

The Rent Collector



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CAMRON WRIGHT

Camron Wright grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he also studied and earned a master's degree in Writing and Public Relations at Westminster College. Although Wright began an MBA, he gave it up to begin his writing career. Wright published his first novel *Letters for Emily* in 2001, which won a Reader's Choice award, was selected for several book clubs, and has been published in multiple countries. Despite the success of his first book, Wright took a decade-long break from writing to focus on his business and design career, which over the years involved owning several retail stores and working as a designer alongside his wife for the McCall Pattern Company in New York. After one of his four children filmed a documentary about the Stung Meanchey dump in Cambodia, Wright returned to his writing career and used the film's story as the basis of the novel *The Rent Collector*. The book was published in 2012 and won Best Novel of the Year from the Whitney awards, and it was also a nominee for the International DUBLIN Literary Award. Wright followed up with *The Orphan Keeper* in 2016 and *The Other Side of the Bridge* in 2018. He still lives in Salt Lake City, Utah with his wife Alicyn and is an active member of the Mormon Church.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Khmer Rouge" describes adherents of the Communist Party of Kampuchea that rose to power in Cambodia in the mid-1970s. Throughout the 1960s, the Khmer Rouge represented a fringe element of Cambodian politics, slowly growing in size and power while hiding in the Cambodian jungle and receiving support from other Communist forces such as the North Vietnamese Viet Cong and Laos's Communist army, the Pathet Lao. In spite of American bombing campaigns against them, the Khmer Rouge gathered enough power to emerge from the jungles and overthrow the state government in Phnom Penh in 1975, installing themselves as the new ruling regime under the dictator Pol Pot, who renamed Cambodia as Democratic Kampuchea. The regime immediately began evacuating cities, executing anyone who could possibly be perceived as a political threat—usually by having even the most tenuous ties to Western culture and thus Western capitalism—and establishing labor camps and training centers for child soldiers. The Khmer Rouge was fundamentally isolationist, and desired to run a completely self-sustaining agricultural country based on a collectivist mindset. However, their attempts to create their envisioned utopia largely failed, leading instead to widespread famine and disease, since they refused to even

allow for foreign medicine. This, combined with their ethnic cleansing of any minorities, led to a massive death toll in the four years they held power. In 1979, Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia and quickly overran the weakened country, forcing the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot to flee to Thailand. The Thai government accepted their presence, viewing them as a defensive measure to help protect Thailand from the Viet Cong, whom the Khmer Rouge now opposed. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the deaths of somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million people, the United States and its allies chose to back the genocidal Pol Pot and his soldiers in Thailand with food, weapons, intelligence, and even military training, enlisting them in the fight against Vietnamese Communism. After decades of slaughter and oft-changing regimes, conflicting parties signed a peace accord in 1991 and Cambodia was reestablished as a monarchy in 1993, becoming the Kingdom of Cambodia once again and entering its most peaceful period in nearly 50 years.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Rent Collector gives Western audiences a window into the daily life and traumatic history of Cambodia, especially regarding the Khmer Rouge genocide of 1975. To further learn about Cambodia's culture and history, firsthand accounts of these events are invaluable, especially when written by Cambodians themselves. [First They Killed My Father](#) is an excellent example, a memoir by Cambodian author Loung Ung detailing her childhood experiences as the young daughter of an elite family whose life was shattered by the Khmer Rouge, as well as her true story of survival as a child soldier. Alongside Loung Ung's work stands *In the Shadow of the Banyan Tree*, an autobiographical novel by Cambodian-American author Vaddey Ratner, which gives a fictionalized account of her childhood experiences surviving the Khmer Rouge labor camps. Academy Award-winning actor Haing Nor also details his early life witnessing the Khmer Rouge execution squads and mindless brutality in his memoir *Survival in the Killing Fields*. Fans of *The Rent Collector*'s style and use of metaphor will likely enjoy Wright's subsequent work, *The Orphan Keeper*, which describes a young Indian man's quest to find his birth family and rediscover who he truly is.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Rent Collector*
- **When Written:** 2011
- **Where Written:** Salt Lake City, Utah
- **When Published:** 2012

- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Setting:** Various locations in Cambodia
- **Climax:** Sang Ly finds Sopeap Sin in her old house and sits with her as she dies.
- **Antagonist:** Sopeap Sin
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Real Characters. Although the story is largely fictionalized, many of the main characters and their personal struggles are based on real people using their real names as featured in the author's son's documentary *River of Victory*, released in 2010. Sang Ly, Ki Lim, Lucky Fat, and Teva Mao are all real people, and Sang Ly's desperate search for healing for her infant son Nisay is inspired by the actual event.

Global Issue. The Stung Meanchey garbage dump still exists today and is still home to countless families like Sang Ly's, and it is often mentioned as a famous example of the desolate conditions that waste pickers around the world live in.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sang Ly, her husband Ki Lim, and their infant son Nisay live in Stung Meanchey, the largest municipal waste dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Like the other villagers in Stung Meanchey, they scratch out a meager living by picking through newly-arrived garbage and sorting out recyclable materials to sell to a scrap vendor. One day while Ki is out picking trash, a gang of youths beat him and steal his money, leaving him with a severe head wound that requires a trip to a local clinic. While he is gone, Sopeap Sin, Stung Meanchey's old, drunken, and bitter Rent Collector, comes to Sang Ly's one-room hut to demand their rent payment for the month. Sang Ly is unable to pay, and Sopeap threatens to evict them until she sees an illustrated children's book sitting in their hut, which Ki had found in the dump earlier that day. Sopeap holds the book and reads through its pages silently, and since it obviously means a great deal to her, Sang Ly gives it to her as a gift. The old woman leaves silently with the book, and Ki returns with a bandaged head and a knife he has used the last of their money to buy, hoping to protect himself from the gangs. When Sopeap returns some time later, she forgives Sang Ly and Ki's unpaid rent as thanks for the book. As she turns to leave, Sang Ly finds the nerve to ask Sopeap to teach her to read, to give her and her son hope in the midst of their poverty. Sopeap eventually agrees, but on the conditions that Sang Ly must study very hard and buy Sopeap good alcohol each week.

Sopeap misses their first lesson, discouraging Sang Ly, but while she is practicing a traditional healing remedy on her

son—hoping to cure him of his unceasing diarrhea and illness—Sopeap arrives and apologizes, saying they will begin tomorrow. The Rent Collector's sudden show of humility stuns Sang Ly. As Sopeap leaves, she reveals that not only can she read, which is rare in Stung Meanchey, she was once a literature professor at a university in Phnom Penh. Through Sopeap's lessons, Sang Ly learns the Khmer alphabet quickly and soon is able to put the sounds together to read words, which thrills her, though Ki is less enthusiastic since he does not understand the point of reading or all the energy that Sang Ly invests in it. However, during one of their lessons, Sopeap is half-drunk and vomits outside; there is blood mixed in with the bile, revealing that she is very ill.

After Sang Ly learns to read basic sentences, she begs Sopeap to teach her about literature as well, even though Sang Ly is not entirely sure what literature even is. Sopeap again resists, saying that literature requires both the mind and the heart, and she has spent all her drinking years trying to avoid such emotional engagement. However, the old woman relents and tells Sang Ly that if she can find a piece of literature in the dump within just a few days, Sopeap will consider teaching her about literature. Sang Ly searches desperately but is unable to find anything that seems literary until the night before her next lesson, when her cousin tells her a poem orally passed down through her family for generations. When Sang Ly presents the poem to Sopeap, the former teacher reluctantly agrees to teach her about literature, though they will need to move through lessons quickly, because Sopeap plans to leave Stung Meanchey soon.

One day, while Sang Ly is cleaning her hut, a young orphan boy named Lucky Fat bursts in and begs Sang Ly to help him. A young girl named Maly is hiding in his hut. Since she is an orphan and her older brother is in a gang, Maly is at risk of being sold into child prostitution. Sang Ly, her mother Lena, and Ki spend the next several days helping Lucky Fat hide Maly from the gang members who are searching for her. When Sopeap discovers what is going on, she gives Sang Ly money to help Maly escape Stung Meanchey and be taken in by a good, protective family in Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, Sopeap continues to teach Sang Ly about literature, showing her that literature teaches about life, hope, and self-sacrificing heroism. In the midst of her teaching, Sopeap constantly hints that she is running from something in her past, drinking to forget who she once was. Even so, the teacher's hard demeanor is slowly beginning to soften.

As time passes, Sang Ly tries more and more healing methods on Nisay, but nothing cures his illness and he grows weaker. However, Sang Ly dreams that Stung Meanchey is covered in snow, and in the distance she can see her home province, Prey Veng, as well as a man she once knew stretching his arms out towards her, welcoming her. When Sang Ly tells Sopeap about her dream during one of their lessons, Sopeap describes how important dreams are to literature and encourages her to

ponder it, to figure out the dream's true meaning.

In retribution for sheltering Maly, gang members beat up Lucky Fat and trash his hut. However, this encourages the villagers in Stung Meanchey to stand up to the gangs, even though they were formerly too fearful. Ki is excited, since he has been trying to enlist others to resist the gangs for weeks, but his enthusiasm wanes when the villagers beat one of the gang members to death. He and Sang Ly realize that the boy was only a teenager, Maly's older brother. Sang Ly and Ki are both horrified, and Sang Ly reflects that just like in literature, good and evil and heroes and villains are hardly so simple as they first seem.

Sang Ly asks Sopeap if she can read the children's book she gave her, and Sopeap agrees, gifting the book to Nisay. Sopeap reveals that the book was actually written by a close university friend of hers about Sopeap and her son. Later that evening, after Sopeap leaves, Sang Ly discovers that her teacher is dying of cancer, though she has been keeping it a secret. However, during their next literature lesson, as Sang Ly is angrily confronting Sopeap about her illness, Sang Ly's mother arrives in a panic and tells Sang Ly that Nisay passed out and is now completely unresponsive. Terrified, Sang Ly rushes him to the nearby clinic, discovering that it is closed, before a benevolent taxi driver takes her to a modern children's hospital. A nurse takes Nisay from Sang Ly, and after sitting all night in the waiting room, Sang Ly meets a doctor who tells her that Nisay will be alright, but he was severely dehydrated. When Sang Ly finally arrives home from the hospital, she falls asleep and dreams again of Stung Meanchey covered in snow and sees the man from her home province once again, recognizing him as the village's local Healer. When she wakes, Sang Ly feels convinced that she must take Nisay to Prey Veng see the Healer, even though it is a long journey. Ki agrees to go with her. As they are about to leave Stung Meanchey, Sopeap arrives to say goodbye—looking very ill—and say that she wishes they could have finished their lessons. Sang Ly promises that they will resume their literature lessons when she returns, but Sopeap seems doubtful that she will survive that long.

Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay travel by bus and by boat to Prey Veng, where they stay with Sang Ly's extended family for several days. Sang Ly takes her son to meet the Healer, and he prepares a black tar-like substance that he injects into Nisay's limbs. With the healing process performed, Ki and Sang Ly makes their way back to Stung Meanchey, arriving in the middle of the night, but they discover their hut was ransacked while they were away; they've lost everything. However, when Sang Ly awakes the next morning, she notices that Nisay seems healthy and active. Sang Ly decides that even if they have lost everything, they have truly gained everything if their child is finally healed. Over the next few days, neighbors rally together to replace what Sang Ly and Ki lost. Sang Ly hopes to see Sopeap but no one has seen the old woman for days and Sang

Ly fears the worst. Lucky Fat arrives, however, with a notebook from Sopeap that is full of essays Sopeap wrote herself so that Sang Ly could continue to study, as well as a letter in which Sopeap says her final goodbyes, for she is going someplace to die and does not say where. A contact at the local hospital also reveals that Sopeap could have survived her cancer, had she sought treatment out of the country, but she willingly chose to stay and die so that she could finish Sang Ly's education.

In the notebook, Sang Ly reads the last essay, in which Sopeap reveals the events of her life that brought her to Stung Meanchey. When Sopeap was a professor, her real name was Soriyan, and she lived in a wealthy area of Phnom Penh with her husband Samnang, her son, and a housekeeper named Sopeap Sin—the real Sopeap Sin. However, when the Khmer Rouge invaded the city in 1975, intent on killing all educated or intellectual people, Soriyan's housekeeper pretended to be the professor and convinced the soldiers that the real Soriyan was a mere housekeeper named Sopeap Sin, thus sacrificing herself to let Soriyan live. The soldiers killed the real housekeeper, Soriyan's husband, and her son, but they let the supposed housekeeper live. Soriyan kept the name Sopeap Sin and was haunted for the rest of her life by pain and guilt that someone else died in her place. When Sang Ly finishes the story, she is heartbroken but also convinced that Sopeap (her teacher) misinterpreted her own story, and she is desperate to find her teacher so she can show her her own value.

Sang Ly and Ki surmise that whoever owns Stung Meanchey might be able to help them find Sopeap, since she was their Rent Collector. When they go to the Ministry of Land and Records, however, they discover that Sopeap was not merely the Rent Collector, but also the owner of all Stung Meanchey, and that she has gifted her own home to Sang Ly and Ki and the rest of the property to the housekeeper's surviving family. Sang Ly tracks down this family, the Sin family, and discovers that although they don't know her teacher, the family has received anonymous packages of money every month for the last several decades, which funded their educations and lifted them out of poverty. Reading further through Sopeap's notebook of essays, Sang Ly finally realizes that she must have gone to die in the house she once lived in. With the Sin family and Ki, Sang Ly finds Sopeap on her deathbed, graciously hosted by the new owner of the home she once lived in. Sang Ly introduces the Sin family, who have come to thank and honor Sopeap for her generosity, and Sang Ly sits with her as she dies.

When Sang Ly returns to Stung Meanchey, she tells the other villagers a fable about Sopeap, who seemed drunken and bitter but was secretly kind and generous, redeeming her memory.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sang Ly – Sang Ly is the protagonist and narrator. Sang Ly is a poor Cambodian woman who lives in Phnom Penh’s largest municipal dump, Stung Meanchey, with her husband Ki and infant son Nisay. Sang Ly loves her family, but she does not want to live in the dump for the rest of her life and longs for some way to give Nisay a more hopeful future. This leads her to ask the ornery, drunken Rent Collector, Sopeap Sin, to teach her how to read, and later to teach her about literature. Through Sopeap’s lessons, both Sang Ly and the reader learn about the power of literature and the life lessons that can be gleaned from it, as well as its ability to connect people across geography and social class. Furthermore, Sang Ly discovers that there is hidden value in Sopeap; although on the outside she seems to be no more than an embittered old woman, Sang Ly slowly learns that Sopeap is a wealth of knowledge, wisdom, and kindness, and that her alcoholism and foul temper are Sopeap’s methods of keeping her own inner pains at bay. Over the course of the novel, Sang Ly also learns about hope as well, especially that it can be fostered by taking action and telling stories. When she dreams that her chronically ill son can be healed by her home province’s Healer, Sang Ly acts on her hope and travels all the way there, even though they hardly have the money for it, and her hopeful action is rewarded in the form of Nisay’s recovery. In a similar manner, although Sang Ly knows that Sopeap is dying and intends to die alone and forgotten, Sang Ly hopes for her teacher’s redemption. Sang Ly manages to find Sopeap while she is on her death bed and offers her closure and companionship. At the end of the story, Sang Ly speaks to her whole village in Stung Meanchey and tells them a story of Sopeap’s goodness and generosity, redeeming Sopeap’s memory in the villagers’ hearts as well.

Sopeap Sin / Soriyan – Sopeap Sin is the Rent Collector of Stung Meanchey and Sang Ly’s teacher. When Sopeap Sin is introduced, she is a bitter alcoholic with no kindness or empathy for anyone. However, as she spends time teaching Sang Ly how to read and then how to understand literature—taking up her former profession as a literature professor—Sopeap slowly reveals that her meanness and drunkenness are the result of years of pain and guilt that she is trying to forget. Sopeap also reveals that she is dying of cancer. As her fondness for Sang Ly grows and her passion for literature is restored, Sopeap becomes kinder and more generous throughout the story, even going so far as to secretly refuse life-saving treatment for her cancer so that she can finish teaching Sang Ly, an action that makes her a notably self-sacrificing hero. Towards the end of the novel, Sopeap reveals through an essay she gives to Sang Ly that her true name is not Sopeap Sin, but rather Soriyan. During the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975, her housekeeper, the real Sopeap Sin, sacrificed her own life to allow Soriyan to live, though the housekeeper, Soriyan’s husband Samnang, and their infant son were all murdered by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Soriyan thus adopted and kept her housekeeper’s name in order to flee from

her past life, living the rest of her life as Sopeap Sin. Although the people of Stung Meanchey only know Sopeap as the drunken Rent Collector, the novel further reveals that Sopeap owns all of Stung Meanchey and has also anonymously been sending large monthly payments to her heroic housekeeper’s surviving family, proving that one’s outward appearance can hide a wealth of virtue and character. Although Sopeap intends to die alone, Sang Ly tracks her down and brings along the family of the real Sopeap Sin, the housekeeper. Sopeap dies surrounded by people who honor and love her, thus recognizing her true value and redeeming her memory.

Ki Lim – Ki Lim is Sang Ly’s husband and Nisay’s father. Ki Lim provides a meager living for his family by picking through rubbish at the dump to find recyclable materials to sell to a scrap vendor. Although he is a loving and supportive husband, Ki does not understand why Sang Ly suddenly considers reading so important, and initially fears that through education, Sang Ly may outgrow him or no longer need him—though this fear turns out to be unfounded. Early in the story, gang members rob and nearly kill Ki, leaving him with a bad head wound and taking his hard-earned money. Wanting the power to defend himself, Ki buys himself a knife and tries to encourage the other residents of Stung Meanchey to stand up for themselves as well. However, after a young boy named Lucky Fat is beaten by gang members and people chase down one of the attackers and beat him to death, Ki realizes that although he had wanted to fight injustice, the killing of the gang member, who is only a teenage boy, does not feel heroic or just. This experience suggests to Ki and the reader that having the power to fight back is not the same thing as being a hero. As Ki begins to see the hope that literature and stories give Sang Ly, he grows more trusting of her lessons with Sopeap and starts to share her hope. This is evidenced by his willingness to travel to her home province to seek out the Healer based only on her dream, as well as his support of her as she races all over Phnom Penh trying to find Sopeap before she dies. After Sang Ly sits with Sopeap at her deathbed, she sees her husband waiting for her and reflects that, in his steadfast support of her hopes and dreams, Ki truly is a hero.

Nisay – Nisay is Sang Ly’s infant son. Nisay is constantly ill, stricken with diarrhea that leaves him malnourished and less responsive than a child his age should be. Although numerous Western and traditional remedies fail to heal his illness, Nisay is finally cured by the Healer in Prey Veng. Though he appears frequently throughout the story, Nisay is primarily a passive character, an object of Sang Ly’s affections, hopes, and fears.

Lucky Fat – Lucky Fat is a young orphan who lives on his own in Stung Meanchey. Although life is hard as an orphan, Lucky Fat demonstrates how good humor can buoy one’s spirits and help them to endure hardship. He often makes jokes and lightens the spirits of the people around him, as well as uses his humor to point out inequitable situations, such as how the scrap

vendor pays less to women and children than to men. More than being just humorous, Lucky Fat is also heroic. Despite his own hard life, Lucky Fat hides a young girl named Maly when her brother, a gang member, looks for her so he can sell her into prostitution. By protecting Maly, Lucky Fat knowingly risks his own safety, which is evident when he is beaten by gang members in retribution. In the latter half of the novel, Lucky Fat's role is mainly relegated to bringing messages to Sang Ly from Sopeap, but he remains a positive and good-humored presence.

Maly – Maly is a young girl who lives in Stung Meanchey. Although she is a couple of years older, Maly is close friends with Lucky Fat. However, after Maly has her first period, she and Lucky Fat fear that her brother, who is in a gang, will try to sell her into prostitution. With help from Lucky Fat, Sang Ly, Lena, and Sopeap, Maly is smuggled out of the dump and taken in by a good, protective family in the city, though she must leave everyone she knows behind.

Lena / Mother – Lena is Sang Ly's mother. Although Lena is originally from Prey Veng, she moves to Stung Meanchey to be close to Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay, sharing a hut with a distant cousin a short walk away. Lena is depicted as strong and virtuous by the fact that she too wants to take a stand against the gangs and is proud of Sang Ly for helping to protect Maly, and she helps devise the plan to get Maly to safety. Lena plays a relatively limited role within the story overall, and is most often described taking care of Nisay while Sang Ly studies with Sopeap.

Teva Mao – Teva Mao is one of Sang Ly's friends and neighbors in the dump, who often watches after Nisay while Sang Ly studies with Sopeap. Teva Mao is good-natured and friendly, but Sang Ly also suspects that Sopeap forgives a portion of Teva Mao's rent each month in exchange for taking care of Nisay so Sang Ly can study more.

Narin – Narin is Sang Ly's cousin who lives in Stung Meanchey. Though she is mentioned several times, Narin plays a small role within the overall narrative. Her greatest contribution to Sang Ly's development comes when she recites a poem for Sang Ly that her own mother passed down to her, providing Sang Ly with her first example of literature.

Auntie – Auntie is Sang Ly's aunt and Uncle Keo's wife, who gives her, Ki, and Nisay a place to stay while they are in Prey Veng to see the Healer. In a brief conversation, Auntie reminds Sang Ly that even though she does not like Stung Meanchey, it is her home and where her community and Mother are, and is thus a precious place.

Bunna Heng / The Healer – The Healer is a "witch doctor" who lives in Prey Veng. The Healer appears to Sang Ly twice in dreams, saying that she "should have come sooner," which eventually prompts her to travel to Prey Veng to see if he can heal Nisay's illness. Not only does the Healer heal Nisay, but he

also gives Sang Ly the first picture of her father she has ever seen, and reveals that he was close friends with her father. Before she leaves, the Healer repeats Auntie's admonition to value Stung Meanchey, stating that the manner in which she lives matters more than the location.

