long that they no longer want it. Arn steals the skin of the rice once the threshing is done, but it only serves to give their bowels something to process.

The kitchen girl continues to come for Arn, and he gives the sugar or rice she gives him to whoever needs it the most in secret, hiding so that they are never sure who left it for them. Only Mek knows that it is Arn. When Arn gets sugar, he gives it to Mek and usually spends the night with him, cuddled against him like a son to his father. It is the only good thing in the camp as far as Arn is concerned.

Arn and the band practice three times a day and now everyone knows the songs well. When they are told to practice they know it is time for the Khmer Rouge to kill again, and they play fast to cover the sounds of skulls cracking. Death comes daily. After one performance, a small, mouse-like girl comes over to Arn and has to tell him that she is his sister Sophea because he doesn't recognize her. To Arn, she looks like an old woman with hanging skin and missing teeth. She came to see if Arn has food that he can share with her and their aunt and he manages to get cobs and some rice for them. Arn has no idea how she managed the two day walk to him, or if she will make it back. She tells Arn their brother died calling for him.

Arn takes pity on a 5-year-old boy who begins disappearing at night. The child returns in the early morning and is in a deep sleep when the Khmer Rouge wake them up to go to work. Arn tells them that the boy is too sick, lying to save the boy's life. The next night, Arn finds him eating grass and again Arn asks the soldiers to excuse him. The next night Arn looks for the boy again, and finds him in the mango grove, eating the flesh of one of the dead people. The next day, when the boy is accused of stealing rice, Arn is quiet. He lets the boy die without trying to intervene. Then Arn is given a new job. He and one other boy must go to the mango grove each night, and remove the clothes from the prisoners before the soldiers kill them. Then the leader hits them with an ax and tells Arn and the other boy to push them into the grave whether they are dead or not.

Arn practices music, closing his eyes and escaping for brief moments. His stomach causes so much pain that Arn can't make it as far as the latrine. He squats near the pond, stomach clenching, but nothing comes out. A soldier is chasing a man who is running in his direction. They fire at him, unaware that Arn crouches there and Arn expects to be killed at any moment. Then he hears a wet sound, and the prisoner falls down right on top of Arn, saving Arn from discovery.



Arn makes friends with a new soldier named Sombo, who guards one of the leaders in the camp. At first, Sombo just ignores Arn when he notices that Arn is stealing rice, or eating tamarind fruit. Finally Arn asks him why he hasn't turned him in, but Sombo admits that before Khmer Rouge, he was an orphan, poor and hungry just like them. Soon, Arn plays for Sombo almost nightly, and even begins teaching him how to play the khim. He is the first good soldier that Arn has met.

## Analysis

Starvation, hunger, pain and diarrhea are common themes as Arn and the remaining survivors continue to struggle, now two years in captivity. The author uses great similes as the children's swollen stomachs are compared to balloons; their elbows and knees compared to melons; and their fingernails looking as though they've been scooped out with a spoon. It is clear that by now these children will eat anything. One child consumes grass at night, and when that doesn't ease his stomach pains, he begins to consume the flesh of the dead in the mango grove. Arn continues to steal rice; and when that is unavailable, even the chaff will suffice despite being considered as pig food under any other circumstances.

The kitchen girl continues to come for Arn in the night, rewarding his presence with rice or sugar which he shares with those most needy afterward. The author describes the secrecy by which Arn shares these morsels, knowing that to be caught is death and if the children don't know who gave them the treats, they will be unable to tell on him either. Life is full of secrets now – who has them, and who keeps them to stay alive.

Mek hums an old Cambodian love song once sung by the Beatles, but now forbidden, his voice almost purring and the author uses a metaphor to describe how Arn feels as he 'burrows into Mek's like a small cat into a giant one'. Arn often stays with Mek at night, their relationship taking the place of family.

Protection is a strong theme as Arn continues to take the others in the band under his wing, encouraging them, feeding them, and giving them the strength to continue. His behavior is noticed by a new guard named Sombo who sees what Arn is doing and respects him for it. As such, Sombo protects Arn by not revealing the rice thefts, or the tamarind fruit Arn eats in secret.

Friendship is a theme that occurs once again now, having first been introduced before the Khmer Rouge arrived. Arn has feared any connection, knowing that they are all just one angry soldier from death, but when Sombo doesn't turn him in for obvious infractions, and instead wants only to listen to him play for a while, Arn can't help but become his friend, especially after Sombo reveals the similarities in their lives.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some of the effects that occur both mentally and physically when food is scarce or withheld altogether?



## Discussion Question 2

What is Arn's connection to the girl in the kitchen, and why does she treat him the way that she does?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Arn's relationship with Sombo develop, and why does Sombo behave the way that he does?

## Vocabulary

chaff, confession, suspicious, tamarind, bodyguard



# Chapter 7

## Summary

Arn counts time in seasons. So far, they have worked through eight harvests which means they have been with the Khmer Rouge for two and a half years. Another way to mark time is by the amount of times that they are given clean clothes; or by how often they are allowed to wash in the pond. Each prisoner is given one shirt and one pair of pants two or three times a year. They are the only possessions that the prisoners are allowed. Every six weeks or so, they are allowed to jump into the pond. Arn thinks about how he used to play in the water as a boy, and knows that fun things are dangerous now. Girls and boys are separated for bath time and Kha tells Arn and Siv that they can see the girls naked from under the building they sleep in, but reality isn't as much fun as the idea was. The girls are all bone and skin, most with hair that is falling out. They lose interest quickly, ashamed.

These days, everyone is afraid – even the lower ranking soldiers who fear that if they don't support the leader well enough, they will get their turn at the mango field. One day, the leader is called a traitor. A new guy comes and when Arn sees Sombo walking through the camp with a new high ranking soldier, he runs after him. This time Sombo is cold and unfriendly, even calling him nasty names. That night, Arn tells Mek, sure that now Sombo is like all the rest of the mean soldiers, but Mek explains that Sombo had saved Arn's life many times in the past, and had just done so again. Sombo was in trouble for bringing water to a man in the manure pile that was loyal to the last leader. A small child tells on him and now he is going to jail. After that, Arn worries that Sombo will be killed, or beaten or will just die in jail. He waits for a chance to help him escape, or even just to bring him water.

Then a soldier comes with a job for Arn. Arn follows the soldier, thinking that now he will have to watch them kill Sombo. He hardens himself, but when they get to the temple the prisoners are all old, and none are Sombo. One Khmer Rouge explains that they are too old to work hard. He hits them over the backs of their heads and then insists that Arn and Siv pee on them. Afterward, they leave and are so ashamed that Siv cries, but both feel better when they return to camp and find Sombo is free again, and the old leader is in charge once more. Arn and Sombo go back to normal, Arn playing for him every night, and Sombo letting Arn listen to the radio afterward.

Since Arn is the only one who plays, sings and dances, his notoriety increases. The leader notices him, and wants him to perform privately for him at his home. Kha and Siv are worried, but Arn is excited that maybe he will be able to get food. The leader lives in the largest house in town, the only one occupied now. The party lasts for days and when Arn finally returns to camp he has managed to bring a raw sweet potato with him. He shares it with Kha and Siv.



Now Arn is treated like a helper or assistant. When Arn plays for him, he sometimes gives him food like a bit of fish or vegetable and even lets Arn ride his white horse to deliver a message to the next camp. Arn is allowed to go alone, and the horse flies making Arn laugh until he cries. It is the first time in three years that he has laughed or cried. The letter is for a camp much larger and the leader calls him comrade and treats him like one of them. Arn takes his time returning, and for a moment even considers just taking the horse and leaving, but he has no idea where to go so instead he returns. Now he and the horse are friends, and Arn often sleeps in the hay near him. The straw is sweet and Arn sleeps well for the first time, often even sleeping for a while during the day.

## Analysis

Time is a prominent theme in this segment as Arn marks the passage by counting harvests, new clothing issued, and pond baths. The latter reminds Arn of happier times but he dares not play with his friends here now.

The themes of sexuality and interest in the opposite sex occur here as the boys finish bathing and find a way to spy on the girls as they take their turn. The experience isn't what the boys expected, however, when they look at the girls whose gaunt bodies have skin hanging and are so thin that there is little definition worthy of calling appealing.

Loyalty is also an important theme. The prisoners are acutely aware that their lives in the hands of the Khmer Rouge, but the lives of the soldiers are as well. The prisoners live in constant fear of the soldiers, but the soldiers are just as fearful that they will be deemed unworthy or branded as a traitor themselves, like when Sombo is branded a traitor for giving water to a man at the manure pile that was loyal to the former leader. A child loyal to the new leader turns him in, and he is taken away.

The barbarism of the Khmer Rouge continue to look for those they deem are traitors, ferreting them out by insisting they perform acts that would be abhorrent to them under normal circumstances. Arn is able to close himself off from the atrocities he sees, knowing that if he shows fear, disgust or loathing, he will go from helping the Khmer Rouge to being buried by them. Their latest request includes having Arn and Siv urinate on the group of old men who are put to death because they are too slow to be efficient.

Arn's fame and notoriety continue to play a part here as well, as Arn is called to perform at the leader's house for a few days. During this time, he is given considerable leeway – privileges that no other prisoners enjoy, which include small amounts of decent food, and the bonus of being able to ride the leader's horse.

The theme of friendship is tested when Sombo ignores Arn at first and then berates and spits on him to keep him from following. It takes a conversation with Mek before Arn realizes that Sombo has likely saved his life again. When Sombo returns, Arn is aware of how much he risked keeping him safe.





Freedom is a theme offered for the first time in this chapter as Arn is trusted to ride on horseback alone from one camp to another with messages from the leader. By allowing Arn to go alone, the leader trusts that he will return, and for a moment, Arn actually considers just continuing to ride away from camp, but he realizes that he has nowhere to go. The excursion however has him laughing so hard he is crying, both emotions forbidden for the past three years. Despite this overwhelming joy, Arn returns the horse and himself as he realizes the scope of his predicament. Despite having to return to captivity, Arn is happy. The leader allows Arn to look after the horse and even sleep in the barn with him, and Arn feels a contentment he has never known. A part of him hopes the Vietnamese never rescue them.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What happens that shakes Arn's faith in Sombo and why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How can Arn's relationship with Mek best be described, and how does that relationship affect each of them?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Arn decide he doesn't care whether or not he is rescued?

## **Vocabulary**

possession, corrupt, hype, professor, squint



# Chapter 8

## Summary

When the Vietnamese draw near, the camp is in chaos. The higher ranking soldiers flee while those remaining group in the middle of the square, polishing guns and loading up ammunition. Some kids run, but those who stay are given guns, some taller than the kids themselves. Arn finds Siv and Kha and together they find Sombo who can't understand why they haven't run away to find their families. All in all, 20 children from the band and the dance group join together to make up a group that the Khmer Rouge call the Little Fish with the Big Sting. Their group is the first to leave, but Mek stays behind, and cries when he says goodbye to Arn knowing that he is losing yet another son. Arn says they will see each other again, but Mek knows better.

The Little Fish practice shooting, many knocked over by the recoil. Then they follow Sombo until they meet up with other soldiers. Their leader tells them to sneak through the tall grass until they can smell the Vietnamese. Then tell the Khmer Rouge where they are hiding. The leader tells them that since they are so small, the soldiers won't see them. They do as they are told, and find the Vietnamese camp. Instead of returning to report their position, one child stands to see if they are really eating children like they'd been told. The Vietnamese soldiers shoot him dead. Some panic, but most of the kids hide in the grass and wait for the other soldiers to come. When they finally do, some of the kids get up and run to them, cut down from behind by the Vietnamese, and in front by the Khmer Rouge. When it is over, only six Little Fish remain, Siv and Kha among them. Arn hears one soldier extol the virtues of the Little Fish, claiming they should get more, and Arn remembers how he used to use a little frog to catch a big frog. Now they are the bait, he realizes.

