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Book review: A harrowing look at Pol Pot's blood-drenched reign

Published: September 28, 2014 01:00 AM

BY MIKE FREEMAN

Special to the Journal

"FOUR FACES OF TRUTH," by Harriette C. Rinaldi. Fireship Press. 217 pages. \$18.50.

"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" forebodes Ozymandias, Percy Blysshe Shelley's fallen, confected king. As with art as with life, and in all ruins swirl great, haunting questions. What once seemed omnipotent, they say, simply crumbled, and it could happen to you.

Half ingested by the jungle, Cambodia is rife with such portent, from which Warwick's Harriette C. Rinaldi structures "Four Faces of Truth," an elegant, unnerving fictional account of Pol Pot's blood-drenched reign.

While certainly not the first to leverage Angkor Wat and other Southeast Asian vestiges for profound reflection, Rinaldi is particularly well-stationed to do so. A 27-year CIA veteran, she served in Phnom Penh from 1972-75, the years Cambodia devolved into a lunacy rivaling the Holocaust for ghastliness.

Fluent in the culture and immersed in the dawn of its direst hour, Rinaldi states in her preface a need to impart Cambodia's recent "parallels and lessons ... that apply to what is happening in the world today." Her intentions, then, are noble, her artistry subtle and deft, but with everything from drones to daisy-cutters to beheadings to mass executions to suicide bombings to chemical weapons to nuclear bombast roiling the earth, we fear her efficacy may fall short. Heeding the past, after all, along with our scarcely veiled, ecumenical savagery, seems beyond humanity's otherwise astonishing skill set.

As in Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury," Rinaldi uses four narrators, giving distinct voices to detail Pol Pot's ascension, his horrific tenure and its aftermath. The first is a Buddhist novice, who emotively chronicles the incumbent depravity that fertilized the revolution. Woven within this is robust historical knowledge, including the ambient Communist fervor shaking the region at that time. America's refusal to openly support the standing regime, too, weighs heavily, as does its bombing of North Vietnamese targets inside Cambodia.

The most plaintive narrator comes next. A young, middle-class woman coming of age during the unraveling of Pol Pot's feckless predecessor, Thoun Sophana enmeshes herself in the Communist's promised equanimity. Laboring in the shadow for her cause while raising a growing family, Sophana's idealism makes the numberless catastrophes that befall her that much more unsettling. Though she survives the protracted slaughter, when she later imagines "that if one could hear the sound made by the twinkling stars, they would be just like the sweet gurgling sounds once made by my smiling babies," it will undo the most hardened reader, for while fictional, Sophana's plight is hardly exaggerated for the millions she represents.

If ruins force deep contemplation, ancient scriptures are their only peer. For all the Bible's profundity, then, little chills us like the Flood. As with Noah's time and place, early 1970s Cambodia was a wildly corrupt, oppressive state, and through her four narratives Rinaldi captures the culture-wide premonition of — even desire for — a great cleansing. It came in blood, and that Pol Pot went on to live out his life after murdering 2 million people might reflect the Cambodian populace's understanding of a regnant culpability, a sense that such a shame was the work of all and not one man.

That Rinaldi today seems to feel tingles of that same yearning world-wide — some primitive pine for an all-absolving flood — makes her book both deeply worrisome and as relevant for topical purposes as it is for historical.

Mike Freeman blogs about autism and Rhode Island at mikewfreeman.com.



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