The Housekeeper / Sopeap Sin – The housekeeper is the original Sopeap Sin, who worked for Soriyan while she was still a professor and her family was still alive. Although Soriyan previously thought little of the housekeeper, when the Khmer Rouge soldiers came to kill Soriyan and Samnang, the housekeeper nobly pretended that she herself was Soriyan, sacrificing her life so that the real Soriyan might be spared. Although this act saved Soriyan's life, the event also filled her with guilt, prompting her to keep Sopeap Sin's name as her own and send anonymous payments to the housekeeper's surviving family for the rest of her life.

Rathana – Rathana is Sopeap Sin the housekeeper's sister. Towards the end of the novel, when Sang Ly is looking for the housekeeper's family, Rathana is the first person she meets. Rathana tells Sang Ly about the anonymous payments that have been arriving since her sister disappeared during the Khmer Rouge revolution, revealing that Sopeap the teacher has been donating large sums of money to this family for decades. When Sang Ly finally finds Sopeap on her deathbed, Rathana and her family accompany her to pay their respects and give thanks for Sopeap's generosity.

Mr. Rangsey – Mr. Rangsey is a wealthy man in Phnom Penh who lives in the house Sopeap the teacher lived in when the housekeeper, Samnang, and Sopeap's son were killed. Sopeap wishes to die in that same house, since her family did, and though Mr. Rangsey initially refuses, when he hears she was once a teacher, he graciously gives permission, since his own father was a teacher killed by the Khmer Rouge as well.

The businessman – The businessman is a passenger on the same bus as Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay. Although the businessman initially appears ornery and selfish, he like the rest of the bus, is captivated by Sang Ly's story and even nobly stalls the bus driver so that everyone else can hear the ending. As Sang Ly exits, the businessman generously gives Sang Ly money in gratitude for his enjoyment of the story, and his newfound graciousness demonstrates that literature even has the power to change hearts and minds.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle Keo – Uncle Keo is Sang Ly's uncle, who gives her, Ki, and Nisay a place to stay while they are in Prey Veng to see the Healer.

Samnang – Samnang was Soriyan's husband, killed by the Khmer Rouge soldiers for being a wealthy intellectual and government employee.

Grandma Sin – Grandma Sin is Sopeap Sin the housekeeper's

mother, who meets Sopeap the teacher on her deathbed to tell her that the housekeeper's death was not her fault, and that she is thankful for Sopeap's generosity.

Uncle Keo's Mother-in-Law – Uncle Keo's mother-in-law is a stubborn old woman who is annoyed she has to share her house with Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay while they are in Prey Veng.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE POWER OF LITERATURE

The Rent Collector tells the story of Sang Ly, a poor Cambodian villager who lives in Stung Meanchey, a massive garbage dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Although Sang Ly is illiterate, she convinces the ornery Rent Collector Sopeap Sin—who was once a university professor—to not only teach her to read, but also to teach her about literature from all over the world. Through the wisdom that Sang Ly gleans from Sopeap's literary knowledge, the story argues that any meaningful story can be considered literature, and that literature has the power to teach valuable lessons regardless of one's station in life, and to connect people across geographical divides and social classes.

Sopeap teaches Sang Ly that although it may not seem like it at first glance, all literature teaches lessons that can be applied to one's own life. Although Sang Ly initially believes that a piece of literature is merely an entertaining story, Sopeap both shows and tells her that the power of literature is not just in the story that a book tells, but the life lessons it conveys. As Sopeap describes it, literature is “the handbook for the art of being human.” Reading, then, is universal in its ability to help people regardless of their unique circumstances. Through the literature that Sopeap teaches her to read, Sang Ly learns valuable lessons that apply to her everyday life. This is exemplified when Sang Ly realizes that, although [Moby-Dick](#) takes place far away, Captain Ahab's thirst for revenge against the whale parallels her husband Ki Lim's desire for revenge against Stung Meanchey's roving gangs. Since Captain Ahab's quest ultimately destroys his and his crew's lives, Sang Ly realizes that she must warn Ki not to lose himself in his desire to stand up to the gang members. Sang Ly's observation of her husband's situation reflected in that of Captain Ahab's thus demonstrates the ability of literature to resonate with and provide insight for a diverse range of people. As Sang Ly continues to learn, she begins to see more connections between the literary stories she reads and her own life—the

stories are not only about other people's lives, but the reader's as well. This confirms Sopeap's admonition: “Every story we read, Sang Ly, is about us, in one way or another.” The stories may take place elsewhere, but the lessons the characters learn are often universal.

Through her experiences reading literature, Sang Ly finds herself connecting with people from different time periods, places, and even social classes, suggesting that literature has the power to connect people of wildly different backgrounds. Sang Ly's entire life has been spent in Cambodia and, prior to learning to read, she cannot imagine what any other place might be like. As Sopeap observes, “People only go to the places they have visited first in their minds.” By reading literature from around the world, Sang Ly is given a window into the lives of other people from different countries and eras, demonstrating literature's power to connect people across great geographical distances and effectively transport them to different time periods. Sopeap shows Sang Ly a Cambodian story about a beautiful young woman named Sarann, who is oppressed by an evil stepmother until she meets the Prince of Angkor, who recognizes her beauty and virtue and marries her. Sang Ly is enchanted by the story. Sopeap explains that the same story has been told in numerous different cultures for centuries, though under different names: *Cinderella* in America, *Ye Xian* in China, *Tattercoats* in England. Although Sang Ly has never been to any of these places, she feels connected to them by their universal themes of betrayal, hardship, and hope. Beyond resonating with a story's themes, *The Rent Collector* suggests that even the simple enjoyment of literature has the power to connect people. While Sang Ly and her husband are on a bus full of wealthier people who obviously detest them, Sang Ly begins reading a story out loud to her wailing infant, hoping to soothe him. When she pauses from reading, she realizes that the entire bus is listening eagerly along, and a previously spiteful businessman even gives Sang Ly some money out of gratitude for making the trip more enjoyable. The entire bus's shared enjoyment of literature, which overcomes their derision of Sang Ly and Ki Lim's poverty, suggests that literature even has the power to connect people across social classes.

Sang Ly discovers that meaningful literature is not confined only to the stories in books, but can also be found in poetry, oral history, and even informational pamphlets, arguing that any words from which wisdom can be gleaned can be classified as literature. When she is just beginning to experience the literary world, Sang Ly assumes that literature is confined only to what she finds in stories and novels. However, one day she finds an instructional pamphlet titled, *Sy Mao's Advice for Growing Rice*, to which someone has added with their own hand, “and children.” Sang Ly is delighted by the way that rereading the rice-growing instructions in the context of raising children adds new meaning and wisdom to the words, just as she would find in a meaningful story, suggesting that any writing at all can

become meaningful literature with something to teach. When Sang Ly transcribes an old poem from her illiterate neighbor, passed down orally through generations, Sopeap helps her to see the literary wisdom of the words, even though they have never been written down. This suggests that beyond physical books, even oral history and traditions constitute literature when they pass down wisdom or a meaningful story.

For Sang Ly, learning to read becomes more than just an opportunity for self-betterment. As she experiences the wide range of connections that literature can foster, it's clear that reading provides a gateway into the wider world, creating a deeper understanding among different groups of people as stories bridge the gaps of geography, time, and social class.



APPEARANCES, JUDGMENT, AND HIDDEN CHARACTER

Sopeap Sin seems initially to be the bane of Stung Meanchey: a bitter, drunken old woman whose rent collecting and foul demeanor are a burden upon all the villagers. However, as she reluctantly teaches Sang Ly how to read, Sang Ly discovers not only that Sopeap is a knowledgeable former professor, but that her alcoholism and meanness result from years of horrific experiences and ultimately conceal a kind and generous spirit. Through the gradual unveiling of Sopeap's backstory and true character, the novel suggests that it is unwise to judge a person's character based only on their appearance or outward demeanor, since there may be a hidden kindness inside of him or her.

Sopeap Sin is, at first glance, an ornery drunk and nothing more, demonstrating how one's outward appearance and initial demeanor can taint other people's perception of their character. The villagers despise Sopeap, calling her "the Cow," both for her drunkenness and her seemingly cruel nature. She is most often seen staggering about intoxicated and seems pitiless towards the villagers' struggles. When Sang Ly and Ki Lim cannot make their rent payment because gang members beat and robbed Ki, Sopeap does not waver, demanding that they make full payment within the day regardless, or she will throw them out of their home. Even Sang Ly, who is kind by nature, despises Sopeap, demonstrating how strongly one's outward behavior can define others' perceptions of their character. Although Sopeap is eventually revealed to be kind and generous at her core, it is worth noting that in the early chapters of the book, her vile reputation is earned. Aside from rare flashes of generosity—such as forgiving Sang Ly's rent in exchange for an old book that Ki finds—she is consistently rude, impatient, and demanding. In light of the later revelation of her kindness, this behavior suggests that something traumatic has caused her exterior self, the self that the other villager see, to turn foul.

As Sang Ly's relationship with Sopeap develops, she begins to

understand that Sopeap's alcoholism and bitter demeanor are driven by pain and guilt, suggesting that for many, their despicable behavior is not the mark of true malevolence, but of inner pain and prior trauma. Once Sang Ly begins learning to read from Sopeap, she slowly pieces together bits of Sopeap's past life that none of the other villagers ever knew about. As Sang Ly discovers, Sopeap was once a literature professor at a distinguished university. She was married and had a son, and she lived in a wealthy district of Phnom Penh. This shocks Sang Ly, since the only perception she formerly had of Sopeap was as an old drunken woman, suggesting that one's first impression of another person does not account for all of who they are. As Sang Ly's relationship with Sopeap grows, Sang Ly sees frequent hints that Sopeap is trying to bury past pain and trauma. When Sang Ly asks Sopeap how she came to live in Stung Meanchey, Sopeap replies, "You're asking me to remember what I've spent years trying to forget." On a different day, while they are discussing Aesop's Fables, Sopeap lets slip, "Aesop reminds me [...] that during my life, there are times when I pretend to be something I'm not." Such instances suggest that Sopeap's alcoholism—which causes her unpleasant demeanor—stems from a desire to bury her past self. Sopeap's desire to numb herself and escape from her past is clarified when she eventually reveals that her husband, child, and former housekeeper were murdered during the Khmer Rouge genocide, in which the Cambodian military slaughtered anyone connected to academia, intellectualism, or anything deemed to be a product of Western society. Sopeap's housekeeper—whom she thought very little of, at the time—heroically lied to the soldiers that she was the professor and was killed in Sopeap's place, allowing Sopeap to survive. However, Sopeap was haunted by guilt that her housekeeper died in her place and by grief at the loss of her family, prompting her alcoholism and the end of her career. This revelation is heartbreaking for Sang Ly as well, as she realizes that all of Sopeap's drunkenness and foul behavior arise from the pain she has experienced, which further suggests that outward appearances or bad behavior may be the product of personal pain rather than poor character.

The novel ultimately reveals that Sopeap is self-sacrificing and generous, though anonymously, clearly arguing that one cannot accurately judge another person's character based purely on what they see. Sang Ly and Ki Lim eventually discover that not only was Sopeap an esteemed professor, but she has also been secretly giving money to her former housekeeper's family for decades. She is the owner of all of the properties at Stung Meanchey, and she has gifted her own home and all her possessions to Sang Ly and Ki. These revelations completely pivot both Sang Ly and the reader's perceptions of Sopeap Sin from a drunk and crotchety old woman to an anonymous benefactor and nearly saintly figure. The revelation that Sopeap is secretly kind and generous at heart—though also haunted by pain and trauma, causing her to be bitter and drunken—strongly argues that one cannot judge a person by

their outward appearance and demeanor, since a benevolent and beautiful character might be concealed within. Fittingly for a story about literature and learning to read, Sopeap Sin's life fits the old adage: you can't judge a book by its cover.



HEROISM AND SELF-SACRIFICE

In the start of the story, Sang Ly and Ki think of a hero as someone with power or influence. Ki fancies that heroism means the power to fight back against evil, while Sang Ly envisions a noble storybook hero—the last sort of person to exist in Stung Meanchey. However, over the course of the story, Sang Ly discovers that true heroism is more common than she'd assumed, and is plentiful even in the dump. Through Sopeap's literature lessons and through the everyday acts of heroism that Sang Ly witnesses in the village, the novel argues that a hero is not necessarily a noble warrior or regal figure, but merely someone who makes sacrifices for another person, and thus can arise from even the humblest places.

Sopeap teaches Sang Ly that the true sign of a hero is not nobility, wealth, or power, but rather making sacrifices for other people. Although Sang Ly and her friends feel that there are no heroes in Stung Meanchey because everyone is desperate and poor, Sopeap tells Sang Ly that they are “looking for the wrong kind of hero,” suggesting that one's wealth or social standing do not determine whether or not he or she is heroic. Sopeap teaches Sang Ly that sacrifice, rather than power, is “the true mark of a hero,” and that a “hero gives something up, sometimes even his own life, for the good of others,” suggesting thus that one cannot be a hero unless they are risking and sacrificing something in order to help the people around them. The disconnect between power and heroism is embodied in Ki Lim's struggle against Stung Meanchey's gangs. After Ki is robbed and nearly killed, he buys a **knife** with which to protect his family, and rallies the other villagers to fight against the gangsters. Ki believes that this new power in numbers will become a heroic struggle against injustice, but when the villagers beat one of the young gang members to death, Ki and Sang Ly realize that although a gangster is dead, there is nothing heroic about the killing. It seems like mob justice, rather than heroism, since the fight was one-sided and the villagers did not truly risk anything. This incident further suggests that heroism and power are not necessarily linked, since although the mob certainly possessed the power to fight back, the “justice” that it doles out against this child seems barbaric rather than noble.

Because a hero is not defined by where they come from or what they have, but rather what they *do*, the novel argues that anyone can be a hero, regardless of age, wealth, or education. As Sopeap teaches Sang Ly, “heroes arise in the most unexpected places,” suggesting that often those who act heroic are those one would least expect. Such is the case with Lucky

Fat, a young orphan in Stung Meanchey who gives shelter to Maly, a young girl whose brother is a gang member and wants to sell her into child prostitution. Although Lucky Fat is neither strong nor powerful, he risks his own safety to hide Maly until Sang Ly and her friends can figure out how to help the girl escape. Lucky Fat's sacrifice of his own personal safety—he is badly beaten by gang members, in retribution—make him undoubtedly a hero through the lens of the story despite his lack of stereotypically heroic characteristics. Ki also becomes a hero, though not through the power of his knife or by making money. Ki's heroism show itself in his faithful support of Sang Ly's education and the sacrifices of money and effort he makes to help her see it through, even when he does not entirely understand the significance of it. Even when Sopeap falls ill and disappears, Ki patiently helps Sang Ly to track her down—though it costs more money and time—so that she can be with her teacher in her final hours. After Sopeap passes, Sang Ly finds Ki asleep in a chair, waiting for her, and in that moment thinks, “Of all the stories I have read about heroes, [...] of one thing I'm now certain—he is mine.” That Ki becomes heroic without power or influence again demonstrates that any person may be heroic when they make personal sacrifices for the sake of others.

As Sang Ly witnesses ordinary people around her making heroic sacrifices for others, she discovers that not only do heroes come in many different shapes and sizes, but often, heroic people never realize they are heroes themselves. Sopeap is a hardened alcoholic who tries to drown her own grief and guilt by intoxicating herself as often as possible, demonstrating her extremely low view of herself. When Sang Ly suggests that Sopeap is a hero for sacrificing her time to teach Sang Ly to read literature, Sopeap bitterly declares, “Understand, child, I'm nobody's hero.” However, after Sopeap dies, Sang Ly discovers that although Sopeap could have had her cancer cured in Thailand, she chose to stay in Cambodia—and willingly die—so that she could finish educating Sang Ly. Moreover, Sopeap has also been anonymously sending money to remaining family of the housekeeper who sacrificed herself for Sopeap for decades, which lifted them out of poverty and allowed the children to receive good educations. Sang Ly is awed to realize that Sopeap, who seemed to see even herself as a villain, was heroic all along. Sopeap's heroism in spite of her self-contempt suggests that not only do heroes arise from unexpected places, they often do not even recognize their own heroism.

The actions that Sang Ly's family and friends take to help the people around them make them truly heroic, and demonstrate that heroes are not mythic figures or brave warriors, but everyday people who take steps to improve the lives of others.



HOPE AND ACTION

Sopeap describes hope to Sang Ly as “our longing not only to make a difference today but to see what is possible for tomorrow.” Although such longing and optimism seem a rare thing in the Stung Meanchey dump, Sang Ly learns to find and tend her hope for the future until it compels her to take action and create change in her life. Sang Ly’s personal journey suggests that, although a difficult environment may seem hopeless, hope can be fostered by taking action and searching for glimpses of positivity and possibility in one’s own environment.

Stung Meanchey and its poverty make for a difficult environment to live in—the village seems almost inescapable, demonstrating how having constant hardships in one’s environment often inevitably lead to a feeling of hopelessness. Like most of Stun Meanchey’s residents, Sang Ly and Ki Lim rarely have more than enough money to buy enough food for the day, even though Ki works every day. Sang Ly describes it as “a life where the hope of tomorrow is traded to satisfy the hunger of today,” demonstrating their abject poverty and the hopeless cycle they are trapped in, just trying to get by. Additionally, the dump is a dangerous environment in which to work. Most villagers make their living by picking through trash for recyclable materials to sell, but the presence of constantly-moving garbage trucks and heavy machinery means that fatalities among the trash-pickers are common. Only weeks before the story takes place, a garbage truck crushes Lucky Fat’s young friend, emphasizing the daily dangers and hopelessness of living in such a destitute environment. The noxious chemicals in the dump’s waste present yet another danger: Sang Ly’s infant son Nisay is constantly ill, stricken with diarrhea and unable to put on weight, and although doctors at a nearby clinic have prescribed several different antibiotics, none have made a permanent change. The fragility of Nisay’s life in Stung Meanchey further demonstrates the apparent hopelessness of Sang Ly’s position, not only for her own life, but for her son’s as well.

However, as Sang Ly begins learning to read, she feels hope begin to grow inside her again, suggesting that one can take action to foster hope even in a seemingly hopeless environment. Rather than simply wishing her life was different, the act of learning a new skill—and thus bettering herself—begins to revitalize Sang Ly’s sense of hope and help her to believe that the future could be better, and that education could even someday lead to new work opportunities for her or perhaps her son. Sopeap affirms this when she admonishes Sang Ly, “if you want to resurrect hope, *doing* is the most important,” suggesting that taking action to better one’s self or circumstances is the first critical step to renewing hope and setting oneself up for future opportunities. Sang Ly’s revitalized optimism helps her to realize that she must also be hopeful for Nisay’s sake, so that he can learn to hope in the

future as well. She reflects, “I don’t want to raise a child of doubt. I want my son to believe, to hope, to dream that the future holds brighter days.” Sang Ly’s recognition that her own hopefulness will impact her son as he grows up suggests that one’s positive attitude and proactivity in improving one’s circumstances are not only important for their own sake, but for the people around them as well. Sopeap helps Sang Ly to understand that sources of hope can also be found in hidden places, such as the orphan Lucky Fat’s courage and goodness when he hides Maly from her brother so that she will not be sold into prostitution. Sang Ly tells her fellow villagers, “If we look carefully around Stung Meanchey, if we search for stories that teach truth and goodness, stories with lessons that can soften and change our hearts—we will discover hope.” This clearly suggests that even in a seemingly hopeless environment, hidden sources of hope may be found if one choose to actively search for them.

Sang Ly’s renewed sense of hope compels her to take further actions to create a better future for herself, demonstrating how hopefulness can be self-fulfilling when it compels one to make changes that will benefit their future. This is most evident when, after Sang Ly has multiple dreams of a Healer she once knew in her childhood village, she feels determined that she must take Nisay there so he can be healed of his illness. Acting purely out of hope—she does not even know if the Healer is still alive—Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay make the long journey even though they only have enough money to get there, and have no idea how they will make it back to Stung Meanchey. The risk Sang Ly takes—evidence of her hopefulness—ultimately pays off, as the Healer is able to permanently cure Nisay’s illness, suggesting that one when acts on hope, the future can change for the better. However, even amidst such a hopeful story, Sopeap recognizes, “No matter how much we cling to hope, our stories seldom end as we expect.” This is particularly evident in her own character journey, since despite trying to fight her cancer, she ultimately succumbs to it. Although Sopeap’s death is a reminder that life does not always work out as one hopes, her encouragement of Sopeap to remain optimistic and make positive changes in her life still overwhelmingly suggests that hope is worth clinging to and acting on. In spite of their difficulty of life in Stung Meanchey, Sang Ly’s hope for the future allows her to persevere through hardship and strive to better her own life and the lives of others.



HUMOR AND RESILIENCE

Although life in Stung Meanchey can be dreary and difficult, the most resilient characters in the story use their sense of humor to buoy their own spirits, remain optimistic amidst hardship, and even challenge inequitable social conventions. The villagers’ use of humor to cope with hardship and point out absurd social conditions suggests that humor is not as frivolous or nonsensical as it may

sometimes seem—it can be a positive coping mechanism to help one persevere against difficult environments, stressful events, and unjust situations.

Sang Ly, Ki, and Lucky Fat all employ humor to cope with hardship, danger, and fear, demonstrating that a good sense of humor can be a valuable tool for persevering amidst difficulty. When gang members rob and beat Ki, leaving him with a potentially life-threatening head injury, Sang Ly copes with her fear as she tries to tend to his wound by play-acting as if she is a professional nurse, which helps her to stay calm and focus on helping Ki. Rather than panicking or succumbing to pressure, Sang Ly’s playful attitude in spite of her fear demonstrates that humor can be a useful tool to help one cope with the stress and fear of physical danger. In the same manner, Sopeap jokes about the tumor constricting the artery into her heart, grinningly saying, “my artery feels a bit constricted” as a playful greeting. Although such humor is admittedly dark, by joking about her cancer Sopeap is able to recognize it and move on with the tasks of the day, rather than living in denial or being crushed by the knowledge that her days are numbered, again demonstrating the usefulness of humor in coping with physical danger and even looming death.