The next day Sombo takes Arn to another group of kids, leaving Kha and Siv behind. They walk for two days to a new camp and then hide in a trench in front of the soldiers. When the tanks come, they jump out and the boy next to Arn is shot dead. Arn shoots crazed, until Sombo stops him. After a sleep, they walk to another camp where they join other Khmer Rouge children. One named Phat tells the Little Fish they have a new job to prove whether they really love Angka. They are to put grenades in the tanks that come. When the next tank comes, Arn and another boy creep up, open the top, and drop a grenade inside. The tank crashes into the trees. Arn is fine, but the other boy is sitting on the grass, half his leg missing.

After that, the soldiers give them automatic rifles and before they can learn to use them, another boy dies playing around with it. His intestines spill out, and Arn holds him, rocking and humming a song he remembers from childhood. Then, covered in blood, Arn returns to Phat.



## Analysis

In this segment, Stockholm syndrome becomes evident as a theme when, despite the impending rescue by Vietnamese soldiers, the captive children side with the Khmer Rouge. Arn and the others have been with the Khmer Rouge for so long that they have more fear of the unknown Vietnamese soldiers than they do of their captors. Arn takes Kha and Siv to Sombo and asks that he take them with him. Sombo can't understand why Arn and the others don't run, but Arn has no idea where to go. His home and family are long gone, and during his captivity, others have taken their place. Now Siv and Kha are his brothers; Mek is like his father, as is Sombo to a lesser degree. The band and the dancers together now form a new group, instructed to fight against their rescuers, and given guns. It never once occurs to any of them to defend themselves against the Khmer Rouge with the weapons they are given.

Family is also a strong theme in this segment as Arn realizes how much some of the people in his life mean to him. Saying goodbye to Mek is a tearful affair, and Arn promises Mek they will see each other again after the war is over, but Mek has lost his first sons to the war, and now he will lose his adopted son Arn as well. Kha and Siv are like brothers to Arn and when Sombo takes Arn to another group, he is deeply hurt that he was unable to say goodbye to them. The family theme continues as the Khmer Rouge group together the band and the dancers, calling them the Little Fish with the Big Sting.

Arn follows Sombo along with the others, meeting up with varying groups of soldiers along the way. As The Little Fish are given tasks to prove their loyalty to Angka, Arn at first believes that they are a special group with great honor, but he soon realizes the truth. The author uses Arn's past escapades frog catching as a simile for the tasks the Little Fish are now given and Arn soon realizes that the Little Fish are bait.

When the first Little Fish is killed, the rest are stunned. Some panic and run, and are cut down, while the rest hide in the grass until the Khmer Rouge come. This foreshadows a change in attitude by Arn and the other survivors. Now Arn is no longer a victim and is the first to stand and fire his rifle at the Vietnamese who would be their rescuers, continuing to fire until Sombo stops him.

### Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't Arn leave camp to look for his family when Sombo suggests it?

### Discussion Question 2

How has Arn's captivity affected his view of family and friends and why?



## Discussion Question 3

What special tasks are the Little Fish given, and what truth does Arn realize?

## Vocabulary

chaos, protection, invisible, suicide, intestine, screeching



## Chapter 9

### Summary

Arn struggles with Sombo's gruff demeanor, disappointed that he no longer shows any signs that he cares about Arn. As they wait for the first meal they've had in three days, Arn considers leaving like so many of the others, but Sombo is the only family he has now, and he has no idea where Mek, Siv or Kha are. The sound of a whistle warns of an incoming shell and Sombo throws himself over Arn, saving his life. Phat is blown to pieces, and many other children die that evening. Arn feels like the living dead.

They walk quietly north, away from the Vietnamese making as little noise as possible. The girl who carried the rice steps on a stick and though Sombo tells her to freeze, she steps back and the land mine under her takes her leg. After that, Arn carries the rice and they take turns carrying the girl. Finally, she dies in the night. They hike to another camp looking for a new rice bearer and picking up a small boy named Koong.

They continue walking again through rice fields that are mostly weeds now. One place is familiar to Arn, and he realizes that it is the pond where he and Hong went frogging before his life was turned upside down by the Khmer Rouge. They come across another group of soldiers and the girl carrying their rice says hi to Arn. Stunned, he realizes the girl is his sister Sophea. At just ten years old, Sophea looks like a white haired old lady with a bent back. Arn barely acknowledges her, knowing the danger of revealing family. Instead, he tells Sombo he is too tired to continue, and Sombo stops for the night. When everyone is sleeping, Arn goes to Sophea. She touches his face softly and Arn sees her beauty despite the bent back, swollen knees and stomach. In the morning, she asks him to hide from bullets and not be too brave, hoping she will see him again. Knowing that she still lives is enough to give Arn the strength to live too.

### Analysis

In this chapter, the author once again defines Sombo's feelings for Arn, although Arn thinks he no longer cares. Arn considers his position, wondering why he continues to stay with Sombo if he no longer cares about him, but Arn has no idea where else he might go. His insecurity foreshadows events that will prove Sombo's feelings for Arn remain strong, much the same as when similar events played out in the camp the last time Arn doubted Sombo's feelings for him. This time, Sombo covers Arn's body with his own when a Vietnamese shell comes in, saving his life while beside him, Phat dies.

The theme of family is especially strong in this chapter as Arn wrestles with his feelings for Sombo, continuing to follow him because he is the only family Arn has left. There is no way for him to know if Mek, Siv or Kha still live, and as such his ties to Sombo keep him from leaving in the night like many others do. When their group meets up with



another group of soldiers, and Arn discovers Sophea with them, he finds a new reason to live, and to care enough to survive.

The atrocities of war are also revealed in this chapter as the Vietnamese press forward. While their purpose is to liberate the prisoners from the Khmer Rouge, their methods are every bit as deadly. Using shells, bombs and even landmines as well as tanks and guns, the Vietnamese kill as many prisoners as they do Khmer Rouge soldiers, if not more.

Age is also a theme in this chapter as Arn and his group pass by the pond that he and Hong once caught frogs in. He recognizes the area, and is reminded of a time when he was still a child. This theme continues when Arn comes across his younger sister Sophea who at ten looks more like she is nearing retirement age. Her hair is almost white, her belly and knees are swollen and her back is bent, but Arn still sees her as both young and old. Part of him wants to protect her while another part of him leans on the fact that she is alive to give him the strength to keep going himself.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What events convince Arn that Sombo still considers him a favorite?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the difference between the war tactics used by the Vietnamese and those used by the Khmer Rouge?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What affect does Sophea have on Arn when they see each other?

## **Vocabulary**

protecting, smirk, landmine, weapon, coward



# Chapter 10

## Summary

Sombo sneaks away at night to listen to his radio, but Arn follows quietly and listens too. The Angka station claims victory is imminent and the Vietnamese are leaving, shamed and defeated. The radio claims Vietnamese now control the eastern province and many Cambodian people are going to Thailand. Arn keeps the place called Thailand in his mind. The bombs keep getting closer, and Sombo listens, counting. He grabs Arn and tells him to run just as what feels like a hand shoves him forward. Arn is sure he is dying, but then he wakes and Sombo is looking after him. His whole body hurts.

They walk into a village one day to find people living there like normal. At first Arn thinks maybe the war is over. He sees Vietnamese soldiers walking around and telling people that the war is over and free rice is available from the village center, but when they come with empty baskets to fill, the soldiers shoot them. They begin shooting at the Vietnamese and when it is over, Sombo asks Arn to go through the village and make sure they are all dead. One woman is cut in half, but somehow still alive. She accuses Arn of being Khmer Rouge, tells him that she hates him, and then begs Arn to kill her. He does as she asks. At night leeches attach themselves to him; geckos call; snakes, tigers and poison frogs are all worthy of being afraid of, and now Arn can add this woman's face to the list.

After another large battle, their group is reduced to only seven kids, Koong and Sombo. They walk, and walk, and walk until they even do it in their sleep. At first they carry everything they'll need, but soon they begin dropping the heavier items until finally all they carry is their guns and ammunition. When the water runs out, they drink urine until that runs out too. They hide in the jungle, sometimes smelling other fires, but from close or far away they can't tell. There is also no way of knowing whether it is Cambodian or Vietnamese around it. The nights are damp and cold in contrast to the hot days, and Sombo sleeps with Koong to keep him warm and alive so that he can keep the rest alive.

Heading north they see another platoon until one day Arn sees his sister again. Her skin and eyes are yellow, and she is nearly dead. Arn talks to her, telling her how life will be for them when the war is over. Arn considers shooting her, to save her from rape by the Vietnamese or mauling by a tiger, but he is unable to. All he can do is walk, and survive. They come to another village, and the people there beg them not to hurt them. One man brings Sombo a bottle of Coca-Cola and they all share it that night. They camp at a nearby stream and when a bomb lands close to them, Sombo tells them to get into the water. One boy who can't swim dies in the water, and Sombo thinks that the village people will tell the Vietnamese where they are. He creeps back in the dark and kills them all. Arn watches in secret, his opinion of Sombo dropping like a stone. He is just like all other Khmer Rouge, killing without caring. Koong is very sick now and Sombo decides to try to get him to the hospital in Thailand. He tells Arn that he is in charge now



and that he will come back and find them as soon as he can. Not knowing what else to do, Arn agrees.

## Analysis

The family theme is still strong in this segment as Sombo does what he can to keep Arn and the other boys alive. Having left everything behind when the war began, Sombo has come to think of Arn and Koong as family. Though he doesn't show it as often as he used to, Sombo still watches Arn as closely as if he were his own son. Sombo doesn't know it, but Arn watches him just as closely.

War is also an ongoing theme, this segment revealing how complicated and confusing this scale of conflict can become. The Vietnamese, who ostensibly have come to oust the Khmer Rouge and save the populace turn out to be every bit as violent and relentless as their enemies. The Vietnamese enter villages as yet untouched by the ravages of war, and tell the townspeople that the war is over. They feign friendliness, and offer a gift of rice from the new leader, but when the residents reveal themselves, they are shot down. Arn and Sombo witness this atrocity, and open fire on the Vietnamese.

Compassion is a theme that Arn must grapple with when Sombo insists they patrol the village to ensure no one remains alive. Arn finds a local woman who is at first accusing, still strong enough to call him Khmer Rouge in the same tone as she would use to announce a mass murderer, but then dissolving to tears as she begs him to shoot her. He obliges her to save her from a long and painful death in the sun. Then her face becomes one of the many things that terrorize him during the night.

Fear is ongoing as well. Arn knows that leeches are everywhere, eager to suck what life remains from their starved bodies; snakes and poisonous frogs are constant risks and even tigers are on the prowl in the hours between dusk and dawn. Any stick breaking in the night might be a Vietnamese soldier sneaking closer. All in all, fear is a constant companion.

Love can be a catalyst for strength but can also be like kryptonite to Superman as Arn discovers when he finds his little sister, sick and yellowed with fever. Arn touches her gently, and talks to her of how life will be when the war is finally over, trying to encourage her to fight, but he knows that if the Vietnamese soldiers find her, they will likely rape her before killing her. He knows that killing her would be the ultimate kindness now, but he can't bring himself to do this for his sister. He prays but cannot find the strength to put her out of her misery, so instead he just walks away.

In this segment, the author reveals how war can infect both sides, causing fear and paranoia that often leads to the same kind of atrocities from both sides. When Sombo and the boys come across an untouched village, a man runs out with a soda begging them not to hurt them. Sombo shares this can with the other boys but later that night a bomb lands close by, and Sombo is convinced that the villagers have revealed their





position to the Vietnamese. Angrily, he goes back to the village and kills all who are there. Arn, who is always watching, sees Sombo do this and realizes that Sombo is just like the other Khmer Rouge, killing without caring. In that moment, Arn loses his last tie to any kind of family and wonders if a person can die from a broken heart.

