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Biography

**The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandant of the Kiling Fields**
Rithy Panh
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Rithy Panh was a young boy when Khmer Rouge revolutionaries arrived in Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Starting that day, he and his family were designated "new people"—the revolution's code for those who needed "reeducation"—and forcibly evacuated out of the city. That day began a terrifying experience that gradually took away most of his family, forcing Rithy to survive a series of brutal, and often arbitrarily cruel, ordeals.

In *The Elimination*, Rithy tells his story in vivid prose, expertly immersing the reader in his experience. Rithy is best known as a filmmaker, and that comes through. In the scenes from his own life, Rithy captures the despair of his circumstances, from the Khmer Rouge taking away his father to watching other family members starve to death, helpless to do anything about it. He well conveys the paranoia of never knowing when he'd be accused of capital crimes, and how small but risky acts like hiding an extra portion of rice or fishing without an overseer noticing could mean the difference between life and death.

Rather than penning a straight narrative, Rithy intersperses these scenes from his own struggle with scenes from his interviews three decades later with Kang Kek Iew (better known as "Comrade Duch"), the commandant of the notorious Security Prison 21. Under Duch's leadership, S-21 guards tortured and executed thousands of prisoners, and Rithy's interviews with the commandant come after his trial and sentencing for crimes against humanity. Their exchanges are chilling in the elder man's nonchalance and matter-of-fact explanations for many of his actions, and his refusal to acknowledge other crimes even when Rithy confronts him with evidence. He openly concedes that S-21 guards tortured the "new people" and other accused enemies of the revolution for the sole purpose of extracting confessions they knew to be false but that could still serve as cause for execution. Duch remembers specific details of some individual prisoners and their torture, while still trying to minimize his role as merely a man

doing his job. The interview segments provide a resonating glimpse into the psyche of a torturer and killer.

Today, the former site of S-21 serves as a museum about the genocide, and films like Rithy's own *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* have helped educate the public about the atrocities committed by Pol Pot and his regime. Rithy Panh's book is another important and fascinating document in that process.

*Jeff Fleischer*