Lucky Fat, a young orphan abandoned by his parents, also uses humor to cope with the stresses of surviving alone amidst the dump’s difficulties and dangers. When the other villagers name him “Lucky Fat” because of his weight and comment that he looks like Buddha, Lucky Fat humorously leans into it rather than being hurt or offended. He goes so far as to collect Buddha figurines from the trash and fill his hut with them. In spite of being an orphan and living in destitute poverty, Lucky Fat’s good humor makes him resilient, living his life “with more animation than any human being living in a dump should be able to display.” More than simple resilience, Lucky Fat’s good humor earns him the other villagers’ goodwill and admiration, which itself helps him to survive amidst hardship. When gang members beat up Lucky Fat, the other villagers are so enraged that their beloved joker was hurt that they come to his aid and chase down the attackers. Lucky Fat’s humor both helps him cope and earns him the goodwill of others, demonstrating that humor not only helps one to endure hardship, but also can help to form beneficial relationships with others.

As Sopeap teaches Sang Ly, not only can humor provide relief from hardship or stress, it can also be a tool with which to challenge social inequities. While Sopeap is teaching Sang Ly about common character roles used in literature, she describes the role of the “trickster,” a joker who not only “provide[s] relief with their wit, but their often impish actions point out the absurd, things that need to change,” suggesting that humor can serve the additional purpose of highlighting social inequities in a non-aggressive way. Lucky Fat models this function of humor when he points out the injustice of the fact that the scrap buyer—who buys the sorted trash gathered by the

villagers—pays women and children less than he pays men, even when they deliver the same quantity of scrap. Rather than aggressively criticize the buyer, which would infuriate him, Lucky Fat simply “joked about how ridiculous it is [...] right in front of the buyer’s face.” Although the buyer is irritated, he is also so embarrassed that he pays Sang Ly the same fair price as he pays to the men, demonstrating humor’s use as a tool for gently challenging unjust social conventions and practices. Although the villagers’ lives in Stung Meanchey seem difficult and dreary, humor proves invaluable to their perseverance and optimism, demonstrating what a powerful asset it can be.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE KNIFE

Ki’s knife represents the villagers’ temptation for power and revenge. After a Stung Meanchey gang beats and robs Ki, he uses the little money he has to buy a knife, which he keeps strapped to his leg. Although Ki feels that the knife gives him the power to fight and defend himself, Sang Ly is wary of it, recognizing that Ki’s desire for power is also tainted by a desire for vengeance—to hurt the people who hurt him. In spite of Sang Ly’s wariness of the knife, after the gang members beat up Lucky Fat, a local orphan, Sang Ly also briefly thinks of using Ki’s knife, suggesting that even she is tempted by the idea of power to fight evil. Sopeap also believes that evil should be fought with the knife, suggesting that Ki should fight power with power, but when the villagers chase down one of the gang members, a teenage boy, and viciously beat him to death, Ki discovers that he does not have the stomach to actually use his knife or thus to exert his own power against a child. Although the villagers use their power to fight evil, Ki realizes that the use of such power against a teenage boy seems horrific rather than heroic, and his knife remains in hand, unused. From this moment on, now that Ki is disillusioned with the power to defend, protect, or avenge, the knife is never seen again.



SNOW AND RAIN

Snow and rain are both used to symbolize hope and redemption. When Sang Ly dreams of the Healer who will cure Nisay’s illness, she sees that the dump is covered in snow, purified, and no rubbish remains underneath it. Although Sang Ly believes that the dump in its current state makes Nisay sick, the snow-covered dump foreshadows the fact that, once Nisay is cured, San Ly will grow to see Stung Meanchey as a beautiful, hope-filled place, not an entrapment of poverty that is killing her son.

Similarly, the rain that falls while Sang Ly is with Sopeap on her deathbed signals Sopeap's redemption as well—Sang Ly even calls it “Sopeap's redeeming rain.” Notably, the rain does not fall until after the housekeeper's family have thanked and honored Sopeap for her gifts to them, and thus relieved her of her guilt and redeemed what she considered to be a wretched life. As Sang Ly sits with Sopeap and the rain begins to fall on both of them, the bitterness that Sopeap held towards herself and the world washes away like the rain washing away debris. Despite Sopeap's painful and at times contemptible life, she is surrounded by people who love, value, and appreciate her.



THE CLOCK

Sang Ly's floral clock functions as a minor symbol to represent Sopeap's underlying goodness and value despite her rough exterior. Although the clock is broken, Sang Ly keeps it on her wall, ostensibly because she thinks it's pretty, but in reality because she believes that “broken things deserves to be repaired,” and hopes to someday have the money to repair it to its full potential. Sang Ly's belief in the clock's potential and value reflects her belief in Sopeap's potential and value.

Although most people in Stung Meanchey believe Sopeap is nothing more than a useless drunk, just as the clock is just a broken device, Sang Ly begins to recognize Sopeap's knowledge, wisdom, and warmth, even when it is concealed beneath a veneer of bitterness, recognizing both the beauty and value of the person inside. Sang Ly's persistent belief that “broken things deserve to be repaired” applies not only to the clock, but also to Sopeap herself, as evidenced by Sang Ly's efforts to find Sopeap on her deathbed and prevent her from dying alone.

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly describes Stung Meanchey, the municipal waste dump on the perimeter of which she and her family live in Phnom Penh. Despite living in a dump, which is filthy, impoverished, and dangerous, Sang Ly often finds beauty and enjoyment in the midst of it. This is important to the novel's portrayal of poverty, since the author tries to show the destitution in which Sang Ly and her family live without becoming too dour or pessimistic. Sang Ly's casual observance of beauty suggest that, in spite of hunger, desperation, and illness, she still maintains her optimism and habit of seeing the good in an environment—even if she wishes she could leave Stung Meanchey. In spite of the poverty that the novel depicts, such observations of beauty argue that even in such a harsh environment, life is still pleasant enough and very much worth living.

Chapter Two Quotes

●● Although I could never imagine abandoning my own child, I have seen enough desperation in my life to understand the mind-set of those who do. However, what is unfathomable to me is that with an array of choices available for leaving a child—orphanges, monasteries, foreign medical clinics—how could anyone choose to leave her child at the dump, a place where useless things are thrown away?

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Lucky Fat

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly recounts how Lucky Fat's parents abandoned him at the dump when he was seven years old, and tries to imagine what could drive a parent to do such a thing. Lucky Fat, like most of the main characters, is closely based on a real child who the author's son met in Cambodia, and it seems likely that the circumstances of the actual child are much the same as the one described in the story. In light of this, Sang Ly's wrestling with how someone could abandon their son seem to be not only hers, but the author's as well. While, on the one hand, this offers Sang Ly a more personal tone, since the author's own internal conflicts are rising up through her voice, it does occasionally cause Sang Ly to sound rather like an American man, or at least speaking in the voice of someone foreign to Cambodia. This is particularly noticeable in the way that Sang Ly (and thus, the



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Shadow Mountain edition of *The Rent Collector* published in 2013.

Chapter One Quotes

●● Since there are no structures allowed within the center of the dump itself, my view of the place is unobstructed and occasionally quite spectacular, especially after a hard rain has banished the constant haze.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

author) can understand desperation on its surface, but the actual act of abandoning a child seems incomprehensible to her, even though there are obviously several orphans in Stung Meanchey alone, and the abject poverty described throughout the story makes it seem that orphans would be unfortunately common.

☝ I have been quiet today because fear in my heart has been fighting with frustration in my brain, leaving little energy for my mouth. Halfway through the day, my brain declared itself the winner and started to work out a plan. Grandfather loved luck, but I am tired and can no longer wait around for its arrival.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Nisay

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly formulates her plan to convince Sopeap to teach her how to read, hoping that it will provide more opportunities and a better future for Nisay. Sang Ly intuitively understands what Sopeap will later teach her: taking action is the first step in restoring one's hope for the future. Although Sang Ly could continue to struggle through each day and get by with as little pain as possible, as most in Stung Meanchey, she determines that she must make her own luck and take her own steps towards change. Although this seems a difficult thing for anyone in abject poverty to do, since nearly all of one's energy is put toward daily survival, it is also a far more reliable way to rise from one's current station than simply waiting for luck to grant an escape. Sang Ly intuitively understands that actively doing something is a better way for her to maintain her sense of hope than passively waiting for circumstances to change.

Chapter Three Quotes

☝ "I'll keep taking him to doctors. I'll keep searching for a answers. O just don't think anything will change until he has the desire to get better. I can't rely on Grandfather's luck any longer. So yes, as naïve as it may sound, I believe reading will help Nisay. I want to think reading will offer him hope."

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Nisay

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly asks the reluctant Sopeap to teach her how to read, not only for her own sake, but also for her son Nisay's. Sang Ly's request suggests that she not only believes literacy could further her own potential—leading to better employment, higher pay, and perhaps some relief from poverty—but that reading could also be an inspiration to Nisay as well. Her belief that her son needs something to live for speaks to the power of literature to inspire and create aspirations. If Nisay grows up, never learns to read, and only ever sees Stung Meanchey, his aspirations will likely be limited the small world he inhabits, or at best, escaping Stung Meanchey but with no notion of what the rest of the world contains. However, if Nisay is able to read and learn about other people and places, to envision other possibilities in his mind, he then would be able to aspire to something better in life, which would ideally give him the motivation to fight and overcome his own illness.

Chapter Four Quotes

☝ I told Ki I wanted to hang the clock on our wall because I liked its flowered face—but that's not exactly true. There is more. It helps me to remember that even though something is broken, it can still serve a purpose. [...] Sometimes broken things deserve to be repaired.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Ki Lim

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly lies awake at night, pretending that the broken clock on the wall is softly ticking away. Although Sang Ly's relationship with Sopeap has yet to bloom, the clock functions as a symbol for Sopeap and a testament to Sang Ly's belief in redemption in general. Like the clock, Sopeap once served an important function as a literature professor that she no longer fulfills, having been "broken" by the pain and trauma she experienced. Sang Ly's belief that clock can even serve a purpose while broken, and ultimately deserves

to be restored to its full function, foreshadows her steadily-growing realization that Sopeap is a wealth of knowledge and wisdom, still immensely purposeful in spite of her rough exterior. Just as Sang Ly hopes for the clock's restoration, Sopeap will ultimately be restored in her vocation as a teacher, and Sang Ly will even grow to love her, just as she loves the clock.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☛ Her biggest fault—perplexing to this day—is that Mother loves to pick trash.

“It’s an adventure,” she says. “You never know what surprises you’ll find.”

I remind her that *surprises* usually mean human body parts.

Related Characters: Lena / Mother, Sang Ly (speaker), Lucky Fat

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly describes how Cambodian parents traditionally move in with their children when they reach retirement age, which for Lena meant moving into the dump and continuing to work, since Sang Ly and Ki make hardly enough money to survive on their own. Lena’s good-humored nature and optimism help her not only to survive in Stung Meanchey, but even to enjoy her life in spite of its obvious hardships. Although it would be understandable for Lena to succumb to sadness or hopelessness, Lena makes the active choice to be humorous and playful with her work. Like Lucky Fat, Lena is thus an ideal example of the way an individual can use humor to buoy their spirit and endure—even enjoy—hardships and difficult situations. This is particularly significant in such a dour environment, as evidenced by Sang Ly’s observations that among the trash’s treasure are such grotesque finds as human remains. Lena’s ability to still enjoy herself in such an environment is a testament to humor’s ability to lift one’s spirits and help them to cope.

☛ “I hope it changes many things,” I answered softly. “I hope it will somehow get out of the dump—and if not us, that it provides a path out for Nisay. Don’t you want those things too?”

It is a long time before [Ki] replies. “I know that we don’t have a lot here,” he says cautiously. “But at least we know where we stand.”

Related Characters: Ki Lim, Sang Ly (speaker), Nisay

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Though Sang Ly expected Ki to be excited at the prospect of her learning to read, he is instead rather hesitant, even fearful of the changes it could bring. Ki’s resistance to Sang Ly learning to read is less about Sang Ly’s self-betterment than his resistance to change. Although they live in poverty in Stung Meanchey, poverty is familiar. It presents no unknown variables aside from how much money they will have on any given day. Ki’s fear of change, even change for the better, demonstrates one of the insidious ways in which poverty can entrap a person. When a poor, simple life is all that one knows, it is the only thing in the world that feels remotely familiar, and ultimately, safe. Stepping out and taking action to change one’s circumstances for the better, as Sang Ly wants to do, thus represents a risk. While Ki is in poverty’s familiar environment, he knows how the world works. He can feel in control. Stepping out of that environment thus means not only an entire world of unknown possibilities, but also a fearful loss of control. For Ki, such possibility does not seem hopeful as it does to Sang Ly, but fearful.

Chapter Eight Quotes

☛ “But literature is unique. To understand literature, you read it with your head but you interpret it with your heart. The two are forced to work together—and quite frankly, the often don’t get along.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

After Sang Ly quickly learns to read, she begs Sopeap to teach her next about literature, even though she isn’t entirely sure what literature is, but Sopeap is very hesitant. Sopeap is explaining the primary difference between simply learning to read and understanding literature. Learning to read is a purely mechanical process, and one only has to learn to decode letters on a page into the right sounds and learn how to fit them together. Literature, on the other

hand, requires engaging complex thoughts and ideas, self-reflecting and seeking to understand how another person's ideas affect oneself. This suggests that if someone is to truly engage with and learn about literature, they cannot be running from themselves or trying to completely shut away their own hearts and emotions, as Sopeap does with alcohol. Learning about literature thus represents an extreme risk, since one will have to examine not only other people's ideas but also their hearts, and what they find may not always be gratifying.

Chapter Ten Quotes

☝☝ This stunningly innocent and beautiful girl of no more than twelve is going to be taken by her brother and be sold to brothel as a child prostitute.

The notion is unthinkable to anyone civilized—but in Cambodia, it happens all the time.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Maly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Sang Ly realizes the danger that Maly is in, since Maly is having her first period, meaning that she is old enough for a gang to sell her into prostitution. While child prostitution is obviously a horrific practice and the fact that it exists at all in the world is tragic, the author bares his own implicit bias and limited perspective in the language he uses. Although it does not seem intentional, the comment (which he makes through Sang Ly) that although “civilized” people would never permit it, child prostitution occurs “all the time” in Cambodia suggests that Cambodian people are thus uncivilized. This certainly does not sound like something that a Cambodian woman would say, and emphasizes the fact that although he tries to fit the tone of a Cambodian national, the author is an American man. This also completely ignores the fact that child prostitution occurs in every country, even the U.S., though it is much more hidden. Although this incident should arguably not cause the reader to reject the entire novel, recognizing the author's bias gives the reader some additional context with which to understand the story.

☝☝ “People only go to the places they have visited first in their minds [...] Perhaps that is how learning can help you.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Sopeap explains that literature can broaden Sang Ly's horizons and give her the ability to reach for new heights. What Sopeap implies is that ultimately, literature has the power to create freedom for a person. Especially for someone like Sang Ly, whose entire life has been mired by poverty and relegated only to one region of Cambodia, visualizing anything different, any life beyond the one she's already led, seems virtually impossible. Even if she knows that other countries or other people exist, she has no frame of reference with which to imagine them, and if she cannot imagine them, she cannot strive toward emulating them. One of the greatest powers of literature, then, is its ability to open one's eyes to the wider world and to give one an idea of what else life could look like. And then, if one is able to visualize another place, another life, or another role in society beyond their own poverty, they can begin to plan how to take steps in that direction. By opening the world and its opportunities to even the most isolated person, literature has the power to create freedom.

Chapter Eleven Quotes

☝☝ “There's a time and place for defending yourself,” he says calmly, “whether it be with words—or with a knife. Keep reading; your stories will teach you that.”

Related Characters: Ki Lim (speaker), Sang Ly

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Ki is intent on standing up for himself against the gangs, and wants to inspire other villagers to do so as well. After a gang beats up Ki early in the story, Ki wrestles with his own feeling of powerlessness, which prompts him to buy a knife as a symbol of his own power. In time, Sang Ly and Ki will both discover that power—even power to fight back against evil—does not mean the same thing as heroism. However, Ki's desire for the power to seek revenge and defend

himself is understandable, and the narrative here treats it as justifiable. The gangs do represent a growing threat to the villagers' safety, and it is important to establish here that the desire to fight evil is in itself a justifiable and often beneficial impulse. However, after the villagers beat a young gang member to death out of vengeance, the simple categorization of good and evil that Ki currently holds will no longer be enough, and the knife and the power that it symbolizes will fade from view and become less significant.

Chapter Fourteen Quotes

☞ “Words are like ropes [...] We use them to pull ourselves up, but if we are not careful, they can also bind us down—at times by our own doing.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), The Housekeeper / Sopeap Sin, Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

During one of their literature lessons, Sang Ly asks Sopeap why she lives in Stung Meanchey if she is so educated and masterful with words. Somberly, Sopeap nods to the dually creative and destructive power of words. Sopeap's admonition is also a warning, suggesting that just as words and literature can bring hope and broaden one's horizons, they can also bring ruin. Specifically, Sopeap's recognition that words can “bind us down” certainly refers to the many people she hurt, and the bridges she burned as the alcoholic Rent Collector. However, it ultimately refers to her own guilt and foreshadows her eventual revelation that her housekeeper sacrificed her own life to save Sopeap. Although this action is obviously heroic, Sopeap's warning—and a later admission—reveals that she is filled with guilt and remorse that she could have spoken up and used her words to prevent her housekeeper from being executed in her place, but instead remained silent.

Chapter Sixteen Quotes

☞ “Most teachers will agree that the true mark of a hero, what sets him apart from everyone else, is sacrifice. A hero gives something up, sometimes even his own life, for the good of others.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Maly,

Lucky Fat, Ki Lim, Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

During one of their literature lessons, Sopeap teaches Sang Ly about the classic character roles in a story, and suggests that rather than power, wealth, or influence, self-sacrifice is what makes a hero. This is notably different than Ki's initial idea that the power to fight back against the gangs will make him heroic, and broadens both the idea of heroism as well as the range of people who can be heroes. Not everyone can have power, money, or prestige, but everyone can give of themselves for others.

This concept of heroic sacrifice is a major theme throughout the story and is exemplified by every major character, as well as several minor ones. Lucky Fat demonstrates his heroism when he risks his own safety to protect Maly. Sang Ly discovers that Sopeap is an unlikely and unrecognized hero for foregoing cancer treatment, thus sacrificing her life, in order to finish Sang Ly's education. Sang Ly becomes heroic in her long and arduous struggle, sacrificing time and energy, to find healing for Nisay. Even Ki becomes a hero, not through the power of his knife or through fighting back, but by giving his own time and energy to support Sang Ly in her education and her quest to be with Sopeap on her deathbed, even when he himself does not understand the significance of it all. As demonstrated, within this broader understanding of heroism, anyone can be a hero if they give up aspects of themselves for others' sakes.

Chapter Seventeen Quotes

☞ “The only real dreams I have anymore are usually not pleasant.”

“Nightmares?”

[Sopeap] nods. “Perhaps a symptom of old age.”

“I'm sorry,” I say. “How do you keep them away?”

“Rice wine.”

Related Characters: Sang Ly, Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Bunna Heng / The Healer

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After Sang Ly dreams of the Healer and of Stung Meanchey covered in snow, she asks Sopeap what she believes dreams mean. Although Sopeap tells Sang Ly that dreams are somehow significant but must be pondered, she also reveals that she is plagued by nightmares. In spite of Sopeap's deflection that her nightmares come from old age, these bad dreams are clearly a sign of inner psychological torment of some kind. When she later reveals the trauma she experienced and the loss of her family, Sopeap's character goes from being perceived—both by Sang Ly and the reader—as a bitter old woman who gives in to her vices and despises the world, to a sad old woman who is haunted by the past and trying desperately to keep her own anguish at bay with alcohol. Rather than a spiteful, contemptible character, Sopeap's life and hardened demeanor seem rather like a tragedy, and clearly demonstrate that although an individual may seem hardened, bitter, or foul on the outside, that rough exterior may only be covering for an inner pain and anguish.

Chapter Eighteen Quotes

☝ It was just days ago I wanted to kill the criminals myself. But my desire was for revenge on crooks, thugs—dark images of evil that gathered in my head when I pictured the men who beat my husband and Lucky Fat—not boys, especially this boy.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Maly, Lucky Fat, Ki Lim

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Ki previously desired to fight back against the gangs, and even Sang Ly thought of going after them with Ki's knife after they beat Lucky Fat. But when the villagers beat Maly's brother to death, Sang Ly and Ki realize that although he is a gangster, he is also little more than a child. Both Sang Ly and Ki have held the gang members in their minds as the pure embodiment of evil up this point. However, realizing that even those who commit terrible evils (such as trying to sell Maly into prostitution) may only be children themselves complicates the notion of evil in general, suggesting that those who commit evil acts are not themselves evil incarnate. Though Ki and even Sang Ly once

desired to fight evil with the knife (a symbol of power), looking at Maly's brother's broken body, they both realize that there is no heroism in such a victory, especially since the boy was chased down by a mob of villagers and vengefully beaten to death. Although Ki once connected power with heroism in his mind, the reality seems far more complex. This notion of evil being committed by children—which challenges simplistic notions of good and evil—surfaces again in Sopeap's recollection of the Khmer Rouge soldiers who murdered her family, since they were only children as well.

Chapter Twenty Quotes

☝ “We'll read it together later,” I tell [Sopeap], “just as soon as I return.”

[...] “Of course,” she finally answers, but the words ring with hollow conviction. And then she adds, “No matter how much we cling to hope, our stories seldom end as we expect.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Sang Ly (speaker), Bunna Heng / The Healer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

As Sang Ly is about to leave for Prey Veng to meet the Healer, she speaks with Sopeap one last time, promising that she will read Sopeap's favorite story with her when she returns. Although Sang Ly knows Sopeap is dying at this point, she does not understand how close Sopeap believes her own death to be. Sopeap's response not only reveals that she believes this to be their last meeting, but also suggests that, despite how much she talks about hope and encourages Sang Ly to believe in it, she herself has grown cynical and lost her hope in the future. The teacher fails to believe in what she teaches. However, in the midst of such an overwhelmingly hopeful story, although Sopeap's doubt is cynical, it also puts forth an important caveat. She admits that however much one might hope, life may not go according to plan. This is particularly true for Sopeap, since she watched Khmer Rouge murder her beloved husband and son. While this doesn't mean that hope is unimportant or should be abandoned, it is worth recognizing that the world can be cruel, regardless of how much one hopes.