Fever follows the million mosquitoes that attack relentlessly, making some of the children sweat and shiver. When Koong becomes ill, Sombo does all he can to help, knowing that the young rat catcher is all that stands between life and death for many of the boys. Realizing the child will die without help, Sombo tells Arn he is in charge until Sombo returns and, now afraid of him, Arn simply agrees.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What similarities reveal themselves to Arn between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How do Arn's feelings for Sombo change and why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What single thing keeps Arn from giving up all hope, and what happens to change that?

## **Vocabulary**

conqueror, skeleton, ancestor, explosion, bayonet



# Chapter 11

## Summary

Once Sombo is gone, the kids all fight over which direction to take and no one notices when Arn goes in the opposite direction. Consumed by a need to find Thailand and safety, Arn walks alone. After several days he comes to a stream, convinced he has found the river he must cross to reach Thailand. He looks for a place to cross and sees a hut made of sticks and mud. Then he sees the bodies of an old man and his family, recognizing him as the one who gave them Coca-Cola. Arn realizes he's been walking in circles and is now right back where he started.

Arn can see green fruit in the high branches that he can't get to, and when he sees one that has dropped to the ground, he races to it. Biting into it, the juice is so sweet that Arn doesn't even notice the maggots at first. When he finally does, he realizes that he's already eaten some, and no longer caring, he eats the rest as well.

At night, Arn climbs into trees to stay safe, and the grass under the tree is flattened in the morning as though tigers slept beneath him. The jungle is full of monkeys who like to throw food at each other, and Arn imitates them until they toss food at him too. He isn't sure what kind of fruit it is, but he eats it and then sits against a tree to rest. When he opens his eyes, the monkeys are looking at him, and chattering. The biggest one checks Arn out and Arn can tell that he is the leader. He sees a baby holding onto its mother, and thinks about how lucky he is. Then one little monkey climbs into his lap and puts his arms around Arn's neck. Arn holds still, not wanting to ruin the moment, but then the other monkeys start to leave. The little one is the last to go, and before he can Arn grabs him and breaks his neck. Afterward, he feels like he is no longer human. He can't even figure out why he did it.

Arn becomes sick; his fever high and blisters forming on his back, chest and shoulders. Unable to lie comfortably, all he can do is continue to walk. Now the monkey troop throws rocks and sticks and even shit at Arn. He knows they scream at him for killing the baby. In his mind, the troop turns into his family, and they are playing hide and seek with him. He runs to them, crying from happiness to see them and tells them he will see them again over and over. Then the jungle tilts and he feels as though he can finally rest.

When he wakes half his face is buried in the mud and Arn realizes that he is still alive. He prays death will come, and then sees a tall white rabbit who commands him to follow. Arn does so in a daze until he comes to a river. On the other side, the land is open and there is no more jungle and no places to hide. He knows with certainty that this is Thailand. The rabbit is on the other side now, and Arn follows, half floating until he is crawling up onto the grass.



## Analysis

Freedom is the theme most prevalent in this segment as Arn deserts the boys after Sombo leaves with Koong. He is determined to find Thailand which is the only hope Arn has left for survival. Arn has been a captive for so long that fighting for the Khmer Rouge seemed right at the time, but once Sombo left, Arn realized that his connection to the war left with him. Now all Arn wants to do is make it to the mythical place named Thailand where the war has not touched.

Starvation is ongoing as Arn walks day in and day out, hoping to find the place called Thailand. When he sees the fruit in the higher branches of the trees, he is reminded of how hungry he is, and looks down instead to stop torturing himself with what he cannot have. Then he sees one on the ground and eats it eagerly, despite the fact that it is full of maggots. Starving for so long changes a person's opinion of what is food, and if you go long enough without any, you are willing to eat things that perhaps would have shocked or appalled you under other circumstances. This is revealed in earlier chapters as well when Arn and his companions are forced to drink urine to survive, or eat crickets and grass to fill the void in their stomachs. Even mango fruit is gorged on despite the diarrhea that they know will follow.

The family theme comes up again when Arn is greeted by a troop of monkeys who are curious about him. When Arn first notices them, he sees they are throwing food at each other, and makes similar noises which encourage the monkeys to throw fruit at him. He sees a baby with its mother and envies it for the love it gets from her. He falls asleep at the base of a tree and a baby climbs into his lap as he sits there, wrapping its arms around him just as it had its mother. At first, Arn is overwhelmed with the baby's touch and love, but then the troop begins to leave. All the monkeys have left and the baby is about to join them but Arn grabs it around the neck and kills it.

Guilt and shame are prevalent when Arn realizes what he has done. He can't really come up a reason for having done it beyond the fact that he has killed before. Arn feels as though he is less than human, resolving his shame by convincing himself that he'd done it because he had to think about surviving every minute of every day.

The author compares the monkey troop to Arn's family as his mind begins to play tricks with him. The constant hunger and lack of sleep are enough to unhinge normalcy enough that Arn sees what his mind wants to see instead of what is really there.

A rabbit appears to Arn after he has given up and invited death to take him. The rabbit he sees is as tall as he is, and stands on his hind legs commanding Arn to follow. It plays a game of hide and seek with him in the trees, leading him right to the river. The rabbit crosses, and somehow convinces Arn that he is strong enough to cross as well, so he does just that.

Insanity is also a theme in this segment as Arn begins to wonder whether or not he is losing his mind. He sees things that aren't there, and talks to family members that he



knows are dead. He even follows a rabbit in his delirium, and somehow manages to get to the river across which Thailand lies.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What prompts Sombo to leave the group of boys and what happens when he does?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Arn interact with the monkey troop he encounters at first; how does that interaction change and why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What incident prompts Arn's humanity to come to the surface, and what happens when it recedes again?

## **Vocabulary**

opposite, Shallow, hammock, insane, teasing



# Chapter 12

## Summary

Arn wakes to find what he thinks is his big sister Chantou standing over him. Two other girls are there as well and Arn thinks they are his other two sisters, Maly and Sophea. They carry him, giggling and Arn falls asleep again, feeling as though he is in heaven. When he wakes up the girls are gone, and Arn is lying in the shade now in a small forest. He can hear voices around him and feet walk by so he reaches out and touches one. A shriek follows as the person runs away and soon afterward another one comes, telling Arn she is surprised that he is alive. A beautiful girl looks down at him and tells him that she and her two friends carried him from the border. Arn finally realizes that his sisters aren't there as she continues to tell Arn he had been lying there for about five days. Arn thinks of the three girls as angels. They come frequently, chewing herbs to put on his wounds and giving him water.

A strange voice wakes him and it takes a moment before he realizes it is a bullhorn. For a moment, Arn fears he has been transported home again and the Khmer Rouge have just arrived. The voice announces that it is safe for refugees to come out and the refugee camp has medicine, food and water for them. Arn fears this is a replay of what the Vietnamese had done, pretending to offer aid and then shooting all those who come out. He shuts his eyes and waits for the gunshots, but instead all he hears is music. The song is a Cambodian love song and Arn is drawn to it. The sound is coming from a large bus, and everyone is getting in.

The bus is large and has a fan that makes Arn shake with cold. His clothes are thin and sickness still makes him shiver. Outside he sees Thai residents wearing brightly colored clothes, jeans and even shorts. The bus driver sings along with the Cambodian love song, and although his voice is terrible, Arn thinks it is about the best thing he has ever heard. He is filled with a sense of hunger to be normal, and he can taste the tears on his lips. Then he realizes that one of the voices he hears singing is his own.

## Analysis

In this segment, the author shows how the mind can confuse reality with desire especially when under stress or duress. Arn qualifies in both, his body and mind having been stretched beyond its ability to cope for years now. When he wakes to see the girls around him, he believes they are his sisters, somehow having found him and even come back to life in order to bring the family together again. So strong is Arn's desire to have that happen that his mind can't compute the likelihood or the impossibility of the situation.

The sound of the girls laughing is incongruous to him as he listens, thinking the sound is heavenly. The author uses analogies such as Arn's mind hearing the laughter and



comparing it to the sound of music and also comparing the girls themselves to angels as surely to see this somehow he must be dead.

When Arn wakes to the sound of the bullhorn, he is instantly transported from heaven to hell, the comparison easy to visualize as Arn remembers the last time he heard a similar invitation to come out and get free food and comparing this announcement to the one made by the Vietnamese, is convinced that bullets and death follow shortly. Instead, he hears music. The music Arn hears comes from a time before the Khmer Rouge, having heard it on his aunt's radio – a time in his life that surely was heaven from his perspective now.

The song called 'Waiting For You' projects a positive outcome to their appeal – an expectation of attendance that is appropriate as the villagers get aboard the bus which is broadcasting. Arn walks to the bus too, drawn to the music that sings about how it is 'waiting for him'. This contrast continues after Arn boards the bus. In threadbare clothes he is cold and still sick, but looking out the window he can clearly see the absence of Khmer Rouge or its influence. It is so much like the life he once had. He cries, overwhelmed, and sings because he can and because he wants so much to be a part of this group.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What contrasting statements are made or implied in this segment?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What nightmare does Arn think he might be stuck in, and what made him think so?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Where does the rabbit come from and what trick does Arn believe it played on him?

## **Vocabulary**

bullhorn, hometown, refugee, racket, nightmare



# Chapter 13

## Summary

In the hospital, Arn is given powdered milk every day, although he can't keep it in. When the nurse tells him that it is March of the year 1979, Arn realizes that he has been away from home for four years. As near as he can figure out, he is fifteen years old now. Though safe, a simple thing like a rainstorm has Arn thinking that the battle has begun again. First Lady Carter tours the facility and Arn watches as she goes from bed to bed, thinking later that she must be a princess or someone of similar rank. The radio is always on, and Arn listens for news about the war in Cambodia, hoping that one day it will be safe enough that he can go home and look for his family. Arn hears the Khmer Rouge in his head, announcing that the war is over. The voice of Angka said the same thing too. Arn knows better. He knows the war is everywhere, and it is not over.

Another important person visits the hospital but Arn has no idea who he is. He spends every day pestering the nurses and doctors, and is angry and emotional over each child lost. Arn's stomach churns and grinds making Arn think he is dying. He talks to Death; the pain so severe that he welcomes it, begging it to come and take him soon, but then the American man comes to him. He gives Arn medicine to kill the worms in his system, and spends time every day with him until he begins to get better. He tells Arn that he has chosen him, and encourages him to fight for life. When Arn improves enough, he is transferred to a children's center. There, he is encouraged to eat as much as he wants, and struggles to believe that this good fortune will continue. He gorges himself just in case, suffering painful cramping afterward. The American man, who Arn now thinks is a monk, continues to visit him even at the center.

Volleyball is played by many of the children, and Arn tries to join in, but his first experience with an incoming ball is met with the automatic response of crouching and covering his head. The other children laugh at him and embarrassed, Arn puts on his toughest face and walks away. He befriends a young boy name Runty, and sits with him promising himself that he will learn to play when he is stronger, and will be a star.

Arn learns the American's name is Misster Pond. The nurse, called Missus Gotobed for the way she tells the children to do so at the end of each day, is often angry with Misster Pond for showing Arn preferential treatment, like bringing him a candy called Chuckle. He tells her to mind her own business. Arn shares the candy like he once shared rice, knowing they will remember who gave it to them.

The children's center is located next to a refugee camp, and although Missus Gotobed has told them that danger is out there, Arn is determined to find his family, sure that they must be there. He sneaks out one night to look, but after walking through the camp, the only person he recognizes is a Khmer Rouge soldier. Frightened, he looks around and realizes that there are more Khmer Rouge soldiers there, wearing regular clothes instead of black pajamas, trying to fit in. Arn knows now that Missus Gotobed was right



– it is a dangerous place. He wants to run, but forces himself to turn and walk back to the children’s center. After that, he focuses all of his attention on volleyball, studying when the others play, and sneaking out at night to practice on his own. Next time, no one will laugh at him.

The war continues, and they can hear the pounding of shells at night. Runty comes to him, much like he had once gone to Mek, and Arn holds him like a big brother or father would until he stops shaking and goes to sleep.

