

Bamboo Promise: The Last Straw

Vicheara Houn

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Vicheara Houn's *Bamboo Promise: The Last Straw, Volume 2* relates the author's traumatic experiences in the Cambodian killing fields and beyond. This book builds on Houn's first memoir, with the focus shifting here to share her coping strategies.

The narrative showcases the survival techniques that helped her deal with the deaths of many people, including her father and young husband. She managed a harrowing escape to Thailand, the uncertainty of a refugee camp, and a bewildering immigration to the United States.

In the Thai refugee camp, she fell in with Meng, a slick, womanizing alcoholic. She knew he did not have the good character of her first husband, but she clung to his protection. He was her way out, but even in the United States, escaping him took time.

At every stage, Houn spiraled farther down into patterns of self-doubt and anxiety. Because so many of the Cambodians who survived the genocide were themselves victims of extreme physical and mental abuse, she repeatedly found herself dependent on people who were untrustworthy and cruel to her. That she is now able to share her story is a testament to her resilience.

Houn's post-traumatic stress disorder plagued her for decades. Discussing her "wounded soul," she explains the sights, sounds, smells, and dreams that trigger her PTSD, as well as relating the treatments and strategies that she continues to use to heal those deep wounds.

Vivid retellings of her years in Cambodia and Thailand are not matched by stories of her immigration experience, or of what it was like to move from a sweltering climate to the wintry Pacific Northwest, though the narrative does include accounts of cold nights and suicide attempts. The text contains some subtly awkward phrasing, but the author's voice remains distinctive. At the end of each short chapter, a psychologist weighs in with a brief analysis.

The book promises to create a how-to for others who suffer from PTSD, and for those who seek to help them. The psychological analysis found at the end of each chapter is clinically detached, as might be expected, but often fails to connect all the dots to show how Houn's unconscious responses stall her healing path after her primary traumatic experiences, and ultimately how her conscious responses lead her to relief from PTSD.

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KALYNN HUFFMAN BROWER (June 15, 2017)

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