☝ “I distance myself from heaven and then complain that heaven is distant.”

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

When Sang Ly asks Sopeap what she believes about what happens to a person after they die, Sopeap remarks that she has no idea, and that even the concept of God or heaven seems far away from her. This is the only mention of the afterlife in the entire story, and it seems that Sopeap's perceived distance from heaven stems from her distance from human warmth. In this light, Sopeap's revealing comment suggests that although she is miserable and a part of her believes that the world is cold and cruel—suggested by her belief that heaven, and thus any sort of God-figure, is distant—her own drunkenness and cynicism have reinforced that notion for herself. The world treats her coldly because she treats it coldly. Ultimately, her misery is self-reciprocating, leaving her feeling alone, separated from human warmth or the comfort of a belief in heaven.

Chapter Twenty-One Quotes

☝☝ Sopeap said that literature has the power to change lives, minds, and hearts. Until this moment, reading to others on this rickety old bus about tigers in India, I had not fully understood what she meant.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Nisay, Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, The businessman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

While Sang Ly travels to Prey Veng to hopefully cure Nisay, the other passengers on their bus seem put off by her family's poverty and annoyed by Nisay's constant fussing. However, when Sang Ly reads from a storybook Sopeap gave her to calm Nisay, it instead calms the entire bus, and she realizes that all of the passengers are listening to her, united by their simple love of a good story. What draws the other passengers in is not the literary weight or masterful life lessons of Sang Ly's story, but simply the enjoyment of an adventurous tale. Although the other passengers come from all sorts of backgrounds, social classes, and experiences, their enjoyment of Sang Ly's story proves

universal, strongly suggesting that literature and stories have the power to bring together people who might otherwise be irritated or antagonized by each other to unite them in a common, simple pleasure. This reality emphasizes literature's powerful ability to create connections among wildly different sorts of individuals.

Chapter Twenty-Two Quotes

☝☝ “Remember, the province, though beautiful, has its own pockets of ugliness. While the dump is ugly, it also has its pockets of beauty. I think finding beauty in either place simply depends on where you decide to stand.

Related Characters: Auntie (speaker), Lena / Mother, Sang Ly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

While Sang Ly is in Prey Veng, she chats with Auntie, who reveals that Lena fears Sang Ly will leave Stung Meanchey now that she has an education. Although to Sang Ly, leaving the dump seems only a good thing, Auntie warns her against so easily abandoning her home and thinking so little of it. Auntie's admonition is interesting and cutting to Sang Ly, precisely because so much of her hope and her motivation to learn to read has been tied up in the desire to escape Stung Meanchey. Auntie's warning suggests that while hope itself is a wonderful thing, only hoping to be somewhere else is ultimately a fruitless endeavor. Although to Sang Ly, Prey Veng seems far more beautiful than the dump, by focusing all her attention on someplace other than where she already lives, she is missing the beauty currently around her. Sang Ly's hope, if angled purely at moving someplace else and escaping the dump, does no good for the people in Stung Meanchey, the people who form her community and have been her entire life for the last several years, including her own mother.

Chapter Twenty-Three Quotes

☝ I don't mean to be a skeptic to lack hope, or to harbor fear. However, experience has been my diligent teacher. Still, I hate it. I don't want to raise a child of doubt I want my son to believe to hope, to dream that the future holds brighter days. [...] And it must be true; some hope must remain in my heart, for I am standing in the hut of the Healer. If all hope had died at Stung Meanchey, I would not be here.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan, Bunna Heng / The Healer, Nisay

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

When Sang Ly brings Nisay to the Healer in Prey Veng, she wants to be hopeful that her son will be cured, but every other remedy and medication she has tried thus far has failed. Sang Ly's fear reveals that even for one as hopeful as her, she is plagued by the same cynicism Sopeap wrestles with, suggesting that hope can be a difficult thing to maintain in the face of constant failures and setbacks. However, in spite of these doubts, Sang Ly's willingness to travel all that way, risking both time and money, only because of a dream and an overwhelming desire to see Nisay become healthy again, also demonstrates that hope lives inside her regardless of her circumstances. The simultaneous presence of hope and doubt in Sang Ly suggests that the two feelings are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One may take risks and act on their hope, even if doubt still nags at the edges of their mind. The important thing, as Sang Ly discovers, is to act on hope, even when doubts persist.

☝ "It doesn't matter where you live, Sang Ly, it is *how* you live."

Related Characters: Bunna Heng / The Healer (speaker), Auntie, Sang Ly

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

When the Healer tells Sang Ly that he believes her father would be proud of who she is, Sang Ly counters by reminding the Healer that she lives in the dump. Even

though Sang Ly reveals that she is ashamed of where she lives, the Healer unknowingly continues Auntie's earlier argument that Sang Ly should not be ashamed of who she is or where she is from, and should not place all of her hope in leaving Stung Meanchey. Although Sang Ly, now educated, has the opportunity to leave the dump behind and seek success elsewhere, doing so would mean leaving behind all the villagers in Stung Meanchey who know her and have supported her over the years. Sang Ly's shame at living in Stung Meanchey implicitly suggests that it is not good enough for her, and that by extension, its people are not good enough for her. The Healer's wise admonition thus suggests that Sang Ly—and by extension the reader, who is meant to learn along with her—would do better to be content wherever she is and focus her energy on living a hopeful and virtuous life, rather than spending all of her energy dreaming of somewhere else. This further suggests that a noble life lived in poverty is as valuable as a life lived in the wealthiest place.

Chapter Twenty-Four Quotes

☝ "I should go to work," [Ki] says, "but I have no boots, no picker, nothing." Of course, he is right, we have nothing. And yet, if Nisay is truly better, *we have everything*.

Related Characters: Sang Ly, Ki Lim (speaker), Lena / Mother, Nisay

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay return from Prey Veng and arrive back in Stung Meanchey, they discover that all of their possessions were stolen from their hut. However, Nisay seems genuinely healthier; he is more responsive and even hungry. Although Sang Ly was somewhat reluctant to return to the dump and wished they lived somewhere else, her realization that even in a dump they have all they need marks a critical turning point in her perception of Stung Meanchey. Even robbed of all their personal possessions, Nisay's healing makes life seem full and bright to Sang Ly, suggesting that one's physical environment and material possessions do not ultimately matter if the people that one cares most for are healthy, happy, and present. Within such a frame, hope for the future can even be found within abject poverty, especially if the things one hopes for are not material wealth and security, but happy and healthy relationships, since those can be found in any environment.

Chapter Twenty-Five Quotes

☝☝ The soldier behind Samnang furrowed his brow in confusion and then cast a glance at another, perhaps his superior. Sopeap didn't offer either man time for mental debate. The girl I'd berated moments before carried herself like a woman of culture, a wife, a mother, a queen.

Related Characters: Sopeap Sin / Soriyan (speaker), Samnang, The Housekeeper / Sopeap Sin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Sopeap (whose real name is Soriyan) recounts to Sang Ly though an essay how her former housekeeper—whom Soriyan considered lowly and simple—convinced the Khmer Rouge soldiers that she was the professor so that they would kill her and spare her employer, Soriyan. The housekeeper's self-sacrifice so that Soriyan could live plants her squarely among the ranks of the story's many heroes. More importantly, the housekeeper's bravery and ability to carry herself like "a queen" completely defies Soriyan's expectations about her, revealing an inner strength of character. Soriyan's misperception of her housekeeper is particularly ironic since parallels the misperception that the people in Stung Meanchey later make about Soriyan. Just as Soriyan made the error of judging her housekeeper just by her demeanor and appearance, so the villagers later judge the old woman they know as Sopeap Sin purely on her disheveled appearance, drunkenness, and bitter demeanor, completely missing her true character and wisdom. Aside from again suggesting that one cannot accurately judge a person's character or potential by their initial impression, the judgment of Stung Meanchey's villagers seems like karma in light of this revelation, and possibly is part of the reason that Soriyan (living as Sopeap) leans into her reputations as the drunken, bitter old woman.

Chapter Twenty-Six Quotes

☝☝ The openings are shuttered tight. What I most envy, however, is [Sopeap's] front door that locks. Still, in a world where everything means something, I'm also reminded that, like her home, Sopeap allows very few people inside.

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

While Sang Ly searches for Sopeap, who is dying, she checks her house on the edge of Stung Meanchey, noting that is an actual house with walls and a locking door, unlike the huts in which all the villagers live. The locked door represents Sopeap's closed-off heart, and her refusal to let other people inside. Sang Ly's envy of the locking door suggests that she desires security in her own life, just as Sopeap did. However, although Sopeap's house will never be robbed as Sang Ly's was, the suggested consequence of such security is that other people can never come in, either literally into one's house or metaphorically into one's heart or relational sphere. While this does offer peace of mind, since one is immune to robbery or wounded relationships, locking one's door to all others—friend or foe, robber or companion—means that they will be alone forever, or at least until they take the risk of opening the door. They will never be hurt, but they will also never have the comfort or warmth of another person.

Chapter Thirty Quotes

☝☝ "To this day, if we look carefully around Stung Meanchey, if we search for stories that teach truth and goodness, stories with lessons that can soften and change our hearts—we will discover hope."

Related Characters: Sang Ly (speaker), Sopeap Sin / Soriyan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 263-264

Explanation and Analysis

After Sopeap dies, Sang Ly returns to the dump and tells the villagers a story about her teacher, to encourage them to find hope even in such an environment as Stung Meanchey. Sang Ly's story is an encouraging message that hope can be found anywhere. However, it also demonstrates that Sang Ly has ultimately made her peace with living in Stung Meanchey and loving the people who live there. Sang Ly used to place all her hopes in escaping Stung Meanchey for a better life, since she felt that the dump was a hopeless place with no future for her or her family, even though this would mean leaving so many people behind. Her new perspective and belief that hope is present even in Stung Meanchey demonstrates that she realizes her dreams of escape were ultimately a self-serving endeavor, and

suggests that she is ready to think of Stung Meanchey as

her permanent home.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER ONE

In the year she comes to know the Rent Collector, Sang Ly discovers that heroes don't only exist in fairytales, and "the most difficult battles in life are those we fight within."

Sang Ly can hear trucks honking outside, even though her mind is still dreaming of being a child, talking to her lost grandfather, who tells her that today will be a lucky day. Sang Ly's husband, Ki Lim, shakes her awake, and she realizes she overslept and has not prepared his lunch for the day. Sang Ly will bring his lunch in the afternoon since Ki needs to work an extra long day to make enough money to pay "the Cow." As Ki steps out of their hut to go to work, Sang Ly holds their infant son Nisay, who is skinny, frail, and less responsive than he should be at his age. He is sick with diarrhea, as he has been for months, and no medicines have yet been able to cure him. As Sang Ly steps out into the morning light carrying her son, she tells him that Grandfather promised them a lucky day.

Sang Ly and her family live in Stung Meanchey—which ironically means "River of Victory"—the largest waste dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where her family, as well as many others, live in temporary shelters on rented land. Although the poverty and squalor is putrid and often dangerous, there is also a quiet beauty to it at times, which Sang Ly cherishes.

"The Cow" arrives, spoiling Sang Ly's reverie. "The Cow" is the moniker the villagers gave the rent collector, Sopeap Sin. Sopeap is a foul, bitter, drunken woman, who comes around each month to collect rent from the villagers. Sang Ly hands Sopeap all of the money her family has, minus a bit she's withheld to buy food for the evening. Sopeap knows that some is missing and demands it, and the two women bicker back and forth, as they always do, until Sopeap threatens to throw them out if they do not pay. She will return in the evening for the rest of the money.

The opening line suggests that the story will be a journey of personal growth, as much or more than a struggle against physical obstacles.



Sang Ly's life is layered with disadvantages—her environment, her poverty, her sick child—which establishes the tone of the story as one in which the protagonist will face the far-reaching consequences of these obstacles in her daily life. Notably, although Sang Ly speaks to Grandfather, her ancestor, a number of times throughout the story, Grandfather does not truly have any presence, attributes, or ever take any actions. Thus, he operates more as a mythical figure or deity whom Sang Ly prays to than a family member with whom she had a close relationship.



Sang Ly's ability to find glimpses of beauty despite the dump's filth foreshadows her eventual realization that life in the dump, as well as the people who live there, can be as beautiful as life anywhere else, though this will take the full length of the novel to establish.



Sopeap is introduced as a grotesque, spiteful old woman with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. This is important for establishing both Sang Ly and the reader's initial impression of her as a character, from which she will develop into a kind and generous figure, thus arguing that first impressions are often not accurate. However, at this moment, she is still foul, likely causing the reader to sympathize with Sang Ly and Ki over Sopeap.



CHAPTER TWO

Poor families eke out a living in Stung Meanchey by picking through trash, searching for recyclable materials to sell to a scrap collector. Most of them are too worried about immediate problems to hope or plan for the future. To shield themselves from the sun, pickers often build temporary lean-tos to rest under in the afternoon, but government bulldozers always flatten them by the next day, along with anyone foolish enough to be out in the dump after dark.

As Sang Ly goes to bring Ki's lunch to him, she runs into Lucky Fat, a chubby young orphan boy whose parents abandoned him at the dump. Despite having to survive alone, Lucky Fat is always cheerful and good-humored, even making a practice of collecting Buddha figurines when the other villagers remark that he looks like the plump Buddha. While Sang Ly is speaking with Lucky Fat, Ki arrives, carrying his sack filled with heavy metal pipes, meaning that it has been a good and profitable day collecting scrap. Ki gives the money he has earned so far, along with a children's book he found amongst the rubbish, to Sang Ly, and tells her to go home and buy good food for the evening. In light of this, Sang Ly remembers Grandfather's prediction of a lucky day.

Sang Ly walks home, imagining how she will triumphantly and proudly pay off Sopeap this evening. In their hut, she holds Nisay on her lap and flips through the illustrated book that Ki found, making up a story as she goes since she cannot read the words. As they are looking at the pictures together, Sang Ly hears a shuffling outside and assumes it is Sopeap, drunk, back for the rest of her rent. Instead, Sang Ly finds Ki lying on the ground with blood running from his head. She instinctively knows that one of the dump's gangs beat and robbed him.

By the next morning, Ki's bleeding still has not stopped, and he is growing pale and weak. Sang Ly convinces him to take what money they have left to go see a doctor, even though that cost will leave them without enough money to pay the Rent Collector. Sopeap arrives, and discovering that they still have no money, tells Sang Ly that she is evicting them; they must be gone by morning. Just as Sang Ly is protesting, however, Sopeap spies the children's book and falls silent. She picks the book up and flips through it, beginning to weep and moan. Sopeap rises to leave, and Sang Ly tells her to keep the book, since it obviously means a lot to her. As Sopeap wanders away in silence, Sang Ly realizes that the woman must know how to read.

The trash-pickers temporary lean-tos parallel the existence of hope in Stung Meanchey: although a poor person may prop up some hope to give themselves some brief psychological relief from the day's drudgery, such hope is always flattened, crushed, unable to exist for long on its own, unprotected or supported.



This passage introduces Lucky Fat as a character, immediately establishing him as a cheery, good-natured young boy despite his struggles. In this way, Lucky Fat is the best representation of how humor can make an individual resilient even amidst great hardship. Living as a child in Stung Meanchey is hard enough, but even more difficult without parents to protect and provide. Lucky Fat's use of humor to remain high-spirited suggests that it is a powerful tool for maintaining one's spirit and resilience.



Sang Ly's interest in the book foreshadows the the importance literature will take on for the rest of her life. The contrast of Ki's brief good fortune during his workday to this stroke of ill luck illustrates how poverty can seem to be an inescapable situation, since just as one gets a break from one life-threatening problem (hunger and homelessness) another rears its head (gang violence).



The power of one children's book to silence Sopeap's fury suggests that literature wields some sort of power to disarm even the most furious or drunken individual. Although it is yet unclear what this power is or how it will play out, literature at this point demonstrates more power to pacify Sopeap than any of Sang Ly's arguments or pleas for sympathy. Sang Ly's surprise that Sopeap knows how to read suggests that literacy is a rare thing in Stung Meanchey.



Ki returns late in the evening with a bandage around his head, disoriented from painkillers. A clinic treated him for free, so Ki used the money he'd brought with him to buy a **knife** for protection against the gangs, which he's strapped to his ankle. The next morning, the painkillers have worn off, but Ki is in no shape to work. Sang Ly leaves to pick trash instead, so that they can still afford a little rice to eat. Although it is more profitable to work near the garbage trucks and pick what comes off of them, Sang Ly opt to work out in the open swathes of rubbish. It is less profitable, but there is less danger of being crushed by machinery, and she can let her mind wander while she works. As she does so, tired of waiting for Grandfather's luck, she devises a plan, but she imagines everyone in the village will think she is crazy for it.

Although the practical purpose of the knife is a tool and a weapon, it functions as a minor symbol for power. Ki's beating makes him feel weak and powerless, and the weapon's presence suddenly gives him a sense of power and capability. This will tie in later to Sang Ly and Ki's changing perception of heroism. The fact that Ki chose to buy this sense of power for himself rather than food for his family suggests that his own feeling of powerlessness preoccupies him from other concerns. Personal safety, then, is paramount over even basic necessities like food in Stung Meanchey. Sang Ly's decision to launch a crazy plan rather than wait around for Grandfather's suggests that, even before Sopeap begins to teach her, Sang Ly senses that taking action is the most important step in fostering hope.



CHAPTER THREE

Sopeap arrives at Sang Ly's hut, looking unwell. Strangely quiet, Sopeap asks if Ki is recovering from his injury, which surprises Sang Ly since the Rent Collector has never expressed interest in anyone else. Sopeap asks if she can buy the children's book, and when Sang Ly tells her it was a gift, Sopeap responds that she will mark their monthly rent as paid in full, stunning Sang Ly. As Sopeap turns to leave, Sang Ly summons her courage and asks the old woman to teach her how to read, even though Ki is uncomfortable with the idea. Sopeap does not understand why Sang Ly should want to learn, but Sang Ly tells the woman she wants a better future for Nisay. Stung Meanchey is keeping him ill. She wants him to at least have hope.

Sopeap's sudden sympathy and generosity defy her earlier characterization as a vicious, even heartless old woman, again beginning to suggest that one's first impression of a person are often inaccurate, that their hard outward demeanor may in fact mask an inner kindness that rarely shows itself. Once again, Sang Ly takes action to search for and foster hope, again suggesting that she implicitly understands that taking actionable steps towards a better life is the first step in developing and protecting hope for the future.



Since Sang Ly's request was "heartfelt," she expects Sopeap to at least give her some amount of respect. Instead, Sopeap's face hardens and she tells Sang Ly that hope "died at Stung Meanchey." However, when Sang Ly pithily responds that the only thing to die in Stung Meanchey is Sopeap herself, Sopeap begins to laugh rather than reacting angrily. The old woman tells Sang Ly she will teach her to read, but only on the strict conditions that Sang Ly buys her an expensive bottle of rice wine each week, studies and does homework with fierce dedication, and supplies her own pencils and papers. Sang Ly realizes that these things will cost money, and Ki will not be happy, but agrees that she will try. However, Sopeap declares that trying is not enough: "If you want to resurrect hope, *doing* is the most important."

Sopeap surprisingly laughs when Sang Ly challenges her, rather than being angry or combative, which suggests that Sopeap respects Sang Ly for returning her own hardness, and perhaps even desired this response. Sopeap's admonition that doing something is the most important step to revitalizing hope explicitly confirms Sang Ly's earlier suspicions. Sopeap's list of demanding conditions suggests that Sang Ly, or anyone, will only be able to learn new skills and find hope once more if they commit to difficult work and diligence; it will take a significant investment from the learner.



CHAPTER FOUR

Ki is not optimistic about Sang Ly's plan, especially because they will have to buy drunken Sopeap rice wine each week, leaving them with even less money for food than they normally have. Ki is not convinced that someone as vile as Sopeap even knows how to read. However, Sang Ly reminds Ki that they will have extra money since Sopeap forgave the month's rent. The following day, Lucky Fat helps Sang Ly find some pencils and old paper that is unmarked on one side. In the stillness of the night before the first lesson, Sang Ly looks at the old floral-printed **clock** Ki once found for her, hanging on their wall. It's broken, but Sang Ly keeps it because she likes the look of it and hopes to repair it someday. It is a reminder that "sometimes broken things deserve to be repaired."

The next morning, Sang Ly cleans their hut until it is spotless and does every chore she can think to do, hoping to impress Sopeap when she finally arrives. But she does not arrive, and when Ki arrives home from work, Sang Ly is on the verge of tears. Ki is unsurprised, but does not mock Sang Ly for it. That evening, Sopeap arrives staggering and drunk, demanding the rice wine. Although Ki is determined not to give it to her since she did not fulfill her part of the bargain, Sang Ly eventually convinces him to let her have it, since she is still the Rent Collector and is obviously in some sort of pain. With the rice wine, Sang Ly offers her the pencils and then retreats behind the curtained doorway of their hut.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sang Ly rubs Nisay with menthol oil, preparing Nisay for a traditional Cambodian remedy in which she scrapes his skin with the edge of a coin to release the "toxic air" from his body. The practice also ruptures blood vessels, leaving red lines on the skin for several days. An American doctor working for a charity once derided Sang Ly for the practice, calling it superstitious and foolish, but the Western antibiotics he provided did not help any more than the scraping. As Nisay cries, knowing that the painful scraping is about to begin. Sang Ly tries to soothe him, telling him that though the scraping is painful, it is meant to make him stronger.

The broken clock functions as a foreshadowed symbol of Sopeap herself. Just as Sang Ly is able to see the value and beauty of a broken object, which has no function at present but perhaps could be restored, she will discover that although Sopeap is broken in her own way as well, there is a hidden beauty and tremendous value in the old woman waiting to be recognized. Although Sang Ly seems to intuit this, Ki, who is more practical and pessimistic, does not share his wife's capacity to see an individual's full potential.