Soon Arn is able to play volleyball, and Misster Pond comes to watch. One day he tells Arn to pick two favorites and Arn picks Sojeat and Ravi – both capable volleyball players. Misster Pond takes them to his car and tells them to get into the trunk. The other two are afraid at first, but Arn gets in smiling, so they get in too. Misster Pond takes them to an American building where they are given food and eat with white people. Missus Gotobed is furious when they return, but Misster Pond just laughs. Two nights later, a young boy is found in the morning with his stomach cut open and stuffed with grass. The Khmer Rouge come to take kids with them to fight, Misssus Gotobed tells him. When a kid says no, he is killed.

Misster Pond brings Arn, Sojeat and Ravi a few new books to learn English, and takes them all out to eat at the American building again. Missus Gotobed yells at him, but it doesn’t help. Then he doesn’t come for days, and Missus Gotobed tells Arn that perhaps now that he’s been shot, he will have learned a lesson. Arn goes to the hospital and finds him lying there smiling. He tells Arn that the Thailand queen is angry that the guard shot him – an American – and offered him three wishes. He tells Arn that he picked Arn, Sojeat and Ravi.

## Analysis

Ongoing illness continues to be the theme in the early portions of this chapter and Arn draws many comparisons between the Khmer Rouge camp and the hospital. In both, he is given only colored water to drink, and he spends his time so sick that often he is unable to make it to the latrine and the diarrhea explodes from him. Everywhere he hears children crying and moaning. Closing his eyes, he can easily believe he is in either place.

Time becomes relative to Arn again as he asks a nurse for the date. The nurse tells him, and Arn realizes that he is probably fifteen years old now. Conditioning is a theme here as Arn has become so used to war that even a strong rainstorm has him looking for his gun as the rest of him braces for the bombs that will surely follow.

Foreign medical aid is introduced for the first time as Arn is not only given care in the hospital in Thailand, but is also visited by First Lady Carter, and often visited and cared for by Misster Pond.

Death is a prevalent theme as always, but now the deaths are not a direct result of enemy fire. Now death comes more as a result of the war in general. Lack of food and





improper care of injuries or illnesses are now the greatest cause of loss of life, although one child from the children's center is killed on the volleyball court by a Khmer Rouge soldier, his stomach cut open when he refused to fight for them. Arn welcomes death, tired of the constant pain, hunger, illness and despair.

Flood waters come also, and Misster Pond rescues Arn, carrying him to a dry location. Misster Pond spends a great deal of time with Arn after that, telling him that his job is just to survive; to fight for life. Once Arn is able to get up and move around, he goes outside and watches some of the other children play volleyball and splash through the puddles. They still remember how to play, how to laugh, and how to be free inside. Arn compares himself to them and feels dead inside.

When Misster Pond is hospitalized, shot by a guard by mistake, Arn goes to see him. The irony of the situation is clear.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Where does Arn look for his family, and what does he discover instead?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Arn become angry with Misster Pond, who does he let his anger out on and how?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Where does Misster Pond take the boys and what is the purpose behind the conveyance used to get them there?

## **Vocabulary**

monsoon, nightmare, malaria, corpse, nonsense



# Chapter 14

## Summary

Arn's opinion of life improves considerably once he knows that Mister Pond is taking him to America. He sings on his way to breakfast, and even jumps into the swimming hole with joy. At breakfast, the entire camp is aware and only Runty hides under the table holding himself tightly. Arn sees him and feels the betrayal in eyes. He runs back to the dorm, heart heavy now and spends his day in bed thinking about Runty and the others.

Sometime during the night Runty climbs into his bed and Arn holds him like always, promising to come back for him. He doesn't know how, but he is sure that he will. He falls asleep hoping to become someone famous so that he can rescue them all, but in his dream they push him down into the ground until he feels as though he is buried under the weight of their dead bodies. All he wants to do is hide until it is time to go.

All throughout the day, Ravi, Sojeat and Arn study the English books that Peter Pond brought them, learning new words and phrases. Arn draws pictures of the life he will have in America. Peter Pond goes back to the States ahead of the boys, sending them American clothes. The rest of the kids are jealous.

Sojeat, Ravi and Arn are now the volleyball stars of the group. One day the ball goes over the fence and Arn fearlessly goes after it, despite warnings. He grabs it and is heading back when a voice calls out 'Little Fish'. Arn's stomach churns, recognizing the voice. He ignores Sombo, unwilling to have anything to do with Khmer Rouge and from that time forward, he spends his time indoors studying English, and learning numbers. Sojeat watches him closely, knowing something has changed. Arn is sure that Sojeat heard Sombo calling him, and now knows that Arn was Khmer Rouge and is convinced that if he tells anyone, Arn won't be going to America with Peter Pond. Arn hears Sombo's voice in his head all the time now, and even in his dreams. One day when the food line is close to the fence and Mrs. Gotobed insists he get in line, Sombo sees him and smiles happily but Arn behaves as though he doesn't see him. A man near Sombo asks him if Arn is the one who can play music blindfolded, and Sombo says no once again saving Arn's life.

A message from Peter Pond announces they will leave for America in one week, and includes candy and a twenty dollar bill for the trip. On their last night, the other kids are sad, and jealous, and Arn gives something to each kid from the things Peter sent. When Ravi and Sojeat see what he is doing, they give their things away too.

## Analysis

The theme most prevalent in this section is hope. For the first time since the Khmer Rouge came to his town, Arn feels real hope. Peter Pond is taking him, Ravi and Sojeat



to America and Arn's entire outlook on life has changed. He sings on the way to breakfast, noticing how wonderful the world is again.

Balancing the hope and joy Arn feels is the despair Runty feels knowing that Arn is leaving. Arn can't face the disappointment in his face, and hides in his bed thinking about the children he is leaving behind, and what they face. Guilt is the next theme as Arn considers the fact that he shouldn't be the one chosen by Peter Pond to go since he had done so many horrible things with the Khmer Rouge. Many of these children had never done anything bad, and part of him feels like he doesn't deserve to go as much as many of the others do. He wants to hide himself until it's time to go but then hope returns as Arn falls asleep thinking about how he could become famous in America and return to bring all of them to the States too.

Confusion and sadness are introduced when Arn ignores Sombo, but it is clear that he understands Arn's reluctance to acknowledge him when he returns Arn's blank stare and turns away. The situation is equally confusing to Arn, and he is saddened by the fact that he feels he must avoid or ignore Sombo who has saved his life multiple times. The sadness comes from the realization that there are two sides of Arn's life that will never mesh. To be free of Khmer Rouge and war, he must sever his ties to Sombo despite the lingering loyalties he still feels.

Generosity is the final theme in this segment as the time to leave for America is upon Arn, Ravi and Sojeat. The sadness on the faces of the other children is obvious, and Arn is the first to begin giving away everything Peter Pond had given him, spreading the treasures among the children who must stay behind. Once the candy is gone, he even gives away the clothing, shoes and other items Peter gave them, and watching him, Ravi follows suit, as does Sojeat. Arn's ongoing generosity continues to affect those around him – a generosity that he has shown from the very beginning, despite the fact that his generosity often meant that he would do without.

## Discussion Question 1

How do the children in the center respond to the news that Arn, Sojeat and Ravi are going to be taken to America?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways has Sombo saved Arn's life in the past, and what does he do that saves Arn again at the children's center?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Arn do to mitigate the jealousy and sadness that the other children feel as the time to leave draws near, and what affect does that have on Ravi and Sojeat?

## Vocabulary

mynah, betray, conceited, pressure, confused



# Chapter 15

## Summary

The time to fly to American finally arrives. Arn, Raji and Sojeat spend most of the twenty dollars Peter Pond gave them on ice cream at the airport in Bangkok and Arn's stomach cramps painfully afterward. He hides his discomfort, afraid that he will not be allowed to go if he is unwell. On the plane, they wear badges with Peter Pond on them, and when the plane leaves the ground, they are all smiling and excited. They jump around on the seats, pushing to look outside until a stewardess tells them to settle down, and puts their seat belts on. Sojeat and Ravi fall asleep, but Arn quietly says a prayer for his family, his friends and even Mek and Runty, promising them that he will return for them.

In Denmark, they land to refuel and they spend an hour outside. Denmark is colder than anything they've ever known, and having given away the warm clothes Peter Pond sent them, all three children hop around bare footed and freezing cold. They are happy to get back onto the plane again. A stewardess gives them a sweater and Arn believes that what he has heard about the U.S. is true – they give everything for free.

They land in New York and finally find Peter in the crowd of people. They get into his Buick and when Peter admits he owns the car, Arn is sure they are rich. Peter shows them different things out the window, but Arn understands less than Sojeat and Ravi. Peter takes them to McDonald's where Arn asks the man behind the counter for rice. When Arn insists that is what he wants, the people around him laugh including Peter. He orders them all hamburgers and to Arn it tastes like an old shoe. He likes the ketchup however, and eats several packets that make him vomit several times on the way to Peter's house. Still, Arn thanks Peter over and over for the hamburger.

When they get to Peter's mother's house, she takes them upstairs to a room with a big bed and closes the door. They play while Peter and his mother argue. The boys play, jumping on the bed until Peter comes in and yells at them. Arn doesn't understand him, but his anger is clear and Arn hides under the blanket. For a moment, Arn thinks coming to the States was a bad idea.

The next morning Peter is happy again. He takes them to the mall and loads a buggy with more clothing and shoes for the boys. Thinking everything is free, the boys begin adding everything they see that appeals to them. Then Peter is yelling again and taking out the stuff they put in, telling them they can't do that. The mood swings are confusing to Arn.

Back in the car, Peter asks them to learn how to say something in English for a meeting at his church. They put on their new clothes and shoes, and watch as Peter makes a speech. Then he gives the boys the microphone but Sojeat and Ravi are too afraid to speak. Arn takes the microphone and imitating what he has seen the Beatles and Elvis



do, he announces that he is happy to be in the United States. Everyone claps and Arn feels like he is already just a little bit famous.

## Analysis

Poverty and hunger combine with greed and excess in this segment as Arn, Sojeat and Ravi make their way to the United States. None of the three children have ever experienced a life of plenty, and their indoctrination begins at the airport when they spend almost the entire twenty dollar bill Peter gave them on ice cream.

The other issue dealt with in this chapter is the third world opinion of North America and our way of life. Poverty stricken all of their lives, it is difficult for the kids to grasp the degree of excess that exists on our continent. In America, more people drive than don't making for a great many automobiles on the highways. Arn, Sojeat and Ravi's first experiences as they fly to and spend their first day in America include the fact that a stewardess provides them with sweaters when they are cold in Denmark – a sure sign that everyone is rich in America; Peter owns the car he picks them up in – a sure sign that he is a rich man in Arn's mind; food is available in restaurants everywhere although they don't recognize the food that is served – Arn thinks his first hamburger tastes like shoe leather and prefers the packets of ketchup; the house Peter lives in has multiple bedrooms – Arn considers it to be a mansion; they are given a room with a bed to sleep in – something Arn, Sojeat and Ravi have never experienced before and even the bedding is enough to prove to them that Peter and his mother are wealthy; and even the trip to the mall where Peter replaces their clothing for a second time is a memorable experience for the boys as they see Peter loading things into a buggy and imitate him thinking everything is free for the taking. All in all, America is the land of plenty!

Fame is also a theme here again as in the previous chapter when Arn prays that he can become famous enough in America to come back and bring all of the kids back with him along with Mek of course. When Peter takes them to his church to reveal their plight to the congregation, both Ravi and Sojeat are too afraid to speak but Arn simply mimics the famous people he knows like Elvis and the Beatles, and announces to the congregation that he is happy to be in the United States. The sound of the applause that follows is deeply pleasing to Arn and he thinks it implies that he is already a little famous.

## Discussion Question 1

What difficulties do Arn, Ravi and Sojeat face on the way to America and why?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the overall opinion that the boys have of America and what experiences do they have that contribute to these opinions?