Sopeap's inconsistency—she was sober and affable enough in her last appearance, but is now drunk and useless—suggests that she will continue to be a difficult individual to work with, even though she respected Sang Ly for standing up to her. Although Sang Ly knows nothing of Sopeap's background as of yet, her willingness to give Sopeap the wine even though she has not earned it suggests that Sang Ly intuits that Sopeap is in tremendous pain and drinks to keep her emotional strife at bay.



This scene establishes a running contrast between modern Western medicine and Cambodian traditional remedies. Although it seems as if the narrative is setting up to make an argument of one over the other, neither modern medicine nor traditional remedies are ever lifted up higher than the other. Both, at times, are certainly shown to fail, suggesting that there are limitations to both.



Since they do not have running water, Sang Ly must carry it by hand from a vendor's stall. While she is doing so, a neighbor, Teva Mao, watches Nisay for her. On this errand, Sang Ly runs into Sopeap, who apologizes that she was not in a state to teach on Friday, but tells her that they can begin today, immediately. Sopeap will make arrangements for someone to take care of Nisay for the day. The sudden generosity stuns Sang Ly. When she mentions Ki's doubt that Sopeap can even read, the thought amuses Sopeap, and she tells Sang Ly that of all the names she has ever been called, her most treasured is "teacher," which her students referred to her as while she was a literature professor for nine years at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Sopeap's amusement at the fact that Ki doubted she could even read herself suggests that she possesses enough good humor to laugh at herself occasionally. Her revelation about being a former literature professor at a prestigious university clashes with her initial characterization as a drunk old woman who lives in the dump. This again suggests that one's first impressions of another person based on appearance or demeanor are often false, and do not account for that person's life history or underlying qualities.



CHAPTER SIX

Sang Ly begins her first lesson with Sopeap, where they cover all the letters and sounds of the Khmer alphabet. Sopeap delivers the information quickly, and is impatient with Sang Ly when she does not understand something. However, within the day, Sang Ly has written down every consonant and vowel, and Sopeap tells her that she must have all of them memorized within three days. Ki arrives home from work, and Sang Ly imagines that he must be home for an early lunch. However, when he tells her he is home for dinner, she realizes that she and Sopeap have been working together for over six hours.

Sopeap strict and rapid pace of teaching studies suggests that she has high expectations for Sang Ly. On one hand, this suits the narrative, since learning to read is only the beginning of Sang Ly's education. On the other, it suggests that with a demanding teacher, one may rise to the challenge and accomplish more than they thought possible.



Later, Lucky Fat asks Sang Ly if she will someday teach him how to write his own name, and she tells him she would love to. Ki still struggles with the idea, and refers to Sopeap again as "the Cow," but Sang Ly asks him to refer to her as "teacher" instead. Although Sang Ly does not know why a former professor would be living in the dump at Stun Meanchey, Ki imagines that it must have been due to her drunkenness.

Sang Ly's insistence that Ki call Sopeap "teacher" rather than "the Cow" as Sang Ly herself once did suggests that her perceptions of Sopeap are already shifting. Through her personal interactions with Sopeap, Sang Ly begins to recognize that calling Sopeap "the Cow" is dehumanizing and does not recognize her true value.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Traditionally, when Cambodian parents grow old they move in with their children. For Sang Ly's mother, Lena, that unfortunately meant moving into the garbage dump. However, Lena is good-humored about it, and even enjoys picking trash, though Sang Ly cannot fathom why. Sang Ly and Ki Lim's hut is too small for all of them, so Lena lives with a distant cousin, a 10-minute walk away.

Lena's positive attitude and enjoyment of life in the dump once again suggests that good humor can lift one's spirits in even the hardest environments. However, the fact that Lena had to move into the dump to be with her daughter implies some level of shame on Sang Ly's part.



On the second day of teaching, Sopeap is half-drunk, and is angry and impatient whenever Sang Ly does not understand something. Sang Ly berates her for being drunk so often, but as she does, Sopeap doubles over, crawls outside, and vomits up the alcohol before saying that she will be back tomorrow, and will be sober. When Sang Ly goes to clean the vomit, she notices that it is mixed with blood.

Sopeap's vomit mixed with blood clearly suggests that she is very ill in some manner, which may be related to why she drinks heavily and treats people poorly. Sang Ly's criticism of Sopeap's drunkenness suggests that she is becoming more confident in calling out her teacher's poor behavior.



In the evening, Ki wants Sang Ly to come to bed with him, but she insists she needs to study longer. Ki is irritated and still does not understand why reading is so important to his wife. When Sang Ly states that she hopes it will bring change, Ki grows uncomfortable and admits that he fears such change. Even though they are poor, life in the dump is familiar, and he is comforted knowing that Sang Ly still needs him. Sang Ly reassures him that no matter what changes, she will always need him, and joins him in bed.

Ki's fear of change, particularly that Sang Ly will somehow outgrow her need of him, suggests that the familiarity of life in poverty becomes its own form of entrapment, and fear of doing something new or different may keep people in poverty longer than is necessary. This also suggests that Ki is insecure about his own position as a husband, at least to some degree.



Sang Ly spends more afternoons picking trash now, because it affords her more opportunities to study. When she finds bits of refuse with writing on them, she picks out the letters and recites their names and sounds. One afternoon, while she is sounding out the letters in a line of text, she realizes that she is able to understand that it spells *samnang*, the Cambodian word for "luck." In the thrill of reading her first word, Sang Ly collapses on the ground, weeping with joy. She then pockets the piece of paper and skips home. By the time Ki is home from picking, Sang Ly has decoded the entire piece of paper, a slogan of a local restaurant that reads, "Where everyday is lucky." After proudly showing Ki, she gives him a warm hug, and he hugs her back.

Sang Ly's playful approach to studying while she works represents a form of good humor, demonstrating that such humor can make even the filthiest work enjoyable and beneficial in its own right. The fact that Sang Ly reads before she even realizes she knows how suggests that she possesses untapped potential, waiting to be set loose. "Luck" being the first word that Sang Ly actively interprets recalls Grandfather's prophetic dream while suggesting that in life, one makes their own luck, since she could only read it as a result of her actions and hard work.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Soon, Sang Ly is reading simple books, enchanted by the way that individual words can unite and form a picture in her mind. Sopeap tells her that she will give her some more difficult books before she leaves for several days for some sort of appointment. When Sopeap returns, she will teach Sang Ly about grammar, and then they will be finished. However, Sang Ly does not want the lessons to end, and begs Sopeap to teach her about literature as well, even though she doesn't really know what literature is.

Although Sang Ly's initial plan was simply to learn how to read, she has accomplished this goal within the first portion of the story, suggesting that there is far more to literacy than simply decoding letters into words. Now that she has begun to stir her mind, Sang Ly wants to learn more, suggesting that once one begins to take steps towards change, the process becomes its own reward.



Sopeap answers that she is unwell and doesn't have the energy to teach literature anymore. When Sang Ly remarks that she clearly has the energy to drink, Sopeap tells her that the alcohol isn't meant to soothe her body, but something deeper.

Literature requires both an active mind and an active heart, and Sopeap's heart simply isn't in it anymore. She also feels that Sang Ly is not ready, since literature poses too many deep questions from which the limitations of the dump have protected her. The next reading lesson will be the last one, but if Sang Ly improves by then and finds and brings an example of literature, they can discuss it, and Sopeap will decide if she is ready. Sopeap tells Sang Ly that Stung Meanchey is "awash in literature," and Sang Ly will recognize it when she finds it.

Sang Ly is eager to tell Ki about the assignment so he can help her find a piece of literature, but when she sees him, Ki is somber. He recounts how the gang that beat him up was walking around the dump that afternoon, but all the villagers were so frightened that no one stood up to them. Ki does not want to be a coward and wants the power to protect his family, but Sang Ly is afraid that he will do something stupid and get himself killed. In the following days, Ki finds some trashy magazines, but Sang Ly does not think that these count as literature.

Sang Ly and Ki bring Nisay to a local "cupping" practitioner, another traditional remedy that involves creating suction to attempt to draw the toxins out of one's body, to see if he can cure his diarrhea. As they are returning home, they meet Lucky Fat, who says that he just left a book at their hut that he found for Sang Ly. Additionally, he saw Sopeap there, who said that they would resume their lessons on Friday. Sang Ly worries that she is running out of time to find literature.

CHAPTER NINE

Sang Ly is stressed, since she still can't find any literature even though Sopeap told her it was everywhere. Lucky Fat's book turned out to be just a mechanic's instruction manual. The night before her lesson, Ki tells Sang Ly that her cousin Narin stopped by while she was picking trash and said that she might have some literature. Sang Ly is so excited that she ventures out into the darkening evening to go see her cousin, careful to stay on the path and not wander into the mountains of garbage themselves, which are dangerous at night.

Sopeap's admission that the alcohol is a way to placate her own psychological turmoil again provides an early hint that she is running from some part of her life, trying to silence some part of herself. Although Sopeap implies that anything can be literature, since even the dump is "awash" in it, she also hints at the fact that literature can ask more questions than it answers, and has the power to open the world to an individual, though this undoubtedly makes life harder and more complex.



While Sang Ly's newfound literacy and desire to learn empower her, Ki once again grapples with his own powerlessness and the fear that he and the other villagers have of the gangs. Again, this feeling of powerlessness is important to developing the notion of a hero, and more importantly, what a hero is not; namely, a person who merely possesses power over others.



Sang Ly and Ki's various attempts to cure Nisay temper the idea of hope and action. Although they constantly try new remedies, Nisay's sickness remains, demonstrating that action alone cannot solve every problem in life. Again, Nisay's illness on top of their already-difficult poverty demonstrates how compounding issues can keep people down and disadvantaged.



Sopeap's rather vague admonition that literature is everywhere is typical of her teaching style in general, in which she often gives broad and rather vague insights, leaving Sang Ly to do the work of interpreting it. The noted danger of the dump at night reinforces that it is a harsh and difficult environment in which to live, and particularly in which to raise a family.



When Sang Ly meets with Narin, Narin shares a memorized poem that her mother taught her, about animals and nature. Sang Ly feels that this must be literature, and determines to return in the morning with pencil and paper to copy down the poem. Narin asks if she can have a copy as well.

The next day, after explaining grammar—which Sang Ly discovers is simple and intuitive—Sopeap and Sang Ly discuss the poem she brought. Sang Ly explains the origin of the poem, where Narin grew up, and how Narin’s mother taught the poem to her. In response, Sopeap tells Sang Ly that poetry is even older than written history, originating from a time when people passed down their history and knowledge orally. Sopeap notes the structure and pattern of the poem, and Sang Ly feels ashamed for not having recognized them herself.

Sopeap asks Sang Ly if the poem is literature or not, and Sang Ly tries to point out the structure and pattern that Sopeap showed her. However, the teacher grows angry and irritated at this, saying that if Sang Ly doesn’t know why the poem matters to her personally, there is no point in studying. Both women are frustrated, but Sang Ly finally admits that she simply does not know what literature is. Sopeap, in turn, responds that Sang Ly does know, she just does not realize it yet. Turning to leave, Sopeap announces that despite her reservations, she will continue to teach Sang Ly about literature using some of the lessons she taught at university. However, they will need to move through them quickly, because Sopeap will soon be leaving Stung Meanchey.

CHAPTER TEN

While Sang Ly is kneeling on the floor of their hut, sweeping ashes from the stove, Lucky Fat bursts in with a panicked look in his eye. He frantically tells Sang Ly that his friend is bleeding, and that Sang Ly must come with him right away. Lucky Fat is insistent that she come alone. Taking Nisay with her, Sang Ly follows Lucky Fat back to his hut and finds a young girl inside, 11 or 12 years old. Her pants around her pelvis and thighs are soaked with blood.

Narin’s desire to have a copy of a poem she knows by heart suggests that there is power and value in the physical aspect of writing. Even if Narin herself cannot read it, written words that her mother once spoke seem precious because they have the power to connect Narin with her loved one despite their separation.



Now that Sang Ly is beyond simply learning how to read, the story takes many opportunities to teach the reader about literature alongside Sang Ly. In this regard, Sang Ly’s position as the narrator is apt, since the reader can come to the same realizations that she does and join her on her own personal journey of discovery.



Sopeap implies that the poem is indeed literature, and that poetry is a form of literature that predates writing itself. This furthers the argument that anything can be literature, even if it is not written down. This viewpoint defies the conventional concept of literature as written words contained in books or volumes, usually written by wealthy or sophisticated people long ago. Sopeap’s statement that she will soon leave Stung Meanchey is a veiled reference to her illness and explicitly foreshadows her death.



Lucky Fat demonstrates that he is not only good-humored, but also heroic. As an orphan, his life is difficult to begin with, without taking on the problems of other people as well. This scene introduces Maly as a character, whose brief presence in the story will help to develop Sang Ly’s understanding of heroism and self-sacrifice.



At first, Sang Ly thinks she must have been assaulted, but the girl, Maly, says that nobody touched her. Lucky Fat explains that while they were picking trash, she suddenly started bleeding and was so scared that he brought her back to his hut. Sang Ly is relieved, realizing that Maly is not injured—she is menstruating for the first time. Being an orphan like Lucky Fat, Maly does not have a mother to explain the process to her. Sang Ly sends Lucky Fat away so she and Maly can speak, and finding some rags and water, helps Maly to clean herself.

However, Maly is still nervous, and mentions that she does not want to be “sent away.” Sang Ly does not understand, and when she suggests that Maly tell her older brother about this, Lucky Fat charges back into the hut protesting. He exclaims that Maly’s brother is in a gang, and now that Maly is a woman, they will sell her to a brothel to be a prostitute. The narration states, “The notion is unthinkable to anyone civilized—but in Cambodia, it happens all the time.” Often when poor families cannot support all their children, daughters will be “sold” for a couple hundred dollars to a man who claims the girl will be employed as a waitress, but the man will instead sell the girl to a brothel where she will be kept as a slave. Lucky Fat tearfully insists that they have to protect Maly.

Gangs have been in Stung Meanchey for as long as Sang Ly can remember. Most often, gang members are children or teenagers with no one to look after them, and used to stick mostly to minor harassment and mischief. Lately, however, they have become more aggressive, but the general Cambodian way is to mind one’s own business—after the Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge’s genocide slaughtered 1 million people in the 1970s, an entire generation of Cambodian survivors have learned to keep their heads down.

However, Ki feels this refusal to engage with the problem is cowardly, though Sang Ly fears his sudden urge to fight back is motivated in part by revenge. When she tells him about Maly, he agrees they should help, but is not sure how yet, since not even the police are trustworthy. He thinks they will have to keep her hidden until they can arrange a way for her to escape Stung Meanchey.

Sang Ly’s immediate assumption that Maly was sexually assaulted makes sense in light of Lucky Fat’s panic, and further portrays the dump as a dangerous and violent environment. Maly’s fear at an ordinary stage in a young woman’s life underscores the difficulty of living independently as an orphan, without the guidance of a mother or father.



While child prostitution is inarguably a horrific practice, it is also a sad reality all over the world, present even in the United States—though less publicly than some countries, such as Cambodia. In light of this, it is worth pointing out that the author, an American man, exhibits his potential bias by implying that Cambodians are somehow uncivilized, since they live in a country where child prostitution regularly occurs. While this does not seem intentional, it is worth recognizing the author’s own implicit bias and limited perspective.



The Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975 is one of the most horrific occurrences of the 20th century, though less well-known than other such events. The narrative implies that those who survived only did so by keeping entirely to themselves and likely passed that habit down to their children as well. In light of this, the villagers’ reluctance to fight back against the gangs seems less like cowardice and more like long-practiced survival.



Despite Ki’s knife and preoccupation with power, it is clear that he means well, as demonstrated by his desire to protect Maly. His distrust of the police yet again underscores the difficulty of living in such an impoverished environment, where one cannot even count on public protection.



During her next lesson with Sopeap, Sang Ly practices reading aloud while Sopeap writes notes from books. Although she previously said they must proceed quickly, she seems to be taking her time, which frustrates Sang Ly. However, Sopeap warns that it won't do to rush into things before Sang Ly is ready. She gives Sang Ly one of Aesop's fables to read, explaining that the story comes from Greece. In the short story, trained monkeys dance skillfully upon a stage, dressed and masked like courtiers. However, as soon as someone throws a handful of nuts onto the stage, the monkeys forget their training and scabble for the food like mere animals.

Sang Ly thinks it is an amusing story, but Sopeap is frustrated that her student does not understand its purpose. Sopeap explains that the first lesson of literature is that each story has life lessons woven into them, even short ones such as this. Stories are layered with meaning. However, Sang Ly still does not understand the fable's moral. When she presses Sopeap to explain what the story means to her, Sopeap whispers that it reminds her that sometimes, "I pretend to be something I'm not." Sang Ly wishes she could understand what Sopeap keeps so tightly hidden about herself, but instead of offering any clues, Sopeap apologizes for teaching the material poorly, and says they will try again tomorrow, after she has spent more time preparing.

Rumor spreads around Stung Meanchey that a young girl has been kidnapped. During the night, Lucky Fat and Maly think they hear someone sneaking around his hut, so they bring Maly to Sang Ly and Ki's hut to spend the night there instead. After Ki leaves in the morning, Sopeap arrives, but Sang Ly is so tired from staying awake with Maly that she asks if they can skip today. Sang Ly tries to keep sleeping Maly hidden from view when Sopeap is present. As Sopeap leaves, she remarks that people can only "go to the places they have first visited in their minds," and surmises that perhaps that is how literature will help Sang Ly, so that someday she might be able to leave the dump. However, as she walks away, all Sang Ly can think of is what they will do about Maly.

The fact that Sang Ly has the new opportunity to hear the thoughts of an ancient Greek man illustrates the power of literature to connect people across eras, geographical distances, and social classes. Whereas Sang Ly's entire life was previously contained within the dump at Stung Meanchey, the world is beginning to open up to her through literature, even if she does not yet know what to do with it.



Once again, the reader is given the same lessons as Sang Ly and encouraged to search for deeper meanings within a story that can apply to daily life. For instance, Aesop's monkey fable suggests that although one may wear a façade, with the right stimulus or temptation, that façade falls away and they show who they truly are. Sopeap obviously understands this, and her admission that she herself has a façade once again suggests that her demeanor and appearance do not give an accurate impression of her true character or value.



Sang Ly and Ki's commitment to keeping Maly safe demonstrates that they are noble, compassionate, and even heroic characters, intent on doing right. Meanwhile, Sopeap's statement that one can only go where they have first imagined once again suggests that literature has the power to open the world up to the reader, letting them not only visualize a life that is different than their own, but perhaps even to achieve it, since by visualizing a better future, they may also be able to hope for and achieve that outcome.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

After three days, Sopeap has not returned, and Sang Ly's nerves are at their limit from worrying about Maly. She decides to enlist the help of her mother Lena, who is proud of her for doing what's right and promises to think up a solution. When Sopeap finally arrives with another lesson, she seems healthier and friendlier than ever before, even though she is still demanding. This time, she explains to Sang Ly that "literature should be loved." Regardless of the life lessons it contains, none of it will make a difference if the reader does not remember to enjoy what they are reading.

When Ki arrives home, having spent the afternoon trying to convince the other trash-pickers to stand up to the gangs, Sang Ly expects him to be bitter or frustrated, but he is instead quite pleased with himself. He has convinced two other men, as well as Lena, to take a stand. Sang Ly still fears Ki will get himself killed, but he insists that there is a "time and place for defending yourself [...] with a **knife**." Despite their disagreement, they are still amiable.

Sang Ly enjoys learning, but also frets about leaving Nisay with Teva Mao so often; she feels as if she is not being enough of a mother. However, Sopeap assures her that education is always a good thing. It will benefit Nisay as well, since it helps one to understand their "place in the world" and is a "handbook for the art of being human." However, literature will also raise many new questions about one's purpose and path through life, since "every story [...] is about us, in one way or another." Sopeap hands Sang Ly a Cambodian story about a girl in a difficult situation, and Sang Ly feels certain that this gesture means Sopeap knows about Maly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sang Ly finds Lena causing mischief at the dump and watching two neighbors bicker with amusement. Sang Ly and Lena briefly mention Sang Ly's father, whom she never met because he mysteriously died outside the hut at the same moment that Sang Ly was born. She has never even seen a picture of him. Lena tells Sang Ly that she has arranged a way to get Maly to safety, away from Stung Meanchey, but they will need Sopeap's help.

Like Sang Ly, Lena proves herself to be virtuous and brave as well in her concern for Maly's safety and desire to protect her. Sopeap's efforts towards sobriety and improved health suggests that her hard demeanor and lifestyle are slowly beginning to change. Just Sopeap has had a positive impact on Sang Ly's life, it appears that Sang Ly's companionship has benefitted Sopeap in return. Sopeap's sudden expression that "literature should be loved" suggests not only that her affection for literature is returning, but that it plays an important role in her positive change.



Although Ki's interest in his knife as a symbol of power carries a dark tone, the desire that underlies it to protect himself and his family is treated as a reasonable and just, even though Sang Ly fears what the consequences will be. Sang Ly and Ki's good standing in spite of their disagreement suggest that they have a strong and resilient relationship.



Sopeap's insistence that literature is a benefit to anyone regardless of their role or position in the world—since it will help them understand where they fit—suggests another aspect of the power of literature is its universality. Whether one is rich or poor, he or she is still trying to survive in the world as a human being, and thus literature can serve as a "handbook" for humanity holds value to every person, regardless of their circumstances. It bears no prejudice or favoritism.



Once again, Lena demonstrates that using humor—even at others' expense—can help lighten one's spirits and relieve some of the drudgery and toil of life in the dump. Lena's inclusion of Sopeap in her scheme to rescue Maly suggests that Lena recognizes the gradual character change in Sopeap as well.



Sang Ly sends word to Sopeap that she needs to speak to her. Sopeap arrives and reveals that she has known about Maly since she spied her sleeping in Sang Ly's hut. Sang Ly explains that they have arranged for a family to adopt Maly, but they need money for transportation and to cover the new family's expenses. When Sang Ly asks if she cannot pay rent this month but use the money for Maly instead, Sopeap refuses. Instead, Sopeap gives Sang Ly the money out of her own pocket, and realizing that they cannot meet today since Sang Ly will be seeing Maly off, announces that she is going to go drink.

Sopeap's response to Sang Ly's request is interesting, because she upholds the value of personal responsibility by refusing to let rent slide even for a legitimate reason, while also demonstrating her own generosity and virtue by offering her own money to help save Maly. However, this show of virtue is tempered by Sopeap's subsequent drinking, suggesting that although she is becoming kinder once again, her own personal journey is far from over.



That evening, Lucky Fat and Sang Ly say goodbye to Maly. Sang Ly gives Maly the Cambodian book that Sopeap gave her days before, and promises her that someday she'll learn how to read it. As Lena takes Maly away to safety, Sang Ly knows that this is the best option, but still feels as if she has lost a daughter.

Sang Ly's gift of the book and reassurance that Maly will learn to read is a promise of a brighter future. Although Sang Ly's relationship with Maly seems underdeveloped, the fact that Sang Ly feels a motherly affection toward Maly suggests that the young girl came to mean a great deal to her.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

During their lessons, Sang Ly reads some Cambodian literature, but mostly translated stories from around the world, since Sopeap was not only a professor but also formerly studied in America. Today Sopeap announces that they will start an abridged version of *Moby-Dick*, in which Captain Ahab represents evil and the whale represents good, though neither are pure. Sang Ly feels overwhelmed by everything having double meanings, but Sopeap insists that "in literature, everything means something."

Especially for Sang Ly, who has lived her entire life in Cambodia, the fact that Sopeap studied abroad further reinforces that she is far from the simple drunk old woman Sang Ly had once believed her to be, again suggesting that first impressions are rarely accurate, since they don't account for the whole of a person's life. "Everything means something" is once again a lesson both for Sang Ly and the reader.



Ahab's desire for revenge reminds Sang Ly of Ki's desire for revenge, which worries her, since Ahab dies with his crew at the end of the story. However, when Sang Ly asks Sopeap how one should confront evil, Sopeap answers, "Fight ignorance with words. Fight evil with your **knife**. Tell you husband Ki that he is right." Sang Ly recognizes real fear in Sopeap's eyes when she speaks of evil.

Captain Ahab forms an explicit parallel to Ki in his understandable desire for revenge, since the gangs beat Ki and the whale bit off Ahab's leg. This vengeance has the potential to spiral into a destructive force and bring ruin to everyone around them. Sopeap's obvious fear suggests that she has firsthand experience with such evil.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sang Ly finds an instructional pamphlet called *Sy Mao's Advice for Growing Rice*. Someone has handwritten "and children" alongside the pamphlet's title. Sang Ly is delighted as to how two simple words can change the instruction's meaning from agricultural advice to child-rearing wisdom, and she shares it with Lena, who also marvels at it. When Sang Ly shows Sopeap her discovery, Sopeap tells her that words are both more valuable than gold and powerful enough to start and end wars, but one should be careful with them since they can alternately pull one up or hold them down.

That evening, Sang Ly tells Ki that Sopeap spoke about him during their lesson that day. Ki is unhappy, assuming it was somehow critical, but Sang Ly assures him that she affirmed his desire to fight back against the gangs. However, Sang Ly makes Ki promise not to "be Captain Ahab," since Ahab perishes for the sake of his revenge.

The agricultural pamphlet's transformation into child-rearing wisdom with the simple addition of two words to the title yet again suggests that, through the power of words and metaphors, nearly anything can become literature, so long as it conveys some type of wisdom, lesson, or meaningful idea. Sopeap's warning that words can help or harm foreshadows the source of her own guilt, which stems in part from her failure to speak at a critical moment.



Sang Ly's ability to see the risks of Ki's desire for revenge through Captain Ahab, and to warn him against it, again demonstrates the power of literature to convey lessons that universally apply to people's everyday lives and struggles.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Although most of Sopeap's books do not contain pictures, she gives Sang Ly a Cambodian book with an illustrated cover called *Sarann*, and explains that it comes from a particular group of stories. Sopeap proceeds to read the entire story.

In *Sarann*, many centuries before, the titular Sarann is the only child of a royal Cambodian family. Sarann and her family are happy, but right after she turns 14, a fever sweeps through the land, killing her mother and leaving her father frail and weak-minded. Her father marries a widow (meaning Sarann has a new stepmother and stepsister) before passing away himself shortly after. Sarann's stepmother is obsessed with becoming beautiful and resents Sarann's natural beauty, so she gives her the dirtiest and most difficult chores to do.

Years pass. A sorcerer tells the stepmother about a magic flower in the dangerous jungle that will bring one's beauty to the surface and make them radiant. Her stepmother orders Sarann to find it or she will burn Sarann's treasured silken dress that her mother gave her, reasoning that either Sarann will be killed or she will return with the flower, which is an optimal solution either way. Sarann ventures into the dark jungle, her skin becoming mottled and torn by thorns. Finally, she finds the magic flowers, which she fastens into a wreath and wears on her head so her hands will be free to make her way back to civilization.

The story about Sarann functions mainly to demonstrate that some stories transcend cultures and eras, and that hope is a value shared by all people.



Sarann is the Cambodian version of the Western Cinderella story. Sarann's natural beauty parallels her inherent virtue, while the stepmother's need to be perceived as beautiful not only suggests that she is not, but also that any image of virtue she may project is similarly false, which becomes obvious when she treats Sarann so poorly.



Sarann's stepmother's absolute disregard for her safety or wellbeing are evidenced by her intentionally sending Sarann into danger for a selfish motivation. Sarann's beauty being torn and mottled by the jungle parallels Sopeap's kindness and virtue that is battered and eventually hidden altogether by the pain and hardships of her life, most of which have yet to be revealed.



Sarann meets a handsome young man in the forest who helps her find her way back, but when she reaches her stepmother's house, she discovers that the cruel woman already burned the silk dress. Sarann is so distressed that she runs back to the jungle where she meets the Goddess of Mercy, who tells her that although her last gift from her mother is gone, she still has the memories of her mother in her heart. Sarann awakes, realizing that she fell asleep at the jungle's edge, and discovers that she is magically dressed in an even more beautiful silk dress. Hearing activity nearby, Sarann follows the sounds until she happens upon an ongoing festival, where she discovers that the handsome young man she met is indeed a prince—the king's son.

The prince introduces Sarann to the king, but as she is speaking with them, her stepmother sneaks up behind her and steals the magical flower wreath, placing it upon her own head instead. However, the flowers draw out the true essence of a person, but not necessarily their beauty as the sorcerer had said, and the stepmother turns into a leech and falls into the river. Sarann meanwhile becomes the new princess, ending the story.

Sang Ly states that she enjoyed the story, though cannot specifically point out why, other than that it made her feel happy. Sopeap explains that this same character has existed in many different forms in different cultures over thousands of years: Ye Xian in China, Cinderella in America, Tattercoats in England, and so on. In Sopeap's mind, the story is so universal because at their core, all human beings are drawn to hope.

Sopeap calls this the "problem" of hope, the mystery as to where it comes from and why it seems so universal amongst human beings. She recounts that many of her fellow professors tried to understand the nature of hope, but could never determine why it is so inherent to humanity. This seems to be the case with other motifs in stories as well—they so adequately describe a basic human emotion that they appear all over the world and in all sorts of cultures. However, Sopeap is also careful not to hope too much, reminding Sang Ly that although everybody wants to believe they are Sarann, life does not always work out so nicely. But dwelling on this too much can lead to cynicism, of which Sopeap implies she herself is guilty.

By burning Sarann's treasured silk dress, the stepmother further reveals her cruelty, her utter lack of inner character or virtue, and thus, her innate lack of beauty. The Goddess of Mercy parallels the fairy godmother in the Cinderella version of the story, while Sarann's waking up garbed in a beautiful silk dress seems to parallel the magical dress, carriage, and slippers that the fairy godmother summons in the North American version. Sarann's sudden beauty, even though her skin was previously torn by the dress, suggests that her true virtue and value is shining through.



The stepmother turning into a leech reveals that regardless of how other people may have perceived her, she possessed no virtue and no beauty, once again suggesting that the physical appearance or general demeanor of a person is often deceiving.



This same story's existence across many different cultures, countries, and even time periods suggest that hope, which Sopeap argues is its central theme, is an inherent aspect of humanity, arising in every culture, time, and place. Again, this also suggests that literature has the power to share feelings and ideas from all over the world.



The notion that no matter how much hope is studied, it is never truly understood, further demonstrates the value and utility of literature. If hope cannot be pinned down and examined in a lab, but best expressed through stories, literature would seem to be the primary vessel for hope. However, Sopeap's own admission of occasional hopelessness and cynicism once again suggests that she has experienced events which have challenged and threatened her belief in hope, leading her to her current state.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Seasonal rain forms intermittent ponds amidst the dump's rubbish, in which reeds take root and large snails grow. Since money is still tight, rather than spend what little they have on pork from the market, Sang Ly decides to go gather snails to eat. Teva Mao's daughters tag along. As Sang Ly is wading through the knee-high water, she notices a leech attached to her ankle, which sends her into a panic—she has a phobia of leeches. She high-steps out of the water and begs the girls to pull it off, but they are unable to, and Sang Ly scrapes it off with her sandal. She tells Ki about the episode when she gets home, but cannot find the bite mark from the leech or even remember which leg it was on. Ki finds this hilarious, though Sang Ly is less enthused.

The next time Sopeap is giving Sang Ly a lesson, on heroism, Sang Ly remarks that her neighbor thought that Stung Meanchey is the last place one would find a hero. Sopeap answers that she simply seeks the wrong kind of hero; a true hero is not one who is powerful or wealthy, but one who sacrifices for the good of others. Sang Ly asks if that makes Sopeap a hero, then, since she gives her time to teach Sang Ly. But this makes Sopeap angry, and she states bitterly, "I'm nobody's hero."

Sopeap continues to state that there are other important roles within a story: there is the shape-shifter, who may seem like a friend but ultimately betrays the hero, and then there is the trickster, who uses humor to "provide relief" as well as to point out absurd or unjust situations. Sang Ly observes that Lucky Fat did this when he joked that the scrap buyer never pays women or children as much as men, prompting the annoyed man to give Sang Ly a fair price that day. There is also the shadow, a character who is sometimes evil, but sometimes simply disagrees with the hero and sees itself as the hero instead.

Most importantly, teaches Sopeap, these roles are not always strictly set; some characters may play certain roles only for a time or switch between roles, which makes both life and literature far more exciting. Regardless, for each character, "the fiercest battles take place within," and sometimes a hero will emerge from "the most unexpected places."

Sang Ly's encounter with the leech parallels the stepmother's transformation into a leech in the Sarann story, foreshadowing that the cruelty and ugliness of the world may soon threaten to overtake Sang Ly's inherent goodness. This episode also humanizes Sang Ly a bit more, and demonstrate that even one so courageous as herself is subject to irrational, even foolish fears. Sang Ly's irrational fear is emphasized by the fact that Teva Mao's daughters find the episode hilarious and seem to have no fear whatsoever of the leech. When Sang Ly is unable to even find the bite mark that evening, the narrative suggests that the leech attack was not nearly so serious as she believed at the time.



Although Ki is preoccupied with having the power to defend himself and even take revenge on the gangs, Sopeap teaches both Sang Ly and the reader that the true mark of a hero, in literature and in real life, is one who makes sacrifices for others. Sopeap's insistence that she is "nobody's hero" suggests that she harbors a lot of self-contempt.



Sopeap's teaching about the classic roles in a story gives Sang Ly a lens through which she can find greater understanding of the people and events in her daily life, yet again demonstrating the power of literature to convey wisdom and help one make sense of the world around them. Lucky Fat's use of humor to point out injustice and help Sang Ly get a fair price for her labor demonstrates humor's utility in calling out inequitable situations.



The recognition that characters often change roles within the story both reflects Sopeap's own changing role—she begins as an antagonist and is now an ally and teacher—and foreshadows her ultimate transition to the role of the hero at the end of the story.



Teva Mao buys some bitter melon leaves from the market, since they are supposed to be good for easing digestion and reducing fever, and hopes they may help Nisay. Sang Ly is willing to try anything, so she boils them into a bitter tea and asks Ki to feed it to Nisay. The mixture is so unpleasant, however, that after one spoonful, Nisay refuses to drink anymore. Cleverly, Ki leaves and returns with juice from the sweet custard apple, which Nisay drinks eagerly, and alternates the sweet juice and the bitter juice until Nisay has drunk all of the bitter melon solution. However, the next morning the child still has diarrhea. Sang Ly wonders what good literature will be for Nisay, and cries for the whole morning until Sopeap arrives.

Although Teva Mao's neighborly gestures suggest that Sang Ly has good support, and although Ki's clever and gentle handling of Nisay suggests that he is a good father, Nisay's constant illness and inability to get well no matter how many remedies he gets creates a sense of hopelessness that overshadows even the loving support that Sang Ly's friends give her. While literature is certainly powerful, in light of such an immediate and pressing problem, words in books seem a small comfort at best.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sang Ly dreams that she emerges from her tent in the morning to discover Stung Meanchey covered in **snow**. She marvels but knows she still must work, so taking her trash-picking tool and a sack, she ventures out to the rubbish field. However, when she digs through the snow she discovers that there is no more trash or filth; the snow has purified Stung Meanchey. Looking up, Sang Ly can see her childhood home, Prey Veng, in the distance, even though she knows this is impossible since it is a long distance away. In the far-away village, a man stands with arms stretched towards her, who says, "You should have come sooner. Why didn't you come sooner?" He repeats his question three times, and Sang Ly wakes up.

The snow in Sang Ly's dream seems to symbolize hopeful redemption—just as rain will also symbolize redemption in the end of the story—since although Sang Ly still lives in the Stung Meanchey dump, the setting is seemingly transformed from filthy to pure and beautiful. It is significant that Sang Ly's dream of this mysterious man comes immediately after another remedy for Nisay has failed to cure him, implying that he may hold the key to healing the sick child.



The next day, Sang Ly asks Sopeap if she ever dreams, but Sopeap replies that she only ever has nightmares, which she keeps away with rice wine. However, she tells Sang Ly that many famous authors wrote stories based on their dreams, and the psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that dreams were incredibly important, and that one must "ponder" them to discover their true meaning.

Once again, Sopeap's admission that she drinks to keep away her nightmares alludes to her internal struggle to keep certain memories, events, or thoughts at bay, suggesting that her alcoholism is not the result of poor character, but inner pain.



That evening, Sang Ly is bathing Nisay when Ki arrives and tells her that the gangs beat up Lucky Fat, apparently because they found out he helped Maly escape. One of Lucky Fat's eyes is swollen shut, and the gangs smashed all his Buddha figurines, but he's alive. Sang Ly is furious and thinks of using Ki's **knife** herself, though she's usually a "pacifist." However, Ki tells her that since most of the villagers like Lucky Fat, now almost 30 men are ready to stand up to the gangs.

The danger that Lucky Fat faced—and thus, his heroism for facing it—are confirmed when the gang beats him up. However, the other villagers' goodwill towards Lucky Fat also demonstrates the manner in which being good-humored in spite of a dire environment can build connections and endear oneself to others.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

During the next lesson, Sopeap decides it's time they read a tragedy, and introduces Sang Ly to *Romeo and Juliet*. Later that afternoon, Sang Ly notices that none of the villagers are working near the trucks as they usually do, and a woman runs past her shouting that a crowd of people caught one of the thieves who beat up Lucky Fat. Sang Ly joins them, but seeing that the culprit is just a teenage boy whom the villagers beat to death, she is horrified. Looking closer, Sang Ly realizes that the dead child is Maly's older brother. Sang Ly vomits onto the ground.

Ki places his hand on Sang Ly's back; his other hand holds the **knife** uncertainly. He explains to her that while they were working, two men spotted the boy and chased him, and soon it was the whole group of villagers pursuing him. Ki joined the pursuit, but secretly hoped they wouldn't catch the boy. By the time he caught up to the first pursuers, they'd already killed the child. Sang Ly and Ki weep together as Sang Ly wonders why, in the good and evil conflict between Captain Ahab and the whale, the roles aren't more clearly defined and easy to understand. In spite of all the literary knowledge Sopeap gave her, words cannot bring meaning to the anguish they both feel.

The next morning, the boy's body is gone, but Sang Ly and Lucky Fat hold a small memorial service for him anyway, leaving small gifts as funerary offering on the site where he died. Lucky Fat suggests that Maly's brother can finally watch over her now in the next life, and Sang Ly agrees. Although she considers telling Sopeap that she is too distraught to learn about literature today, as she thinks about Captain Ahab, revenge, justice, and mercy, she decides that maybe literature is the perfect thing for the day.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sang Ly washes clothes in a bucket behind their hut—they wear Western clothing because they can get rejected garments from the nearby manufacturing factories for mere pennies. While washing the clothes, Sang Ly tries to explain to Ki about metaphors in literature, trying to angle the argument to convince him to help do laundry. However, Ki doesn't understand and the conversation turns to flirting until they have bargained Ki's help with laundry and bathing Nisay that afternoon in exchange for the couple having sex that evening. Sang Ly reflects to herself, "Metaphors in literature can be a very confusing thing."

Although the narrative does not describe or discuss anything about [Romeo and Juliet](#), Sang Ly and Sopeap's reading of it clearly foreshadows the Maly's brother's tragic death at the hands of the villagers. The fact that the criminal is only a young boy pointedly blurs any simple notions of good and evil, since although the culprit was ready to commit a heinous evil, he himself still seems a child, and thus innocent to some degree.



Ki's knife, held but unused, again symbolizes his sense of power, except that now he has no wish to use it. While Ki once held ideas about standing up to the gangs and bravely exerting his own power and thus heroism, the villagers exerting their power by beating the boy to death like an angry mob seems utterly unheroic. If anything, it is grotesque. This scene firmly argues that heroism and power are not necessarily linked, as Ki had once believed.



Lucky Fat's forgiveness and sadness for a boy who hurt him and sought to sell his own sister demonstrates his maturity in spite of his young age. The thought that perhaps Maly's brother will look after her now that he is in the next life suggests that the boy was not evil at his core, but only caught up with the wrong people and corrupted by his environment.



This scene serves to depict Ki and Sang Ly as both playful and affectionate in spite of their various hardships and poverty. Although it would be easy for either of them to grow disenchanted by their hardships, their good humor helps them to remain resilient and hopeful, demonstrating humor's ability to lift one's spirits and help them to endure difficult situations.



Sang Ly asks Sopeap if she will bring the children's book that Ki found, the one that meant so much to Sopeap. Sopeap says that it is "not a typical children's book" and she will only allow it if Nisay sits in Sang Ly's lap while she reads it. Sang Ly states that if that is the case, she wants Sopeap to be there as well, which Sopeap eventually relents to, and agrees to bring the book in the evening. True to her word, Sopeap brings the book, and Ki is eager for Sang Ly to begin. The book is titled *Love Forever* and describes a mother's love for her child. When Sang Ly finishes, she turns to thank Sopeap, but "Sopeap is gone."

The next morning, Sopeap visits to tell Sang Ly she is ill and asks to postpone the day's lesson. Sang Ly tries to return the book, but Sopeap tells her it is a gift to Nisay, and shares that a friend of hers wrote it during the years that Sopeap taught at the university. However, the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime invaded Phnom Penh before it could be published. The regime ransacked the university, burned all its books, and killed all who had written them. Sopeap assumed the books were all lost on that day, until she saw the one in Sang Ly's home. Sopeap lastly reveals that her friend, the author, was childless, but wrote the book about Sopeap and her son.

Later that evening, Sang Ly's cousin Narin visits the house to tell her that one of her friend's sisters works in the local hospital, and is currently treating Sopeap. Sopeap is ill with cancer, and it seems as if she will die very soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sopeap arrives to share a piece of Japanese literature with Sang Ly, but Sang Ly cannot contain herself and yells at Sopeap for concealing her illness. Sopeap claims that she did not want to ruin Sang Ly's innocent joy in reading and literature, but admits that it may have been a selfish thing to do. She tells Sang Ly that an artery is constricting her heart, and although with more money and in a country with modern medical facilities she might live, she is dying. She found out the day that she almost evicted Sang Ly and Ki, which is part of what made her so angry. Sang Ly wants Sopeap to go home and rest, but Sopeap refuses and insists they will continue the lessons, adding, "I can't die yet. I'm just starting to like you."

Ki's eagerness to hear his wife read the story to Nisay suggests that his initial hesitation towards Sang Ly learning to read is falling away, especially when he can see the benefit a literature parent confers to Nisay. Meanwhile, Sopeap's disappearance while Sang Ly reads the story shows that the story is painful for her to hear, suggesting that it is more than simply a children's book to her.



Once again, Sopeap's generous gift of the book, which obviously means a great deal to her, defies her initial characterization and the perception many of the villagers have of her, suggesting both that she is continuing to change, and that one cannot accurately judge a person by their outward demeanor. Sopeap's revelation that she was once a mother furthers this suggestion, and hints at the pain she so often references as the cause of her drinking.



Sopeap's earlier statement that she planned to leave Stung Meanchey soon reveals itself as a metaphor for passing from one life to the next. Her impending death adds a sense of urgency to the story.



The knowledge that Sopeap had just learned she was dying on the day she threatened to evict Sang Ly and Ki changes the reader's perception of her behavior. Sopeap initially seemed like nothing more than a bitter, spiteful old woman, but understanding that she was reeling from the new diagnosis makes her seem rather like a scared individual who does not know how to appropriately handle her own pain and fear, leading her to take these difficult feelings out on others. This further reiterates that one's initial perception of another person is often not an accurate portrayal of their true character.



They continue with the lesson, though Sang Ly recognizes small signs of Sopeap's illness that didn't stick out to her before. She is still hurt and angry that her teacher did not tell her she was dying, but as she tells Ki about it the evening before, Ki exclaims that if Sopeap isn't angry about it, then neither should Sang Ly be. Sang Ly realizes it's selfish for her to be angry that their time together is limited. Bringing her mind back to the lesson, Sopeap promises to bring her favorite book tomorrow.