## Discussion Question 3

Why is Peter less patient with the boys in America than he was in Thailand and for what reasons?

## Vocabulary

announce, mansion, shrivel, microphone, applause



# Chapter 16

## Summary

Arn is surprised to learn that Peter has children of his own that live in the house and a wife named Shirley as well. They meet his three children – Donna, Doug and Kate and everyone welcomes them. A bowl of fruit just sits on the table and the boys sneak some of it into their room. They play and later they pee out the window, afraid that the ‘American latrine’ might suck them down too.

Shirley yells when she sees the room, angry that it smells like a latrine and, sure they will be sent back to Cambodia, they pack their few belongings. Instead, they have a family meeting and the boys are given chores and rules to follow. During the day they are kept busy with chores, television and meals, but at night Arn is haunted by his time with the Khmer Rouge. He sees the faces of those he’d killed, and of the woman who called him Khmer Rouge and spat at him. Finally, he rises and sits at the window until the sun comes up.

The days are getting shorter and colder now, though not as bad as Denmark. They get up at 4 a.m. for chores and then work on English with Shirley until Peter decides it is time they went to school. Ravi and Sojeat were in a school before, so they are only a little nervous. Arn is terrified. Five hundred white teenagers attend this high school and all stare at the newcomers from Cambodia.

The boys wear their new clothes and Arn tries to take everything in. He accidentally goes into the girls’ bathroom giving Sojeat and some American kids a good laugh, but Arn is angry that Sojeat didn’t tell him. The next day the teacher assigns a student to show Arn around. Arn doesn’t understand much of the language, but all day he hears ‘monkey’ when he passes people. Later, he asks Doug what it means and Doug apes monkey behavior. Arn’s anger grows.

Peter attends constant meetings about Cambodia. One day he takes the three boys to a meeting. When they get there, one girl gives Arn a dollar for ‘his country’. Arn takes it to send to Runty. Then the newspaper reports that three barns have been burned and the new kids from Cambodia are mentioned. The next day a group of kids circle Arn lighting matches in his face. Arn swears at them and they laugh. Arn tries to control his growing anger. That night, he has nightmares. He wakes, realizing that though there are many good things in New Hampshire, it is still just another place he has to learn how to survive.

Arn is put into an ESL class and Sojeat teases him. The teacher, Pat, spends all day trying to teach Arn how to make certain sounds and finally, when the teacher puts her face right close to his, Arn spits on her. She jerks back and with tears in her eyes, leaves the room. Arn tries to understand what made him do something so mean.





It snows, so beautiful that Arn leaves the school and walks home. It's so quiet and Arn thinks about Mek who told him that paradise was a place where sugar fell from the sky, and no kids are hungry.

Then Arn is shown the game of soccer and once he understands the rules, he is a natural, just as he was with volleyball. That morning, he was called a monkey, but now they cheer him. The teacher offers him a spot on the team. Sojeat leans over and tells Arn that though everyone there thinks he is a hero, he knows who Arn really is. One day at lunch, a teacher gives Arn a wooden flute and Arn takes it into the woods at night, teaching himself to play the songs he remembers.

Peter takes Arn to meetings frequently now. Sojeat and Ravi don't want to speak in public but Arn doesn't mind. To him it is performing. One night they have a candlelit dinner, even though Peter is gone at another meeting for Cambodia. Sojeat leans over and tells Arn he is Khmer Rouge and killed his mother and father. Arn snaps. He jumps on the table and kicks Sojeat, breaking his nose as well as much of the dishes. Kate screams and cries but Arn is too far gone. Blood is everywhere, and finally Ravi grabs Arn and wrestles him to the ground. He looks up and sees the faces on the family, scared and crying. Arn jumps up and runs out into the night.

## Analysis

The boys are surprised to see that Peter has a family with three kids and a wife. They all welcome the boys from Cambodia, but Arn can see the worry on their faces. It reminds him of the face Hong's mother made when Hong wanted Arn to come with them and reveals the mindset of the theme of poverty that is ever present throughout this story. Although Arn, Ravi and Sojeat are in America and consider Americans (including Peter) to be rich, they still worry about having enough to eat which is reflected in their interpretation of the looks Peter's family gave them. Arn thinks they are worried that they won't have enough food for another three mouths, but there is no evidence to support Arn's fear.

Another ongoing theme in this story is the 'third-world' theory which speaks directly to the differences between America and Cambodia. These differences are pointed out frequently throughout the story in too many places to mention all but follow along the same lines as Arn not having attended school of any sort; the concept of shopping and paying; the bed none of the boys had ever experienced; the bedding that was soft and cloud-like; the first time having hamburger or seeing ketchup packets and their lack of proper clothing and the list goes on.

The family theme inserts itself here again, but in a different manner. This time, the family is Peter's and rather than having found someone to be a new family for them, Arn and the boys have been brought to a place where their presence isn't entirely approved of. As a result, Arn and the boys are able to witness the family dynamics, but from outside looking in.



Guilt is also a theme touched on in this chapter. Arn is fine during the day for the most part but when evening comes and everyone is in bed, his mind replays the faces and last words of the people he killed or people who thought he was Khmer Rouge. He also sees the faces of the children he left behind in Thailand like Runty, and the children who died in battle, spread across the battle field. Arn is wrapped in a sweat soaked blanket when he wakes, and he spends the rest of the night quietly looking out the window and waiting for dawn.

The fear theme is also present again in this section, but the fear is different. This time, instead of fearing for life threatening dangers, or fearing for where their next meal will come from, Ravi and Sojeat discover that they have a fear of public speaking. As such, Arn becomes the spokesperson for the children of Cambodia, and he travels with Peter to speak to supporting groups. Arn has his share of fear as well when he learns that they will be attending school. While Sojeat and Ravi had both done so before, Arn had never been to school and the thought of being somewhere with five hundred teenagers was terrifying. He finds school confusing too. Everything looks the same, and when he mistakenly goes into the ladies bathroom instead of the men's, Sojeat and other American children laugh at him. The entire incident adds to the nightmares he is already having. This leads readers directly to the next theme. Betrayal.

Arn is betrayed by Sojeat at school when he allows Arn to make mistakes without stepping in and considering the fact that Arn doesn't read English well. Kids at school continue to tease him and his anger is fueled by their behavior and by Sojeat's omission.

The local newspaper reports arson in the area, three barns having been burned down, and some of Arn's classmates are quick to blame him, lighting matches in his face and intimidating him. The fire is synonymous with the way Arn feels inside, burning to show them what he is really capable of. Thankfully, Arn swears at them instead.

Prejudice is a prominent theme in this segment as well. While Arn has experienced this to some degree when he was taken by Khmer Rouge, he has never been a victim of this kind outside the parameters of war. Now, his peers isolate him for his race, his origins, and his lack of education. They compare Arn, Sojeat and Ravi to monkeys, implying they are merely animals beside them.

Anger is also a growing theme. Arn becomes increasingly agitated by the way he is treated by his peers, and by Sojeat, the latter even worse somehow as his behavior is seen as a betrayal as well. The anger grows in him with each incurred slight, and when he is faced with the embarrassment of an ESL class, he struggles, finally spitting on the teacher when she continues to repeat sounds he cannot make. The frustration he feels comes to a head later at home when Sojeat tells him he is just Khmer Rouge and killed his mother and father. In a moment of unbridled fury, Arn attacks him, bloodying his nose when he kicks him in the face.

Once again, escape is all that remains for Arn – a theme which has recurred often since the Khmer Rouge first came to his village.



## Discussion Question 1

Why are Arn, Sojeat and Ravi fearful when they meet Peter's family for the first time, and what experiences in their lives have created this fear?

## Discussion Question 2

In what way does the newspaper affect Arn, Ravi and Sojeat both positively and negatively?

## Discussion Question 3

What positive things have happened to Arn since arriving in America, and how does that compare to the negative experiences he has had?

## Vocabulary

assign, obsess, paradise, performing, conceit



# Chapter 17

## Summary

Arn loses one shoe on the way out of the door, and kicks off the other as he runs into the night. He walks through the woods that surround Peter's house, covered in a mixture of his and Sojeat's blood. It begins to rain and Arn feels like he's in the jungle again. Arn feels as though he is poison and that he hurts everything he touches.

He walks, just as he had in the jungle, putting one foot in front of the other until he reaches a road. A large sound from behind scares him back into the bush until he realizes that it is only a passing truck. Then he begins to hope for another one, realizing that if he just steps out in front of it, all of the problems will end. He will be just a smear on the road. No more trucks come however, and he walks along until he reaches a village. Most of the lights are off, and Arn wishes he were home at Peter's in his warm bed too. He sees a flashing sign that says free TV and having learned that word in the mall with Peter, he now knows the difference between free and what must be paid for. The automatic door opens and Arn goes in, but there is no TV, and no one at the counter. The air is warm and Arn lies down on the carpet and falls asleep.

Later, Arn becomes aware of people around him, and a man yells at him to get out. Arn jumps up and goes back out into the cold, the night now foggy around him. In the fog, Arn sees the people in his past, his family, his friends and the people who have died. A police car cruises the area looking for him, but drives right past him without seeing. Arn steps into the light without thinking until the policeman tells him to stop. Arn keeps walking until he gets right to him, and then putting his arm around him, he puts his head on the officer's chest and asks him to please take him home.

Peter cries, wrapping him in a blanket and thanking God over and over. He takes Arn upstairs to the bedroom, and closes the door. Arn braces for the beating that is coming, but Peter just holds him and rocks him. Arn tells him how he hurts inside; how he hates the men who hurt him and killed his family and friends. He can't understand why he lived when so many died. Peter explains that Arn was chosen to live so that he could tell people what happened in Cambodia, and that by telling the world, he chooses to live. The idea settles in Arn's mind and calms him. He finally understands that he no longer has to fight to survive. Now he can choose to live.

## Analysis

Fear, an ongoing theme throughout this story is again prevalent in this chapter. Arn runs from Peter's house, afraid of what he's done and ashamed of himself. Arn is more afraid of facing Peter after what he'd done than he is of being alone in the dark, in a strange place. Instead he walks barefoot through the forest that surrounds Peter's house, and eventually finds the road.



Self-loathing is also a theme in Arn's life, and has been since the first act of evil he was forced to commit. His heart is black, and beyond help in his mind. Arn is so filled with disgust for himself that he considers throwing himself in front of a passing truck, but luckily none come.

Love is also examined in this chapter as Arn considers how he's let down those he loves. Peter has given him so much, saving his life and taking him out of Cambodia. He loves Peter and feels as though he let him down. Love is also prevalent when Arn is brought home by police and Peter realizes he is safe. He takes Arn upstairs and holds him close, giving Arn a chance to reveal the truth of how he feels.

Forgiveness and purpose are what Peter then gives Arn as he explains the reason Arn survived while so many didn't. He tells Arn that it is his purpose to tell the story of what happened in Cambodia, and perhaps by doing so, freeing those who still remain behind. He convinces Arn that his life has reason, and Arn finally understands that he can choose to live.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Arn run from Peter's house and where is he going?

## Discussion Question 2

What conclusion does Arn arrive at after the truck passes him on the road and why?

## Discussion Question 3

How do the police treat Arn when they find him, and what is Peter's reaction when Arn is brought back?

## Vocabulary

trance, slashing, register, frustrate, nightmare



# Chapter 18: New York City 1984

## Summary

Arn takes a deep breath and begins by telling the crowd at New York's St. John the Divine church his name and where he is from. He has been working with Shirley and Pat at the school every day in an effort to improve his English, but mostly learns from watching television. His determination to learn even helped him to graduate from New Hampshire high school.