Lena suddenly arrives, screaming, with Nisay in her arms, and says that while she was watching Nisay, he suddenly slumped over and became unresponsive. Sang Ly, terrified, runs home hoping to find Ki, but discovers he is still working somewhere in the dump. She decides she will bring Nisay to the free clinic not far away, but in her hurry, she leaves all the money they have at home. Sang Ly runs to the street and flags a passing taxi driver, who takes her even though he knows she has no money. However, when they reach the clinic, its doors are chained shut; it's closed for the day. The driver brings her to a glass building and pulls Sang Ly out of the cab. She shrieks at him, thinking he is betraying her, until a nurse touches her arm and she realizes the man brought her to a children's hospital.

The nurse brings Sang Ly inside and takes Nisay from her. When an orderly takes her information and realizes she is from Stung Meanchey, the hospital staff already know she won't be able to pay, but they treat Nisay anyway. Sang Ly sits against the wall in the waiting room for hours. In the middle of the night Ki arrives, having ran to each hospital in the city trying to find his wife and son. Sang Ly marvels at what a good husband she has.

In the morning, a doctor eventually meets Sang Ly and Ki in the waiting room and tells them that Nisay was "severely dehydrated," but is okay now and they are being discharged. He also gives them pills for the Nisay's diarrhea, but Sang Ly knows they will only be effective for a short time. Together, the three of them make their way back to Stung Meanchey, arriving at noon, and Sang Ly quickly falls asleep.

Sang Ly again dreams that it is **snowing** in Stung Meanchey. She sees the same man from her home province in the dream, though this time she feels as if she knew him many years ago. She wakes in the late afternoon and sees that Ki has gone out to the dump to pick trash, and she hopes they will be able to afford more than just rice this evening—she has not eaten since early the day before. Nisay sleeps peacefully, as he always does while on medication.

Although Sang Ly previously provided the voice of reason to Ki's desire for revenge, Ki now acts as the voice of reason, moderating Sang Ly's anger and helping her to realize that it is, in a way, selfish. The give-and-take of their relationship demonstrates how two people can be of mutual benefit to each other, helping to point out each other's blind spots.



Once again, the contrast between Sang Ly's literature lessons and Nisay's present and immediate illness illustrates that for all the good literature can do and the problems it can help to solve, it can seem almost useless in the face of certain pressing issues. Sang Ly's initial belief that that the taxi driver is abandoning her before realizing he has brought her to the right hospital again nods to the fact that people and their intentions are often not as they first appear.



Although Ki never gets the chance to avenge himself on the gangs, nor ever has the need to fight and defend his family, his faithfulness and support of his wife and son are once again evident. The sacrifices he makes through time, effort, and energy make him seem a heroic figure, regardless of his lack of evident power.



Sang Ly's belief that the pills will only help Nisay for a short time is the result of her lived experiences, but even so demonstrate a lack of optimism, suggesting that constant failure and disappointments can make hope a difficult thing maintain.



The repetition of Sang Ly's dream about snow and the mysterious man confirms to her and the reader that it is a significant event, though it is unclear whether the dream is a message from her Grandfather or other ancestors, or merely her subconscious asserting itself. Within the narrative, what is most important is that the dream revitalizes Sang Ly's hope.



Sang Ly rises and begins stoking the fire in their cook stove, which draws her mind back to her home province, and she suddenly realizes from where she knows the man in her dreams. When she was a child, the man was a “witch doctor” in her home village—his name was Bunna Heng, but the villagers just called him “the Healer.” Though she fears she is too late, Sang Ly knows that the dream means she must go see this Healer as soon as possible, because he might be able to cure Nisay.

Sang Ly and Ki prepare to travel to Prey Veng together, hiding all their possessions and the **clock** beneath their floor. They only have enough money for the trip to Prey Veng, and are not sure how they will get home. Sang Ly has not seen Sopeap since before the hospital, and she is anxious to leave without seeing her again, but also anxious to wait any longer. As she and Ki are making their way towards the bus station, Lucky Fat runs up to them and announces that Sopeap is back, and she is coming to see them off. Ki continues onward with Nisay and their suitcases, leaving Sang Ly with Sopeap.

Noting that Sopeap looks exhausted, Sang Ly asks how she is feeling. With a wry smile, the old woman replies that her “artery feels a bit constricted,” adding that it’s her “new favorite reply.” However, Sopeap admits she is saddened that they won’t finish their literature lessons; there is so much more she wanted to teach Sang Ly, such as the “phoenix story.” Sang Ly answers that they’ll finish when she returns, but Sopeap seems doubtful, saying, “No matter how much we cling to hope, our stories seldom end as we expect.” Sopeap hands Sang Ly a leather-bound book of stories to read during the journey. Hesitantly, Sang Ly asks Sopeap what she thinks happens after a person dies. Sopeap does not know, admitting that for all the literature she’s read, she still does not know what to make of gods or heaven. They bid each other goodbye.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Phnom Penh’s streets are busy and crowded as Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay make their way to the bus station. They arrive early, and sit on the ground to eat a bit of rice. An old woman asks Sang Ly to help her find the right bus, and Sang Ly does, using her ability to read. As she sits, Sang Ly watches an old man with a stack of books digging through a garbage can, and she is struck by the clash of her own desires, both to read the books and to dig through the trash with him. Sang Ly thinks her grandfather gave her that thought.

Although Sang Ly is cynical towards the pill the doctor gave her, her sudden conviction that she must return to her home province to see the Healer demonstrates that she is still holding onto hope and willing to act on it, even when that hope seems unfounded and supported by nothing more than a dream.



Sang Ly and Ki preparing to travel in spite of not having enough money to return home further demonstrates their strong hope in Sang Ly’s dream and the Healer’s power. Once again, in sacrificing his time and all the money his family has to follow Sang Ly’s dreams, Ki is depicted as very heroic indeed, even without his knife or any substantive power, demonstrating that such power is not necessary to be a hero.



Sopeap’s wry comment suggests that she, too, is trying to maintain her good humor, even though she is dying, demonstrating that a sense of humor can go a long way in helping one cope, even with death. This is particularly important, since Sopeap’s admitted confusion about the afterlife suggests that she finds no comfort there. Even while Sang Ly is about to make an excursion based purely on the hope that the Healer can cure Nisay, Sopeap recognizes that hope can also betray, and that life does not always follow the path one hopes for, tempering the novel’s optimistic depiction of hope thus far.



Sang Ly’s newfound literacy not only benefits her, but also helps her to help others, such as the old woman, demonstrating that a person’s education can be of service to themselves as well as the people around them. At the same time, Sang Ly’s juxtaposed desire to read the beggar’s books and dig through the trash with him emphasize the conflicting aspects of her life as a trash-picker and a literate reader.



Sang Ly and Ki board the bus, which is filled with other passengers, most of whom are wealthier than them. A particularly ornery businessman in a suit complains about the lack of air conditioning. As she watches the other people, Sang Ly wonders about their personal stories, who they are, and what they feel. However, as the bus rolls onward, Nisay fusses loudly and begins to wail and the other passengers are clearly aggravated. As Sang Ly stands hiding the child in the aisle, trying to soothe him, Ki suggests that she read him a story to see if that will calm him.

Sang Ly opens the leather book and begins reading a short story called “Tiger Road,” about a man who goes on a vengeful hunt after his horse is killed by a tiger. After a time, Sang Ly looks up from reading aloud to realize that all the passengers in the bus are eagerly listening, and the businessman even offers her a bottle of water when he sees that her lips are dry. One of the passengers begs her to continue, and Sang Ly feels as if she is suddenly “surrounded by friends” rather than irritated strangers. Ki realizes that they are nearing their destination and may not finish the story, but one of the listening women pleads with Sang Ly to read quickly.

When the bus rolls to a stop with only a page left in the story, the businessman nobly offers to distract the driver for a few more minutes so Sang Ly can finish reading to everyone else. In the story, the hunter eventually dies in his pursuit, though he kills the tiger and its family. The other passengers thank Sang Ly as she steps off the bus, and as she passes the businessman, he presses a wad of money into her hand in gratitude for making the bus ride so enjoyable. As Sang Ly counts the money with Ki after the bus drives off, they realize they can now afford the journey home, with extra to spare.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Carrying Nisay, Sang Ly and Ki walk an hour from the road to the river, and then hire a boat to take them to her old village, where they find Uncle Keo and Auntie waiting for them. Sang Ly fills Auntie and Uncle Keo in on news of Stung Meanchey and Lena, but when she is about to tell them about Sopeap, she cannot bring herself to speak of her lessons. Uncle Keo tells Sang Ly that the Healer is away for a couple days, but in the meantime they can stay in his other house, where his mother-in-law lives, though she won't be happy to share her space. True to form, the old woman scowls at Ki and Sang Ly, though Sang Ly hopes she can soften the old woman with a story.

Sang Ly's realization that each person around her, even the unpleasant businessman, has their own life story suggests that her study of literature and stories about human beings is also developing her sense of empathy. Just as Sang Ly realizes there is far more to Sopeap than what appears, she also makes the same realization about other people as well, suggesting that by learning their stories, she may even learn new things about life in general.



Sang Ly's story draws the strangers in the bus together over simple enjoyment of an exciting tale, again demonstrating the power of literature to connect people from different backgrounds and social classes. The businessman's sudden generosity is a marked change from his previous irritation, suggesting that even one so ornery as him may be drawn in by a good piece of literature and led to forget his own minor personal discomforts.



Again, the businessman's repeated generosity, both in stalling the driver and giving Sang Ly money as thanks, demonstrates that a person's initial appearance and demeanor do not give an accurate reflection of their true character. Like Sopeap, at first the businessman seemed self-centered, demanding, and rude. But the simple gift of a story draws out his kindness, generosity, and nobility, revealing a rich—though initially hidden—character.



Sang Ly's hesitation in telling her aunt and uncle about Sopeap suggests that she herself is still working through that pain, reluctant to open that wound when they are away from Stung Meanchey. Like Sopeap, Uncle Keo's mother-in-law initially seems ornery and resentful of the sudden guests, though the development of other such characters in the story suggests that there is more to the old woman than just her spitefulness.



The next day, Ki finds work helping a local rice farmer plant his crops while Sang Ly takes care of Nisay. He was especially sick the night before, and Uncle Keo's mother-in-law is clearly displeased with the living arrangement. Sang Ly takes Nisay to the riverbank to watch the water buffalo for a while before making her way to the Healer's home. There, Sang Ly finds the Healer's wife, who tells her that the Healer will meet her back there in two days.

As Sang Ly returns, she smells smoke, and is horrified to find the mother-in-law cooking rice on her stove, using Sang Ly's leather storybook as fuel. Sang Ly, in a combination of rage and terror, snatches the book away, but many pages have already been torn out and burned. Uncle Keo apologizes for the old woman, explaining that she is old and did not realize that anyone in the village could even read. When Sang Ly, in tears, bitterly remarks that she should replace it, Uncle Keo answers that there are no books in the village.

The next morning, Auntie asks Sang Ly to accompany her down to the river while she does laundry, potentially just to keep her away from Keo's mother-in-law. Auntie remarks that she still talks to Lena by phone sometimes, and says that though she is proud of Sang Ly's reading, she is also worried that she will take a job outside of Stung Meanchey and leave her behind. Sang Ly implies that she'd rather live somewhere like this village, where it is more peaceful, but Auntie reminds her that there is poverty and ugliness here just the same as Stung Meanchey. Stung Meanchey, she says, is like a durian fruit—which, though it stinks, is Cambodia's tastiest and most nutritious fruit. Although Sang Ly disagrees, Auntie argues that perhaps the dump is where she belongs, and that even there one may find beauty in life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sang Ly and Auntie take Nisay to the Healer, who has now returned. Sang Ly expects the Healer to be intimidating, but he is only a simple man in black shorts and a T-shirt. He seems to remember her, though she cannot remember him. When Sang Ly explains Nisay's illness, the man says, "I'm sorry to hear. You should have come sooner." The Healer leads them into his treatment hut and begins crushing a piece of a black rock into a "gummy tar" which he loads into a used syringe. Nisay senses the oncoming pain and begins to squirm and cry, but Sang Ly holds him still as best she can. The Healer pokes the syringe into each of Nisay's limbs several times, and then gives the last of the black tar to Sang Ly to rub on the infant's tongue with her finger.

Prey Veng is a notably peaceful place, especially in contrast with Stung Meanchey over the past several weeks, which has been filled with tension, fear, and, violence surrounding Maly and the gangs. The contrast between the two is accentuated by the fact that, in Sang Ly's mind, Stung Meanchey is what makes Nisay sick.



In spite of Prey Veng's relative peace, the mother-in-law's belief that no one in the village can read, and the village's lack of books, suggest that it is plagued by the same illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities as Stung Meanchey. Though it may seem like a peaceful oasis, it struggles with many of the same problems as the dump.



Lena harbors the same fear that Ki previously did: that Sang Ly would somehow outgrow her own mother and leave her behind, alone in Stung Meanchey. Although Sang Ly does desire to live somewhere like Prey Veng, she seems to ignore the illiteracy of this place as well. Auntie's argument that although Stung Meanchey is filthy on the outside, its heart may be beautiful, parallels the thematic argument that although an individual may seem rough or filthy in appearance or demeanor, that external filthiness may be hiding a rich character and inner virtue.



The Healer's statement exactly matches the words Sang Ly heard in her dreams, which confirms that she was right to trust herself and act on her hope. The Healer's appearance in simple shorts and a t-shirt defies the conventional expectations of a "witch doctor," suggesting that he is a fairly ordinary man simply practicing a different form of treatment than the norms of Western medicine. The pain Nisay must experience to be healed metaphorically suggests that any process of self-betterment is inevitably painful, requiring both hard work and painful honesty.



Auntie takes Nisay outside to calm down while Sang Ly speaks with the Healer. She tries to pay him but he waves it away and assures her that Nisay is now healed. Sang Ly does not want to be skeptical, but she has been disappointed so many times before. However, the fact that she has come all this way based on a dream means that Sopeap must be right: hope is inherent to human beings.

The Healer remarks that Sang Ly looks quite like her father, and reveals that he was close friends with her father growing up. He was even there when her father died, though he knew little about healing and was unable to save him. The guilt the Healer felt at not saving Sang Ly's father pushed him to become a knowledgeable healer, though he distanced himself from Sang Ly's family in his remorse. When Sang Ly says that she has never seen a picture of him, the Healer gifts her an old photograph of himself and her father that he has. The Healer also remarks that Sang Ly's father would be proud of her. When Sang Ly replies that they live in a dump, he admonishes her, "It doesn't matter where you live, Sang Ly, it matters *how* you live." Sang Ly bows and leaves, praying to her father as she walks.

Taking the boat back to the village, Sang Ly and Ki say their final goodbyes to Auntie and Uncle Keo. Sang Ly spots Uncle Keo's mother-in-law and tells Ki that she has one more thing to do before they depart. Taking the charred remains of the leather storybook from her suitcase—no stories remain completely intact—Sang Ly gifts the book to the old woman, whose face breaks out in a huge grin as she excitedly and eagerly prepares her cooking stove.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As Sang Ly, Ki, and Nisay ride the bus back to Stung Meanchey, Sang Ly watches the people walking the streets. Sang Ly is reflecting that each individual person has their own story to tell when she spots Maly walking with an older woman, both chatting animatedly and laughing. Sang Ly is ecstatic, and begins to pull down the window to yell to her when she suddenly realizes that Maly seems happy now, and might not know about her brother's death or the anxiety Lucky Fat has when he wonders if she is okay. She decides to leave Maly be, and simply be happy to have seen her happy and safe from a distance. When Ki awakes, Sang Ly is crying.

Sang Ly and Ki not only risk time, but also the little money they have, to visit the Healer. This demonstrates that their hope is strong and compelling enough for them to take great risks. However, Sang Ly's struggle with cynicism also reveals that constant disappointment has made hope seem unreliable.



The Healer's admonition that the place one lives is far less important than the manner in which one lives their life furthers Auntie's argument, suggesting to Sang Ly that even though she is educated, she should not turn her back on who she is or where she came from. This is a valuable lesson for anyone who rises from humble beginnings. The fact that Sang Ly prays to her father, rather than her grandfather as usual, suggests that her brief conversation with the Healer and the picture he gave her makes her feel more connected to her father, as if she knows him just a little bit better now.



Although Sang Ly never wins Keo's mother-in-law over with a story, a simple gift eases the tension between them and turns the mother-in-law's demeanor from a scowl to a grin, yet again suggesting that her prickly behavior does not define her character, merely how she happened to be feeling in that moment.



Once again, Sang Ly's newfound recognition that every person on the street and in the city has their own story to tell demonstrates the increased empathy that literature can develop in a reader. Stories clearly have the power to teach an individual to see that every person has their own desires, hopes, and fears, all equally valuable. Sang Ly's brief sighting of Maly confirms that Maly is safe and secure, living a happy life outside of Stung Meanchey—once again, Sang Ly's hopeful instincts have proven to be reliable.



Sang Ly and Ki arrive in Stung Meanchey late in the night, but there is enough moonlight for them to navigate to their hut. However, when they reach their hut, they discover that everything they'd once owned has been stolen. There is nothing to do about it in the middle of the night, so they decide to sleep in Lena's house instead. When Sang Ly wakes the next morning, she finds that Nisay is already awake, playing on the floor and grabbing her hair. He is healthy and hungry, and Sang Ly decides that although they have nothing, if Nisay is cured, "we have everything." Sang Ly weeps with gratitude. Lena announces that the villagers have already begun collecting tools and items to replace what was stolen, and Sang Ly decides in that moment that Stung Meanchey truly is home.

Over the course of the day, neighbors arrive with extra food, sleeping mats, cookware and pleasantries to help rebuild Sang Ly's home. "Love abounds, even at Stung Meanchey." Sang Ly hopes most of all to see Sopeap again, but when she checks the old woman's house, no one is there. However, Lucky Fat arrives in the afternoon with Sopeap's bag, containing only a notebook, and tells her that Sopeap came three days before and asked Lucky Fat to deliver the bag. The boy says that Sopeap did not look healthy, and told him she was leaving.

Inside the notebook is a short letter from Sopeap, explaining that she is sorry to not have been able to see Sang Ly again, and that she is thankful for her friendship. In lieu of actual lessons, Sopeap wrote down lessons in the notebook and left some books at her house for Sang Ly, noting where the key to her locked door is hidden. While Ki works and Lena looks after Nisay, Sang Ly thumbs through the notebook full of handwritten essays by Sopeap Sin. The final story catches her eye, since it is titled "The Epilogue," which Sang Ly learned from Sopeap is when the author closes their narration and explains the main character's final fate. Although she hesitates, since Sopeap was adamant that she never skip to the end of a story, Sang Ly cannot help herself and begins reading.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sang Ly reads Sopeap's essay, "The Epilogue": By 1975, Cambodia has experienced so much civil war and "factional fighting" that when the Khmer Rouge army marched into Phnom Penh and declared victory, nearly everyone is happy. However, Sopeap's husband, Samnang, a government employee, is nervous about the regime change. Although most people seem content with the change, the city is also tense, reeling from a recent string of rocket attacks. Sopeap, her husband, their infant son, and her housekeeper (whose name is Sopeap Sin) confine themselves to their modern three-story house for several days straight.

Sang Ly's realization that if Nisay is healed, they have all that they need, suggests that material possessions are insignificant compared to the love and happiness of one's family. Moreover, the loss of so many simple material items gives Sang Ly and Ki's neighbors the opportunity to show their love and support, confirming to Sang Ly that Stung Meanchey is the right place for her to be, even though she could potentially find a better job and living situation elsewhere. This ultimately suggests that relationships matter far more than material wealth or success.



Again, Sang Ly and Ki's hut being robbed causes temporary discomfort but allows them to see the true value of Stung Meanchey's community, regardless of how filthy it is on its surface. This suggests, like the Healer said, that how one lives—and who they live with—is far more important than where one lives. Love and relationships mean more than material wealth.



The fact that Sopeap went through all of the energy and effort to finish Sang Ly's education, even if she will not be there to see it, suggests that Sopeap has grown to truly and deeply care for Sang Ly and eagerly desires for her education to continue. That the ornery and drunken Rent Collector could become a passionate friend defies all expectations, again suggesting that one cannot judge a person by their appearance or demeanor.



"The Epilogue" finally reveals all of Sopeap's backstory and the reason for her guilt and pain, which drives her alcoholic despair, thus fully establishing the argument that one's hardened demeanor may be the result of trauma and pain. Sopeap's life before her loss, before living in Stung Meanchey, could not possibly be more different than it is now, indicating that a tremendous, traumatic change occurred to bring her to such a different state of existence.



Sopeap is restless, however, and decides to venture the short distance through the city to Samnang's sister's house to fetch some eggs. Samnang asks the housekeeper to accompany her, even though Sopeap thinks little of her and plans to fire her soon. Though the housekeeper is nervous, they make their way to the sister's house, retrieve a basketful of eggs, and venture home. On the way, the housekeeper stumbles and cracks a few of the eggs, and Sopeap harshly berates her and takes the basket herself.

As they pass through the gate to their yard, the two women are met by four Khmer Rouge soldiers, who point rifles at them and escort them inside, where they find Samnang also held hostage by a soldier who seems to be hardly more than a boy. Like all Khmer Rouge soldiers, they are intent on killing anyone with an education or high post in the government.

With a glance at Samnang, Sopeap can tell he is formulating a plan, but she cannot imagine what. Looking directly at the housekeeper, Samnang calls her Soriyan, Sopeap's true name, and the housekeeper, the original Sopeap Sin, understands immediately. She strides towards him with dignity and class, as if she were a sophisticated professor and not a mere housekeeper. Samnang's true wife watches, but does not speak. Samnang pulls the housekeeper close as if she was his wife, and a soldier shoots them both dead.

The gunshots wake Soriyan's sleeping child, who cries until a soldier walks back to his room and shoots him as well. Soriyan screams and begs the soldiers to kill her too, but their mission is only to kill the educated, not peasants, farmers, or housekeepers. Two days later, Soriyan—permanently adopting the housekeeper's name, Sopeap Sin—is marched out of the city with hundreds of thousands of refugees to be put to work farming in a rural camp. This is the Khmer Rouge's aim: to make Cambodia as rural and simple as it was before Western culture had its effects. Any person suspected of having even the most remote connection to Western culture is killed on the spot, and Sopeap expects to die every single day. By the time the Vietnamese army overthrows the Khmer Rouge, the regime has butchered over 1 million people.