Ten thousand people are there to hear him speak, including dignitaries like Desmond Tutu, James Taylor, and many other VIP's including reporters. Arn begins slowly, describing his life before the Khmer Rouge came; how everyone was told to leave the city; about the first dead body on the side of the road and then begins to tell them how he was forced to leave his family. The story comes with a will of its own now as he describes the children who died from starvation; how it sounded when an ax hit a skull; and how the dead call to him from beyond. A tear hits the paper and Arn's voice cracks as he cries for the first time since before the Khmer Rouge came.

A man approaches and offers to have Arn stop for a break, but Arn insists on finishing. He does so, often sobbing as he finally completes, his body shaking and tears streaming. At first the silence is deafening, but then one person begins clapping and the rest join in until the applause is thundering. The sound is uplifting to Arn and he sees to his surprise that many in the audience are crying too. Finally, he feels the tiger inside lay down and rest.

## Analysis

In this last chapter, enough time has passed that Arn has finished high school and attained a diploma. The overall theme is one of purging as Arn tells a group of over ten thousand people his story. By doing so, he finally puts voice to the horrors he had seen and survived, telling the crowd about the people he'd met and the battles he'd fought, both during the war and afterward in an effort just to survive.

Again, survival is a theme as Arn describes his experiences, and by doing so manages to find a way forward himself. Though he'd survived Cambodia, and found his way to America, his actual survival depended on his ability to let the worst of it go. By sharing his experiences, and seeing his emotions reflected on the faces of the people there, he finally manages to let a little of the past go. He can take a breath, metaphorically and realistically as he discovers solace in telling his story.

Healing is also a large part of the last segment of this story as Arn is finally able to put the 'tiger in his heart' to bed. The author uses this metaphor frequently throughout the story, Arn using it to describe the pain and anger his helplessness brought about. Now, for the first time since the beginning of his ordeal Arn is able to do so. He discovers that



his heart has room for the love and the life offered to him in this country, and that he has the courage to tell his story to the world.

In this segment, the power of Peter Pond's rescue is finally evident in ways that it had not been until now. Before this segment, Arn floated from one new experience to another, stuffing his past down deep. At night, in the quiet of the house however, the dead came back to him making it impossible to sleep. Now, having shared the entirety of his story to so many, and finding their approval afterward, Arn is filled with a sense of purpose and pride.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the purpose of Arn sharing his story to the crowd gathered in St. John the Divine church?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What happens during Arn's speech and what is significant about it?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does Arn realize after his speech and how does it affect him?

## **Vocabulary**

graduate, introduce, applause, audience, thunder



# Characters

## Arn Chorn-Pond

Arn is an 11-year-old young man who lived in Battambang, Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge first came. He lived with his brother and sisters in his Aunt's home and had since his father died and his mother left town to find work elsewhere. Like the rest of the town, he and his family are forced to flee and are eventually separated from each other as the Khmer Rouge separate them into groups. Arn's group is sent to a large rice field where they are put to work to feed the soldiers. Arn is intelligent and resourceful, and soon understands what it takes to survive. He learns how to hide his emotions carefully under a blank face, regardless of what he sees or what is done to him.

In the next four years, Arn suffers horrors that exceed most war stories at their worst. He and the other children in his group are forced into servitude, fed little or nothing, and terrorized day and night. He learns to hoard small treasures like a handful of rice if he can steal it, and shares it with the smallest, or sickest in the group in an effort to keep them all alive. This despite his own gnawing hunger reveals the strength of Arn's character. During these years, Arn sees many die and is even forced to push them into a mass grave once they are hit with an ax over the head and this experience follows him.

Arn makes few friends, understanding that connections of this kind can be used against you. In fact, when his group comes across another group containing one of his sisters in the jungle, he does not acknowledge her for fear that they would kill her if the Khmer Rouge discovered they were related. Instead, he sneaks out to her afterward and promises to find her when the war is over.

One soldier is nicer than the others. Sombo seems to take a shine to Arn, talking to him, and treating him better than the other soldiers ever did. This friendship saves Arn's life time and again as Sombo manages to intervene surreptitiously on his behalf. That friendship is tested several times, but Sombo remains loyal, even when the rolls are reversed and Arn is unable to acknowledge him.

Arn avoids dying in a rice field by learning how to play music when the Khmer Rouge begin looking for people who can play the rhetoric they are spreading. All other songs are forbidden, but Arn doesn't care. He practices the khim until he can play it blindfolded. During this time, he saves his music teacher, Mek by explaining that he holds their lives in his hands as well as his own. Mek never forgets and their friendship gives them both comfort. Arn even sneaks into Mek's bed most nights - Mek holding him through the night like his own son.

When the Vietnamese soldiers finally come to liberate Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge, Arn has been with them for so long that he knows little else. He has no idea where his family is, sure that most if not all are dead, and he has no where to go so





when he is given a gun, he learns how to shoot. Sombo encourages him to run during the initial confusion, but Arn stays along with many others. Given rifles, they are sent out into fields to find the enemy, often shot in the process. Arn watches many of the boys with them die either from gunfire or fever. When the youngest in their group, Koong becomes ill, Sombo tells Arn to take control of the group while he takes Koong to get help. Arn leaves the group soon after Sombo does, and no one seems to notice.

He walks through the jungle in the direction of Thailand, which he has heard is the place to get away from the war. On the way, in sickness and hunger, he stumbles along until he finally finds the river between Cambodia and Thailand. He manages to get across, following hallucinations that guide him, and on the other side he is pulled from the water. Several days later, he is conscious for the first time, and taken to the hospital compound where he remains for weeks and where he meets the man who will save him - Peter Pond.

Peter will eventually take Arn and two of his friends to America, adopting them and bringing them into his home. Although it is a difficult adjustment for all concerned, Arn manages to complete high school, and begins to purge his own lasting demons by telling his story to the world.

## Sombo

Sombo is the body guard for one of the top soldiers. He wears two guns and is quietly fearsome. Sombo enjoys the music Arn plays so much that he risks his own death by not turning Arn in when he sees him stealing rice, or catches him eating tamarind fruit. Soon, he begins asking Arn to stay behind after the band leaves, and play for him blindfolded. Eventually, he reveals that before the Khmer Rouge, he was an orphan, and hungry most of the time. People often hit him or shamed him for doing the things he had to in order to eat. After that, Arn plays the khim for him many nights, and one night Arn shows him how to play.

Sombo is a true friend to Arn, saving him countless times from death or worse. Having been homeless himself before the Khmer Rouge came, he is sensitive to the plight of the children in camp. When he notices that Arn is sharing everything he gets with other children, he decides to remain quiet. As an orphan, he was often hungry, judged by those around him and shamed or hit when he tried to find food. As such, he decides not to pass that shame on to other children despite the risk to himself. Sombo is a gentle man at heart, caring more for the captives than he likely should. When the Vietnamese come, he tells Arn that he should run away in the confusion and find his family, but Arn has been with the Khmer Rouge for too long now. He has become one for now. Still, Sombo protects him.

When Sombo sees that Koong, the young rat catcher is sick and not getting better, he puts Arn in charge of the rest of the children, and leaves, intending to take Koong to a hospital in Thailand. The next time Sombo sees Arn, it is at the children's center in Thailand and he eagerly hails him but Arn is fearful that their association will get him



into trouble, so he ignores Sombo. Sombo understands and, though disappointed and hurt, he defers to Arn's wishes.

## Peter Pond

This individual is an American man Arn meets when he is still in the hospital. He comes every day. When flood waters overwhelm the hospital, he helps to move the children, picking Arn up and carrying him to safety. After that, he comes to Arn frequently, putting cold cloths on his fevered brow and praying constantly. Finally, he sneaks enough medicine in to make Arn better, telling Arn he has worms and the medicine will kill them. Peter argues with the doctor and nurses, shouting at them, and then tells Arn that he must choose to live. He tells Arn that he can't save all of the children, but he has chosen Arn. Peter gives Arn new clothes, burning the old ones and continues to visit Arn daily until he is finally released to the children's center.

Peter asks Arn to select two of his favorite people from the center and meet him at the fence line. He does, and later than night Peter takes the three boys out for the first decent meal they've had in many many months. He does that several times, but then suddenly stops coming. When Arn learns Peter has been shot, he goes to the hospital to find Peter in good spirits. Being shot helps, he tells them, announcing that they three boys are going to come to America with him.

Peter takes Arn, Sojeat and Ravi into his home, introducing them to his wife Shirley; his son Doug; and his daughters - Donna and Kate. Though they welcome the Cambodian children, they are worried. The transition is not an easy one, but Peter is patient. He eventually gives Arn a reason to live, and he and his wife Shirley adopt a total of seventeen Cambodian children.

## Sojeat

Sojeat is one of the children in the children's center who plays volleyball. He is one of two of the best players and Arn notices this. He gives a piece of Chuckle candy to him and tells him to remember the boy who gave it to him. Of the almost two hundred children in the children's center, Sojeat is one of the two best volleyball players. Arn is so impressed with his ability to play that he practices on his own at night when no one can see so that Sojeat will want him on his team one day. When Arn is told that he can pick two favorites, he picks the two best at volleyball - Sojeat and Ravi, and Peter picks all three of them up later and takes them out to eat. Sojeat is nervous, but jumps in after Arn does. The next day, Peter brings them books.

Sojeat is competitive, and always wants to be the best. He is happiest only when he is on top, and is willing to do almost anything to get there. Sojeat has attended school before, so when Peter tells them they will be going to high school he is not nearly as nervous as Arn is. Sojeat treats Arn nicely until they are in the U.S., and then begins what seems like a single handed effort to discredit him. The first incident occurs in the high school when Sojeat laughs with other students as Arn mistakenly uses the girl's



bathroom. Sojeat does not help or warn Arn, instead laughing with the rest of the students.

Sojeat is not as good at Arn where public speaking is concerned however. Arn does all of them instead. One day a teacher gives Arn a flute and he plays a bit of it for Shirley but Sojeat doesn't like Arn getting attention so he quietly accuses Arn of being Khmer Rouge and Arn snaps. He beats Sojeat bloody and races out into the night.

## Ravi

Ravi is one of the children Arn meets in the children's center and is one of two of the best volleyball players. When Arn is given Chuckle candy by Misster Pond, he shares a piece with both Ravi and Sojeat, telling them to remember that he was the one who gave them such a nice treat.

Ravi is one of three children that Arn admires on the volleyball court for his ability to spike the ball. Ravi and Sojeat are the two children that Arn selects to go to the U.S. with Peter Pond, but he doesn't choose them because they are his friends. He would rather have chosen Runty, but Runty is fearful and can't play so Arn doesn't include him.

Ravi is tall and a little bit shy. He doesn't provoke Arn like Sojeat does. Ravi is also afraid of public speaking, content to leave this part of the United States experience to Arn.

## Koong

This small and skinny boy is the replacement rice-bearer that Sombo gets from another camp after the girl who carried their rice loses her leg and her life to a land mine. He is barely able to carry the rice, but he has other skills as well. Koong can catch rats, frogs, snakes, insects and almost anything else that can be eaten. His job is critical, as there is hardly any rice remaining.

When Koong becomes too ill to carry on, Sombo takes him away on his own to find him some help before he dies.

## Runty

Runty is a very small child that Arn meets at the children's center after he is well enough to leave the hospital. He has the face of an old man, and is terrified most of the time. Arn befriends him when he notices him sitting alone, and becomes to Runty what Mek once was to him – a safe place to be at night when he is scared.



## Mek

This is the name of the second music teacher that Arn and the other children have. When the Khmer Rouge came for him originally, he'd already lost his children and he didn't know where his wife was. His baby boy had just starved to death and he was ready to die himself, but the soldiers had other plans, pressing him into service as a music teacher instead.

## Siv

Siv is a big guy who holds the flag when Arn and the other musicians learn to dance. He is tall and has large feet and a sad looking face that reminds Arn of an elephant. He is simple and kind to Arn, smiling even though no one else does.