Soriyan, now Sopeap Sin, eventually makes her way back to Phnom Penh, but never picks up her life as it was before. In 1995, she moves to Stung Meanchey, which seems a suitable place for her to try to forget who she once was and how much she lost, at least until she meets Sang Ly. Sopeap is haunted for all those years by the fact that she did not speak up, identify herself as the true Soriyan, and save the life of the housekeeper (the true Sopeap Sin).

Sopeap obviously has little regard for her housekeeper or her capabilities, and disregards her nervousness about the dangerous walk through the city, a callous attitude which likely contributes to the guilt that Sopeap feels in the present. The heroic act the housekeeper is about to make once again suggests that one's outward appearance may hide an inner strength, even courage.



The Khmer Rouge soldier being little more than a boy recalls Maly's brother, who tried to commit heinous evil though he himself was quite young. Once again, this complicates simplistic notions of good and evil, since the reader is drawn to wonder whether such a young child could fully comprehend the consequences of his actions.



The housekeeper's willingness to sacrifice herself to save Soriyan again defies the assumptions Soriyan made about her, suggesting both that heroes can come from unexpected places and that one cannot judge a person based on their initial impressions. Although Soriyan does not ask her housekeeper to make this sacrifice, neither does she stop her, which explains the guilt she still feels so many years later.



Although only days ago Sopeap had an upper class, sophisticated lifestyle, her life becomes a living hell, demonstrating how quickly and thoroughly the Khmer Rouge regime's chaos overtook Cambodia. In light of such intense trauma, the fact that Sopeap endured at all seems miraculous, and her constant need to drink and forget all that she has seen seems far more understandable. This strongly argues that one's poor behavior or wretched demeanor are not necessarily the marks of poor character, but perhaps are the effects of severe trauma.



Sopeap is haunted not only by her own cowardice, but by the fact that a person so fine and heroic as her housekeeper died in her place. Sopeap wrongly assumed that her housekeeper was worthless, just as Stung Meanchey's villagers largely assumed that Sopeap herself was worthless and vile, demonstrating that the same misjudgment is committed by all manner of people.



Sopeap writes that the final lesson for Sang Ly to learn is, “Be careful in your choices. Consequences, good or bad, will always follow. I offer you my final goodbye, Sang Ly.” But as Sang Ly closes the notebook, sobbing, she screams that Sopeap was wrong, that she took the wrong lesson from her life, and resolves that she must find her teacher before she dies.

Sang Ly’s total disagreement with Sopeap’s final lesson suggests that, though one can certainly learn lessons about life from literature, guilt, pain, and cynicism may lead them to take the wrong lessons and ideas instead. This misunderstanding can have tragic and destructive results, such as Sopeap’s desire to die alone.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sopeap is still not in her home. Sang Ly spends the rest of the evening reading Sopeap’s essays, mostly poems and stories about her own life. Some are tragic, some are humorous, but all teach lessons, thus making them “perfect literature.” None of them, however, provide any hint as to where Sopeap may have gone. When Narin visits, Sang Ly remembers her contact who works at the hospital, and with Ki’s blessing, she rushes there with Narin. However, Narin’s contact has not seen Sopeap for weeks, revealing that Sopeap stopped treatment because she felt it clouded her mind and “interrupted things she needed to do.” When Sang Ly asks if the treatment would’ve stopped the cancer, the woman says that it only would’ve if Sopeap had left the country, but she refused to because she needed to finish her work.

Sang Ly’s recognition of Sopeap’s essays about her life as “perfect literature” again argues that anything at all can be literature. Sopeap’s willingness to remain in Cambodia and die so that she could finish Sang Ly’s education constitutes a great self-sacrifice, making Sopeap a definitive hero, even if she and others do not recognize it. Just as the housekeeper gave Sopeap another chance to live her life, Sopeap’s sacrifice also gives life—through literature and education—to Sang Ly, thus redeeming her character in the reader’s eyes.



The next morning, Ki and Sang Ly go to Sopeap’s house just outside Stung Meanchey, which unlike the renters’ huts has four solid walls and a door that locks. Sang Ly reflects that, “like her home, Sopeap allowed very few people inside.” After banging on the door and confirming that the teacher is not home, Sang Ly finds the key where Sopeap said it would be and opens the door. She is shocked to discover that the house is filled with hundreds of books, along with a modern cooking stove, dishes, and a desk and chair. There are books from every country imaginable, even ones that Sang Ly does not recognize. Ki remarks that if all these books were left to Sang Ly, they are going to need a bigger house.

The locked door to Sopeap’s house is a brief but explicit symbol of her own heart, since she allowed no one to truly see what was in there until she wrote “The Epilogue” for Sang Ly. Now that she has revealed her heart to Sang Ly, Sang Ly is also given the key to the locked door of her house. Sopeap’s remarkable wealth of books suggests that, not only did she maintain her fondness for literature over the years, but she was also far wealthier—and therefore more modest—than anyone in Stung Meanchey would have guessed.



On the desk, Sang Ly finds an open notebook with a list of Stung Meanchey’s renters, several of whom live near Sopeap’s home. Working from the list, Sang Ly and Ki ask the nearest ones if they know where the woman is, but none have seen her for several days. However, Ki realizes that the only people who might know of her whereabouts would be the landowners themselves, since they employ her. If they track down the landowners, they may find Sopeap.

Ki’s contribution to Sang Ly’s search for Sopeap suggests that the old teacher has begun to mean something to him as well, at the very least because she is so important to his wife. This marks a strong growth in Ki’s character as well, since he was initially distrustful and dismissive of Sopeap.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sang Ly and Ki go to the Ministry of Land and Records building in Phnom Penh, feeling self-conscious about their frayed and dirty clothing as they walk across its clean marble floors. After speaking with several officials who look as if they might throw them out, they find a records clerk. They tell him they are searching for the person who owns Stung Meanchey, and gives him Sopeap's list of renters. The clerk steps out, speaks to an associate, and returns with an identical list, saying that the "sick woman" was here several times to do business. However, the clerk tells Sang Ly that she was not the Rent Collector as Sang Ly believed; Sopeap herself is the landowner.

The clerk says that Sopeap just transferred ownership of all the properties to someone named Chenda Lai Sin, although it will be two weeks before the transfer is official. However, one of the properties was not transferred to her, but to another couple. Looking at the man's map, Sang Ly and Ki Lim recognize that it is Sopeap's house, and she has gifted it to the two of them.

Sang Ly takes a taxi by herself to see the new landowner—she feels bad about spending the fare until Ki points out that they'll no longer need to pay rent—at their home near the edge of the city. When she arrives at a gated house, a woman steps out to meet her. Sang Ly introduces herself and states that she is looking for the family of a former housekeeper who worked for a family during the start of the revolution. The woman steps forward and waves her in eagerly, announcing that the housekeeper, the original Sopeap Sin, is her sister, but she has not seen or heard from her since the bloody revolution.

The woman introduces herself as Rathana, and tells Sang Ly how their father pushed Sopeap (the housekeeper) to take a job in the city, since their family was very poor. Heartbroken by her disappearance, Sopeap's father and mother spent years looking for Sopeap once the Khmer Rouge was ousted, but never found any information beyond learning that the house Sopeap worked in was burned to the ground and reduced to rubble. Like thousands of families in those days, Sopeap's parents never found an answer as to whether or not their daughter was still alive. However, packages of money—no note or identification, just a stack of bills—began arriving each month. Sopeap's father thought that perhaps they were from his lost daughter, but Rathana doubted it, and after following the courier several times, never saw sign of her sister.

The revelation that Sopeap is not the Rent Collector, but the landowner herself, yet again confirms that one cannot judge a person based on their appearance, since even one so outwardly shabby as Sopeap turns out to be secretly wealthy and influential. Sopeap's status as a wealthy person who appears impoverished thus parallels her initially foul and ornery demeanor, which masks a kind, tender, and generous spirit.



Sopeap's gift to Sang Ly and Ki not only erases their rent payment, but also offers a sense of security that they have most likely never known before—both physical, since the home has a locking door, and psychological, because they will never be homeless.



This meeting reveals that Sang Ly's Sopeap (the teacher) gave not only the gift of literacy to Sang Ly, but also a huge gift to her heroic housekeeper's entire family. Although in Sopeap's mind this may have simply been an act of restitution, an attempt to atone for her housekeeper's death, to Sang Ly and the family, it seems but another great sacrifice. This generosity again suggests that Sopeap, though she may wallow in self-contempt, truly is a hero.



Sang Ly discovers yet another sacrifice that Sopeap (the teacher) made to honor the housekeeper's sacrifice, by anonymously sending money to her family each month. The fact that the payments were anonymous and remained so for decades suggests that Sopeap is a humble and unsung hero, since she sought no recognition for the sacrifices she made over such a long period of time. Again, such generosity completely defies the initial characterization of Sopeap the Rent Collector, thus arguing that first impressions rarely tell the whole truth about a person, and a dour appearance may conceal a wonderful character.



Sang Ly tells Rathana that her sister Sopeap (the housekeeper) died in the revolution, but she has a story to tell about her that she feels their whole family should hear. Rathana promises she will gather the whole family if Sang Ly can return the next morning, and they will hear the story then. As Sang Ly is about to leave, an old woman appears who Sang Ly realizes is Sopeap the housekeeper's mother, Grandma Sin. Before she leaves, Sang Ly asks Rathana if she ever met the teacher who employed Sopeap. Rathana never did, assuming she was killed with the other intellectuals, but Sang Ly reveals she is alive, and Sang Ly needs to find her as soon as possible.

Sopeap taught San Ly that stories are both important and powerful, able to inspire, inform, and teach. Accordingly, Sang Ly treats the housekeeper's story as something of great value that should be told properly, honored, and revered. Sang Ly's retelling of the housekeeper's noble and heroic story to her own family (which is implied, but not depicted) begins her storytelling "career" and foreshadows the the retelling she will give of the Rent Collector's life in the book's final chapter.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

On her way home, Sang Ly checks several other hospitals in the city to see if they know of Sopeap, but none do. She and Ki stop in at Sopeap's house once more to see if there are any other clues, but they find none aside from a book with a fiery bird on its cover—the phoenix story. As she cooks rice that evening, Sang Ly reads through several more of Sopeap's essays from her notebook, searching for some kind of clue, when she finds a story that seems to be significant.

Although they've never read the phoenix story together, Sopeap specifically stated that it was her favorite, indicating that it will obviously play an important role in the last chapters, though it is not useful in determining where Sopeap is at present. Once again, however, Sopeap's personal essays provide a window into her carefully-locked heart.



"The Old Woman and the Elephant" by Sopeap Sin: When the old woman arrives at the Khmer Rouge camp, she is already tired, and imagines she will die any moment, since death is all around her. The soldiers are sure to remind her at every opportunity that she is irrelevant, just one more piece of the mass of humanity, utterly disposable. Education, they say, is selfish, as is commerce or anything beyond the working man's labor. Life becomes a nonsensical nightmare, beatings come at random, for any reason or no reason at all. After three years and four months, the old woman decides to kill herself.

The Khmer Rouge's belief that education is a selfish endeavor suggests that even if they had achieved their rural, collectivist utopia, it could not have gone anywhere. Without education to broaden its people's horizons or guide their thinking, the Khmer Rouge effectively stifled their own movement by denying it any possibility to grow or develop. In such a nonsensical situation, the old woman does not want to live because life seems hopeless.



One morning, she walks into the jungle to let the wilderness kill her by any means it sees fit, rather than let a soldier kill her. A rustling noise emanates from a copse of trees, and the old woman closes her eyes, assuming death is coming for her. It doesn't. After waiting some time, the woman grows curious enough to venture into the trees herself, where she discovers an elephant lying on its side, bleeding from three bullet holes aimed at its heart. Although the woman knows wounded elephants are dangerous, death by an elephant suits her aims, so she approaches it. The elephant, though still alive, glances at her briefly and seems unbothered, so the old woman lies down against the creature's massive head.

The elephant—not the old woman—represents Sopeap. The three bullet holes, leading to her heart, represent the three deaths she has spent the last several decades grieving: her husband, her heroic housekeeper, and her son. The old woman thus seems to represent Sang Ly, who asked Sopeap to teach her how to read even though Sopeap nearly evicted her and her family from their home, even though Sopeap, like a wounded elephant, was ornery to the point of seeming dangerous.



Before long, their breathing synchronizes together. The old woman traces the elephant's features with her hands and she finds herself speaking to it, expressing her regret that she can't ease its suffering in some way. The woman remembers learning that like people, elephants prefer to die in the company of their loved ones, and she finds it sad that this creature lies here alone, shot and abandoned by soldiers. As they lie quietly together, the old woman confesses that she came to this place to die as well. The elephant stirs and shudders as its body begins to shut down.

The old woman tells the elephant she is sorry that the creature is dying alone, but as she says it, she realizes the elephant is not alone after all. She is there with the creature, "when comfort and friendship are most needed." At this, the elephant smiles and exhales its last breath, then dies. The woman sits with the creature's body for an hour, and thanks it for its presence, since it allowed the woman to feel needed by someone else for the first time in years. She decides that she will not die today, nor will she tell anyone of the elephant. When she arrives in camp, the old woman tells the soldiers she was just sick and relieving her illness in the jungle, and she returns to her labor for the "benefit of the new society."

As Sang Ly finishes the story, Ki and Lucky Fat wonder aloud if the story is true and if Sopeap was the old woman. However, Sang Ly points out that it can't be, since Sopeap would only have been in her 30s when the story was set. After a moment's reflection, Sang Ly figures out the puzzle: Sopeap is not the old woman, but the elephant, and just as the elephant was hidden nearly in plain sight if only one thought to look, Sang Ly knows where Sopeap must be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ki goes with Sang Ly to take a taxi, but he is still confused at how Sang Ly means to find Sopeap. Sang Ly cryptically says that Sopeap went to her real home—since the dump never truly became home for her—and she thinks she might know who can help her find it. With a car that Rathana supplied, Sang Ly, Ki, and the housekeeper's family (Grandma Sin, Rathana, and several others) drive to the wealthy gated district in Phnom Penh where Sopeap once lived. Grandma Sin points out the house where her daughter worked as a housekeeper. When a guard approaches them, Sang Ly lies and says that the homeowner is expecting them and they are there "to see the old woman."

The elephant's dying is an obvious parallel to Sopeap's looming death, and the old woman's synchronized breathing with it seems to reflect that Sang Ly and Sopeap found themselves drawn together and connected through their mutual love of literature. The old woman's death, should she allow it to happen, would not represent Sang Ly's literal death, but her loss of hope in Stung Meanchey.



Sopeap's depiction of the old woman providing comfort and companionship in the elephant's last moments reflects how, though Sang Ly did not realize it, she too offered the first companionship and love Sopeap received in decades. To some degree, this eased Sopeap's fear and pain of facing her looming mortality, since at least she did not have to face it entirely alone—even if she struggled to let Sang Ly see her fear and pain. The old woman's return to the camp seems to be a message to Sang Ly to keep hoping and working for the "benefit" of the world around her.



As Sang Ly astutely realizes, the story about the elephant and the old woman are a metaphor, a veiled way for Sopeap to share her pain and gratitude towards Sang Ly. For someone as closed-off as Sopeap is, it seems likely that alluding to her feelings was the best way for her to be honest about them.



Once again, Sang Ly's boldness demonstrates the strength and tenacity of her hope, since she has no way of knowing whether her hunch about Sopeap's location is actually right. Her choice to take action rather than question her instincts reflects Sopeap's admonition in the start of the story that taking action is the most important step in resurrecting hope and keeping it alive.



The guard is confused and hesitant, but calls the homeowner, who tells him to let the car into the driveway. The carload of people emerges from the vehicle and meet a well-dressed man at the front door, who announces himself as the homeowner, Mr. Rangsey. After confirming that Sang Ly is there to see the old woman, the man reveals that Sopeap approached him weeks ago, insisting that she needed to die in this particular house. The man refused until Sopeap explained she was a teacher, and since the man's father was also a teacher killed by the Khmer Rouge, he finally relented. Sopeap, he says, is on the rooftop garden, though she is very ill.

Sang Ly climbs several sets of stairs and finds Sopeap lying in a bad on a half-covered balcony amidst the rooftop garden. Sang Ly sits beside her, and Sopeap opens her eyes and quietly whispers that Sang Ly just won't let her be. Sang Ly answers that Sopeap was too wrong to be left alone, and insists she will explain, but first she must meet some people.

Grandma Sin steps forward and clasps the teacher's hands; Sopeap already recognizes her, and taps her her chest above her heart, whispering, "Three holes." Grandma Sin tells Sopeap that she knows her daughter's death was not her fault. When Grandma Sin has made her peace, Rathana and her husband introduce themselves, and thank Sopeap for her kindness, explaining that the packages of money she sent paid for good educations and lifted their family from poverty, and thus they have come to honor their benefactor. Two more families follow suit.

The families, having said their goodbyes, leave Sang Ly and Sopeap in peace. As Sang Ly sits with her teacher, the old woman's heavy breathing makes her think of the dying elephant, and **rain** begins to fall "like elephant tears." Sang Ly and Mr. Rangsey start to move the bed, but Sopeap insists she wants to be left in the rain. Sang Ly sees that she is dying. To ease her mind, Sang Ly pulls the phoenix story from her bag, opens it, and begins to read, and as she does Sopeap visibly relaxes. The story tells of a bird born in the Garden of Paradise, who every hundred years burns itself up, leaving a red egg in the ashes from which a new phoenix will be born.

Sopeap breathes her last breath. Sang Ly places the book upon her chest and sits with Sopeap's body, holding her hand in the **rain** for perhaps an hour, "pondering the wonder and sacredness of the day." She pulls a blanket across the body and leaves, finding Ki asleep in a chair waiting for her, and silently reflecting that her husband is a hero. As Ki wakes, he tells Sang Ly that Mr. Rangsey said they could stay the night, but instead they opt to walk home to Sopeap's house, through Sopeap's "renewing, restoring, astonishing, redeeming rain."

Mr. Rangsey is overcome by the mutual connection he feels with Sopeap, since the story of her experience under the Khmer Rouge closely resembles his own father's story. This once again demonstrates the power of literature or stories to connect strangers of different backgrounds, contexts, and social classes. Sopeap, it seems, desires to resolve her own story by dying in the same house in which her family died.



In this moment, Sang Ly and Sopeap's relationship comes full circle. Although Sopeap was once the teacher explaining lessons of life and literature to Sang Ly, now Sang Ly has a final lesson to teach Sopeap.



Sopeap's sacrifice not only provided extra money for the housekeeper's family, but seems to have single-handedly lifted them out of poverty by allowing them to receive quality educations and move into the professional sphere. This again firmly establishes Sopeap as having been a hero throughout the entire story, even though did not see it herself. This suggests that often, truly self-sacrificial heroes may not realize their own heroism.



Like the snow in Stung Meanchey symbolized future redemption and healing, the rain falling on Sopeap's deathbed symbolizes redemption as well, as it redeems Sopeap's own view of herself in her final moments. The phoenix story speaks of rebirth, and seems to reflect the manner in which, although Sopeap is dying, her spirit will live on through Sang Ly and the powerful gift of literacy Sopeap gave her, which Sang Ly will in turn pass onto her family and the other villagers.



As Sang Ly recognizes, Ki's willingness to support and assist her in searching for and caring for Sang Ly in her final days—even though he did not have that same connection to the old woman—implies a sacrifice of his own time and energy. This self-sacrifice makes him a heroic figure as well, even though he never had his chance to fight back against the gangs or use his knife.



CHAPTER THIRTY

In Stung Meanchey, all the villagers gather to hear Sang Ly tell a story. She begins by saying that although this story is a fable, like any literature, it also contains truth: Years ago, the Sky god, Vadavamukha looks down on Stung Meanchey with pity, because the villagers there “had lost their way.” Vadavamukha decides that he will send his daughter, Soriyan, to lead them and give them hope in spite of their filthy world. However, the sky god’s wife, Queen Devy, knew that Soriyan’s radiance would be unbearable for the villagers; they would not be able to look at her. Soriyan thus decided to clothe herself in garbage as a disguise so that she could lead the people as one of them.

But when Soriyan descended from the heavens, she struck her head on ground and forgot who she was, and Stung Meanchey’s filth turned her foul. Wisely, the sky god knew that in time, she would remember who she was and why she was there, and her hard experiences would develop a sense of empathy within her. But by the time Soriyan remembered who she was, she was so old she only had the time to write down stories to convey her wisdom, and to teach a few people to make more stories to guide Stung Meanchey’s people. Sang Ly ends the story by saying that if the villagers look carefully for good stories in their own midst, the people will “discover hope.”

In certain moments, even long after Sopeap died, Sang Ly still feels the way she did that night, after Sopeap passed away and she walked through Phnom Penh in the **rain** with Ki. Despite waking up in a stinking dump, in those moments the world feels clean and purified, like snow, and filled with love. Sang Ly realizes that Grandfather was right so many days ago, when Sopeap first saw the book that Ki found in the trash: “it was indeed a very lucky day.”

By telling a fable about Sopeap Sin rather than recounting the literal story of her life, Sang Ly mythologizes Sopeap and highlights the meaning and life lessons that can be gleaned from her story. This use of literature to communicate the truth of Sopeap’s character and virtue suggests that sometimes the most powerful and accurate way to convey a person’s true value may be through a story that expresses the essence of who they are, rather than a literal retelling of specific events.



Sang Ly’s story suggests that, between the poverty of Stung Meanchey and Sopeap’s own anguished alcoholism, her teacher simply lost her way for several years, becoming the foul Rent Collector rather than the beacon of hope she intended to be. The narrative further suggests that, although Sopeap only had the time to teach and give hope to Sang Ly herself, she will carry on that work and lead Stung Meanchey in telling stories, spreading literacy, and finding hope.



Sang Ly’s time with Sopeap transformed her life and helped her to see that hope and heroes can be found in any environment, regardless of poverty. Sang Ly’s memory of Sopeap’s “redeeming rain” suggests that Sopeap’s teaching redeemed the world around Sang Ly by teaching her to see the value and beauty in it.





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