## Khmer Rouge (aka Black-pajama Soldiers; aka Red Cambodia)

The Khmer Rouge are made up of young men dressed all in black including a black cap, who parade through the streets of Battambang and announce the war was over. The only thing they wear that isn't black is the red and white scarf tied on their heads. This army claims to be soldiers of the prince and assures residents that the Prince will be returning shortly.

## Sophea

Sophea is younger than Arn, but older than his younger brother. She is their favorite blow gun target and often swears when she gets hit getting her in trouble with their aunt as well. Sophea is a skinny girl, but despite that she is brave and great at climbing trees.

## Chantou

Chantou is Arn's number one big sister who gets angry with Arn when she realizes that he is selling ice cream – a task she considers to be low class. Chantou is sent to a mountain camp with Maly and worked hard. They are encouraged to marry Khmer Rouge soldiers, but refuse.

## Maly

Arn's sister Maly has hair like black/blue silk, similar to the kind of sheen and coloring of a crow until the Khmer Rouge soldiers cut it to neck length.

## **Jorami**

Jorami is Arn's number two sister.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Buffalo Toe Tree

This is the name given to a tree that creates a small, hard seed ball that some kids used as blow gun ammunition with a reed.

## Nestle Can

A Nestle can is the measurement system that was used to dole out rice among the families who were transplanted to be farmers. Each family was given half a can.

## Angka

Angka is the religious deity that the displaced population is told now owns everything, and will provide everything from doubled rice crops to great health. Angka is described by the Khmer Rouge as having as many eyes as a pineapple and everyone is required to clap whenever the name Angka is spoken.

## Three Days

Three days is the length of time given to all indignities imposed on people of Battambang, Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge.

## Khim

A khim is a stringed instrument that Arn is expected to learn how to play in just five days. He quickly becomes proficient enough to play for dignitaries and even to teach others how to play.

## Tro Sau Toch

This is the name of a fiddle like instrument that some of the children are expected to learn how to play in five days so that they can play for dignitaries and to keep workers happy.

## Mango Grove

A mango grove is where the soldiers take the bodies of the prisoners they've killed to be buried (haphazardly covered with dirt). The mango grove comes to symbolize death for the prisoners who survive and especially for Arn who is sometimes told to push the



prisoners into their graves after the Khmer Rouge soldiers hit them over the head with an ax.

## **Year Zero**

Year Zero is what the Khmer Rouge call the current time period – a new beginning where all that has come before ceases to exist.

## **Sugar Lumps**

Sugar lumps are one of the treats that the girl who works in the kitchen gives to Arn in return for spending time with him. He allows her to use his body in any manor she wants so that he can get treats such as this from her, which he then shares with Mek.

## **Rice**

Rice is that staple and often only food that the prisoners see. Most often, they are given only liquid with occasional kernels of rice floating in it. Arn begins to steal rice from the sacks they are in when he visits the kitchen, and even steals rice chaff now in desperation.

## **Angka Speaking**

Angka Speaking is the first radio station that Sombo lets Arn listen to after Sombo is freed from prison. The station promotes Angka, and claims that the rice fields are full and the peasants working them are joyful and looking forward to a harvest so great that everyone will profit.

## **Voice of America**

Voice of America is the station that will get Arn and Sombo killed if anyone hears them listening to it. This station tells of the Vietnamese soldiers who are crossing the border to help with the fight against Khmer Rouge.

## **Little Fish with the Big Sting**

"Little Fish with the Big Sting" is the name that the Khmer Rouge gave the children who were in the band and were given arms to fight against the Vietnamese when they came. The name suited their group as they were often sent ahead through the grass to flush out enemy positions so that the Khmer Rouge could attack with fewer casualties. The children have been captives for so long that they are now more afraid of the Vietnamese



than they are of the Khmer Rouge, so when Arn offers to fight for them, the band becomes a special fighting / infiltration unit with Sombo as their leader.

## Waiting For You

Waiting For You is a Cambodian love song, and this tune is what plays in Thailand as Arn gets his first taste of real rescue.

## Chuckle

Chuckle is the name of the bright colored candy with a jelly center and covered in sugar. Peter Pond gives Arn some of this candy which he shares with some of the other children a bit at a time.

## Volleyball

The children who are well enough to leave the hospital live in an orphanage if there is no family to claim them, and one of the main forms of entertainment is to play volleyball. Arn becomes very good at this game.

## Children's Center

The Children's Center is where Arn is transferred to when he is finally well enough to leave the hospital. To Arn, it looks like a prison camp where all of the kids are without parents and sleep together in a large tent. The center is filled with children who laugh and play as though they've never seen war. Children at the center like to play volleyball, and those who don't play like to watch. There are almost two hundred children in the center, all of them orphans. Just outside of the center is a refugee camp where many people live in rows like a small city.

## ESL Program

The ESL Program is an 'English as a second language' class for those whose native tongue is not English to help teach them the language and enable them to keep up in with school work. Arn is enrolled in the ESL program when teachers in high school realize that he can't read or write English.

## New York Times

The New York Times paper covers Arn's speech at St. John the Divine's church in New York.





# Settings

## Battambang, Cambodia

Battambang, Cambodia is the town in which Arn and his little brother live with their Aunt until the arrival of the Khmer Rouge.

## China

China is where the prince of Cambodia and the widow of an American president have gone to visit.

## Temple

The temple is where Arn is supposed to be every day to learn the chant, do homework and complete the chores the monks assign him.

## Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh is the city where Arn believes his mother has gone to find work after his father is killed in a motorcycle accident.

## Mango Grove

The mango grove is where the Khmer Rouge soldiers pile up the dead, barely covering them with dirt.

## Kampuchea

Kampuchea is the name the Khmer Rouge refers to as the democratic land of plenty.

## Leader's House

The leader of the Khmer Rouge takes over a house in the middle of town. It is the largest house in town, the rest all empty. The house is yellow and has a gate made of iron. Arn plays his khim on a big porch.



## **Thailand**

Thailand is where most of the people from Cambodia flee to avoid the soldiers from both sides. Arn remembers the name, hoping it is true. He manages to make his way there after Sombo leaves the group with Koong and meets Peter Pond who takes him back to America.

## **Banyan Tree**

A banyan tree has low branches that Arn climbs onto creating a hammock-like bed to sleep in safely.

## **Denmark**

Denmark is where the plane that Arn, Ravi and Sojeat take to America stops to refuel. The boys are allowed to go out for an hour and for the first time they are exposed to how cold it can be in Denmark, particularly if you have threadbare clothing and are barefoot.

## **New Hampshire**

New Hampshire is where Peter and his family lives, and where he brings Arn, Ravi and Sojeat when they get to America.

## **New Hampshire High School**

Rav, Sojeat and Arn are enrolled in New Hampshire High School near Peter's home and Arn eventually graduates, as do the others.

## **St John the Divine**

St John the Divine is the large church in New York City that Arn is invited to speak at and where he tells his entire story for the first time.



# Themes and Motifs

## Family Ties

Never Fall Down provides several examples of the types of family ties that Arn experiences during his adolescence. In the beginning, his life is already veered away from a traditional family format as a result of an accident that killed his father. When his mother realized that she could not continue to run the opera house that was their living on her own, she was forced to leave Battambang to find work elsewhere. As such, Arn, his brother and three sisters were left in the care of their aunt. Life wasn't easy, but adaptable as children are, Arn found ways to help make extra money and reduce his own burden on the family unit by spending time with the monks at temple instead. He often stayed there over night as well. During the day, instead of staying at the temple as his sister wanted, Arn would try to earn extra money by performing on street corners or by selling ice cream.

When the Khmer Rouge came to Battambang, Arn's family and all the others in town were instructed to leave before the town was leveled. War had finally come to Battambang, and taking all they could carry, they left. It didn't take long for the Khmer Rouge to round people up in groups and begin a program of culling those who were of no use to them or those who might cause them trouble. Arn is taken from his family and grouped with a bunch of boys his age to work in the rice fields. The boys become his new family and Arn does much the same for them as he did for his own family. He did what he could to keep them alive, finding extra food when he could and distributing it to the weakest ones, despite the fact that he himself was starving.

Arn's next family tie was to Mek - a music teacher brought in to educate those who were able to play for dignitaries and for other workers. Mek is a broken man when Arn first meets him, and would surely have been killed by Khmer Rouge had Arn not stepped up and spoken with him. Mek had no interest in teaching music, having recently lost his entire family, but Arn explains that if he doesn't teach them, they will all be killed. While Mek has little life of his own left in his mind, he cannot in good conscience allow his actions to cause the deaths of these young boys. He and Arn become as close as father and son, often sleeping with arms wrapped around each other at night for comfort.

Arn finally meets a Khmer Rouge soldier that is not evil to his core when he meets Sombo. Sombo saves Arn's life time and time again, intervening when Arn might have been killed by other soldiers, and ensuring that Arn stays safe. Sombo is Arn's friend to the end, coming to his aid when required, and pretending they didn't know each other when acknowledging their friendship would have caused Arn hardship.

Finally, Arn meets Peter Pond in the children's center. Peter becomes a father figure to Arn, eventually adopting him and two friends from the center and taking them back to New Hampshire with him. Collectively, they become his new family, and Arn is finally safe and free.



## Hunger and Starvation

Hunger and starvation are an ongoing theme from the beginning of this story. When the story begins, Arn and his siblings are living with their aunt in Battambang, Cambodia. There is never enough to eat or money for food, so Arn is always looking for ways to earn extra or to acquire food for the family. If he is unable to bring food to them, he manages to eat elsewhere so that he does not deplete their meager resources. This is but a brief glimpse of how bad it can get however.

When the Khmer Rouge soldiers came and residents of Battambang were told to leave, they were only able to take what they could carry. As such, food was an increasingly rare commodity and those who were adept at catching frogs and the like ate better than those who didn't or couldn't. Once Arn was separated from his family, the situation only deteriorated. Given just a small amount of rice each day at first, Arn quickly lost any excess fat his body might have had, and he, along with all of the other boys forced to work the rice fields, soon had swollen bellies and sunken eyes typical of the malnourished. Then even that amount of food became unreliable. He and the other children were often forced to eat chaff when no rice was available; they gorged on mangoes that fell from the trees in a nearby orchard (even though what followed was severe cramps and diarrhea; caught frogs and crickets when they could; and some boys even ate grass at night to fill their empty stomachs. The most desperate even manage to overcome repulsion long enough to gnaw on the remains of those who were killed or died before them.

The ongoing starvation led to rickets, fevers and other illnesses that caused the death of many children and adults alike throughout the camps. Arn continues to survive, stubbornly determined to find his family one day again. When the Vietnamese come to liberate them, Arn is given a gun and treated like a Khmer Rouge soldier. While the food situation improves by a tiny margin, it is still less than adequate for health and welfare.

Arn's experiences with starvation and hunger finally end when he manages to make his way to Thailand. There he is taken to a hospital where he spends weeks feverish and unable to keep anything down. Peter Pond finally manages to find enough penicillin to help Arn, and by the time he is transferred to the children's center, he is able to eat, and is improving. Peter will eventually take Arn back to the U.S. with him, and though the food is different there, Arn will never know a forced starvation again.

## Music

Another theme prevalent throughout this story is the presence of music. In the beginning, Arn and his peers are all familiar with Elvis and the Beatles, and their town and homes are a constant source of music of one form or another. Music was everywhere. Arn and his brother sang and danced on street corners for change to avoid more of a burden on their aunt's meager resources.



Music is a big part of Arn's life, but the Khmer Rouge's arrival changes the kind of music that is allowed. Instead, now the only music acceptable is music that praises Angka. Despite disagreeing with the lyrics to these new songs, Arn learns them. He also learns how to play the khim and becomes so adept that he can play blindfolded. His ability gains him considerable notoriety, and he is soon given more food, and more freedom than other captives. Once he masters the instrument, he no longer has to work in the fields, and is taken from place to place to perform. It isn't freedom as such, but it is closer than most of the boys ever get.

The music played by the band created from boys who were forced to work in the rice fields has many purposes. They play to uplift the workers in the fields, travelling from one area to another and singing about Angka, feigning their joy at doing so as Arn has taught them. They also play at certain times of day or night to cover up the sounds of Khmer Rouge soldiers killing prisoners that have been deemed either traitorous, useless, or too sick to continue to work. Their music covers the sounds of the ax as it connects with the skulls of those who are killed.

Arn is eventually asked to play for leaders and dignitaries. He becomes such a fixture in the leader's home that when the leader requires that a message be sent to a neighboring camp, Arn is given the task and sent out on horseback. The freedom is exhilarating, and Arn doesn't even consider escaping, having been captive for so long now that he has no idea where he would go if he did.

The next example of music affecting or influencing Arn's life occurs when he wakes on the Thailand side of the river, having been dragged up the beach by several girls who found him half dead at the water's edge. A bus comes and a bullhorn invites them all to come for food and shelter. They play a Cambodian love song over the speakers called *Waiting for You*, and Arn is drawn to it like a bee to honey.

Music continues to be an influence in his life after he meets Peter Pond who takes him to the U.S. eventually. There, he listens to the songs he knows on the radio. He is also given a wooden flute which he easily masters and soon finds himself playing Cambodian love songs from his childhood.

## **Atrocities of War**

This story is one that describes many of the atrocities Arn endured that occurred as a result of the war in Cambodia. The influence of war on his life affected not only his health, his welfare, and his family, but it sliced deep into his heart and filled it with fear, loathing and a hardness that comes from helplessness. Arn is amazed when he sees his first dead body, and watches as a constant stream of people pass by without doing anything. He can hardly believe that he can become so used to seeing dead people that the sight no longer frightened him.

That is only the beginning however. Arn quickly realizes that to survive among the Khmer Rouge, he would have to harden himself, and show no feelings whatsoever. He



never cries, and never reacts even when he sees things that make his stomach clench. He manages to maintain a bland expression of disinterest, knowing that to show emotion is to join those who are segregated and eliminated.

Atrocities of war continue with starvation as the captives of the Khmer Rouge eat whatever they can find while the soldiers manage to gain weight with the amounts of food they are given. Arn and the others can smell the food cooking, and can consider themselves fortunate to have been given a tiny bit of rice if even that.

The Khmer Rouge kill for little or no reason at all. Many are killed for falling over in the fields, too weak to continue to work. Others are killed for speaking out, or trying to help those who struggled. Some are killed simply for being intelligent enough to cause trouble in the future. Bodies are piled up in the mango grove, and often soil is not even put over them. As such, these bodies become food for the more desperate of children, too hungry to care about proprieties.

In other examples of war time atrocities, when the Vietnamese soldiers come, the surviving children are given guns and sent out to discover their campsites. Once they had, they were supposed to flatten out on the field and wait, but most were so frightened when the gunfire began that they stood up and ran back to the Khmer Rouge, often cut down by both sides before they could get there.

The atrocities of war as described here are not new or unusual. War itself is an atrocity that humanity has yet to eradicate completely.

## Generosity

Despite the horrors that war brings to Battambang and to Cambodia in general, Arn never loses the generous spirit that is ingrained in him. The first examples of his generosity occur as he does what he can to minimize the difficulties his aunt has providing food and shelter for himself and his siblings. Recognizing how difficult it is for his aunt to provide for all of them, Arn often earns money to buy food he can take home, and stays at the temple with the monks so that he does not drain their meager supplies at home.

This generosity of spirit continues despite capture by the Khmer Rouge. Throughout his captivity, Arn will continuously share the best of what he can find, barter or steal in the way of food with others he feels are worse off than he is. Arn gives extra to a different child each day, ensuring that all of them get something at least some of the time, despite his own gnawing hunger. Even when he earns extra treats like an occasional sugar lump in return for spending time with a kitchen girl, he doesn't consume it himself. Instead, he takes this treat to Mek, enjoying how the small treat lifts him up even briefly.

When Arn finally gets to Thailand, and is in the children's center, his generosity is evident still. Despite losing everything himself, he shares what little he has with those around him. When he learns that Peter will take him and two other boys of his choice to the U.S., Arn gives away all of the clothing Peter bought him, each child getting one



thing to remember him by. He gives away the candy Peter sends him, and his actions inspire, although reluctantly, Sojeat and Ravi to donate their belongings as well.

It is remarkable that despite near death himself, Arn still shares all he has with those he considers to be less fortunate.



# Styles

## Point of View

Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick is a story written entirely from the first person perspective of the main character, Arn Chorn-Pond. The story follows his life from the age of 11 until the age of 20, and chronicles his experiences beginning as a boy in Battambang, Cambodia. The story follows Arn through his family's evacuation of Battambang and on through the time he spends as a captive of the Khmer Rouge. Arn speaks of the atrocities he personally experienced or witnessed as the Khmer Rouge kept him during a four-year period, and describes his eventual freedom from them.

Arn's point of view gives the reader an intimate look at the casualties of war and the atrocities committed by both sides. Arn reveals how his life changed when the Khmer Rouge came; how he and his family were taken, separated and worked almost to death, all in the name of a revolution based on the perspective of the new regime. Arn survives their starvation, separation, illnesses and more in the hopes that he will one day see his family again.

When Arn is taken to the United States by Peter Pond, along with two of the other children, he is given a new lease on life, and despite the difficulties that face him there, he manages to become a spokesperson for his country, and bring the truth of the war in Cambodia to the rest of the world. By doing so, he is able to save countless children.

## Language and Meaning

Never Fall Down is written entirely in English but from the perspective of a Cambodian boy. This is Arn's story - the story of his home, his captivity, and his eventual rescue. Although the story is told in English, it begins when Arn is just 11 years old and his inexperience with the English language is revealed in his sentence structure and composition.

In the beginning of this story, the author chooses to write in a manner that reflects Arn's lack of English skills. Many of the sentences that Arn uses to describe events or people lack proper grammar and use of plurals, lending significant authenticity to the story for the reader. Sentences are often short and poorly constructed in the beginning, but by the end of the story have improved considerably. This is a direct reflection of Arn's ESL studies, and also helps the reader to understand the chronology of the story.

This story follows Arn's life from age 11 to age 20, and his growth and maturity is shown as the story continues. In the beginning, catching frogs and watching movies are Arn's primary concern but by the end of the story, Arn is considering how he can manage to save the friends he left behind. It accurately reveals his emotional growth as it takes him from childhood to adulthood, when his concerns center on global education about the war and ways to rescue those he left behind.



## Structure

Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick is a novel of less than 150 pages, divided into 18 chapters averaging 7 pages each.

The novel opens in Battambang, Cambodia in 1975. The war had not touched Battambang before this time, but when it does, life changes forever. The first chapter gives the reader a small glimpse into Arn's life before the war. The Khmer Rouge come in Chapter 2, and the separation from his family occurs just one chapter later.

Angka is first introduced in Chapter 4 when the children are told it is the only family they will ever need. Since Arn is the oldest in the group, he is tasked with telling the Khmer Rouge if any of the others are of poor character. This is also the beginning of non-stop hunger. By Chapter 6 & 7, Arn has been with the Khmer Rouge for four years, as near as he can count. Sombo also comes into his life at this point, and Arn's friendship with him will save his life on more than one occasion.

In Chapter 8, the camp is thrown into panic as the radio announces that the Vietnamese are coming. Arn joins the fight against the Vietnamese, unsure as to what else to do. By this time, the Khmer Rouge are more his family than his own is. Up until chapter eleven, Sombo leads the boys through the jungle, keeping them safe, but by chapter eleven the youngest of their group, Koong is so sick that Sombo leaves the rest of the boys to fend for themselves. Putting Arn in charge, he carries Koong off into the forest to find medical help. Arn takes this opportunity to go his own way.

Becoming sick himself, Arn barely makes it to the Thailand border where he is found on the beach only half alive. He survives that, getting well in a hospital before being admitted to a children's center for kids with no parents. Peter Pond finds Arn in Chapter 13 and tells him he is a chosen one. Before long, Peter takes Arn and two of his friends to America with him.



## Quotes

Arn, you should be doing chore for the monk, learning the chant, doing schoolwork."  
(SIC)

-- Chantou (Chapter 1 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** This quote reveals Chantou's desire that the family maintain honorable standing despite her father's death. She doesn't want Arn to make them appear as though they are low class although Arn knows that they already are low class.

In just one day a person can get use to seeing dead body." (SIC)

-- Arn (Chapter 21 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This thought is significant as it reveals a fracture of Arn from innocence that even the loss of his father; living without his mother; and a sudden plunge into poverty hadn't managed. While those issues caused sadness and struggle, this single day costs Arn's innocence.

You teach these kids to love Angka, and you tell us if they have poor character.

-- Khmer Soldier (Chapter 3 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** This instruction is given to Arn and he is expected to turn people in if they are openly hostile or have a bad attitude where their captors or their ideas are concerned. By doing this, they create fear and distrust among the prisoners as well, minimizing the likelihood that they will band together and cause trouble.

They gonna kill us if you don't teach us to play good.

-- Arn (Chapter 3 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** Arn can see that the music teacher that has been assigned to them has lost the will to live. He no longer cares if the sun rises, having already lost his family to the soldiers. Arn reminds him that if he fails to teach them, they will also be killed, giving the teacher a new reason to carry on.

How can you play the song with no instrument?

-- Comrade Moon-face. (Chapter 5 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** This quote is significant because Arn and the other band members were sure that they were about to die. Usually, when a person was being culled from the group, they would be told that they were going to the mango grove or asked to help with an ox cart. They never come right out and announce you will be terminated, so when a soldier collects them to play elsewhere, they are all convinced that they will be killed as well. This time, the soldier simply wants them to play.

You leave now, maybe no one will see you.

-- Sombo (Chapter 8 paragraph 5)



**Importance:** This quote reveals Sombo's feelings for Arn, and for his own place in the hierarchy of the Khmer Rouge. Sombo would rather that Arn escape and find his way back to his family than continue to stay with him where his life is in peril.

War is over, come to the center of the village for free rice.  
-- Vietnamese soldier. (Chapter 10 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** This statement has huge impact for Arn. It is the first exposure he has to the Vietnamese who use this ploy to bring all the villagers out of hiding, and then kill them. It reinforces his loyalty to Sombo, and makes his escape to the other side more than a little bit unlikely.

You can come get me now, but please come fast.  
-- Arn (Chapter 13 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Arn makes this plea to Death, hoping that it will come to get him quickly so that he can finally be with his family again. It is significant because, despite how difficult his life has been over the last four years, this is the first time that he has ever pleaded for death to take him, and ironically it is also the first time since leaving home that he is relatively safe.

Is that the kid - the kid who can play music blindfolded?  
-- Former Khmer Rouge soldier (Chapter 14 paragraph 29)

**Importance:** This quote has importance as it is asked of Sombo, who knew that the boy he was looking at really was Arn, but rather than expose him and risk his life or his safety, Sombo takes a cue from Arn who ignores him, and tells his friend that it is some other kid.

Rice, please.  
-- Arn (Chapter 15 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** This is what Arn orders from the counter at McDonald's after Peter picks them up from the airport. It is significant because when Arn learns they have no rice, he is afraid he is going to starve. This is the first time that Arn will be exposed to a hamburger.

You Khmer Rouge; you kill my mother, my father.  
-- Sojeat (Chapter 16 paragraph 33)

**Importance:** This is the comment made by Sojeat and meant to undermine Arn in front of Peter's wife Shirley. It causes Arn to explode, letting loose the anger that has simmered beneath the surface for years. Learning that he has so much anger inside enables Peter to help him.



My family still dead, my friend still dead, my other friend still living in the camp.  
-- Arn (Chapter 17 paragraph 24)

**Importance:** Arn struggles with why he is alive and so many have died. He doesn't understand why he survived. Peter explains that he is the chosen one - the one who will go on to tell people what really happened in Cambodia. By telling his story, he can choose to live.