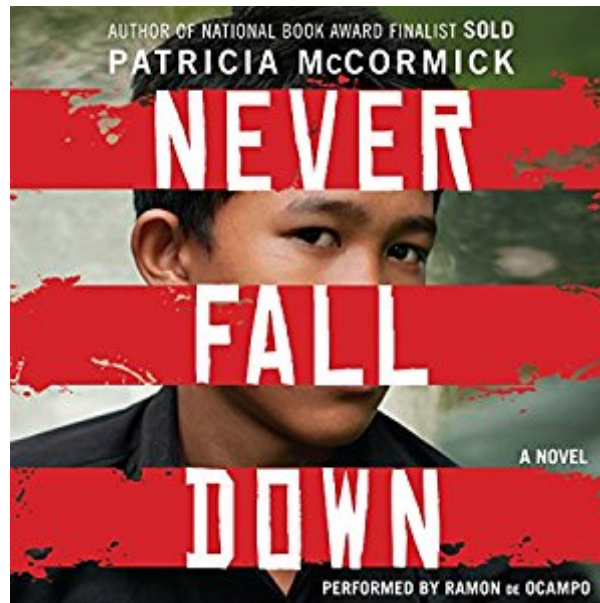




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Never Fall Down: A Boy Soldier's Story Of Survival



Synopsis

When soldiers arrive at his hometown in Cambodia, Arn is just a kid, dancing to rock 'n' roll, hustling for spare change, and selling ice cream with his brother. But after the soldiers march the entire population into the countryside, his life is changed forever. Arn is separated from his family and assigned to a labor camp. Working in the rice paddies under a blazing sun, he sees the other children, weak from hunger, malaria, or sheer exhaustion, dying before his eyes. He sees prisoners marched to a nearby mango grove, never to return. And he learns to be invisible to the sadistic Khmer Rouge, who can give or take away life on a whim. One day, the soldiers ask if any of the kids can play an instrument. Arn's never played a note in his life, but he volunteers. In order to survive, he must quickly master the strange revolutionary songs the soldiers demand - and steal food to keep the other kids alive. This decision will save his life, but it will pull him into the very center of what we know today as the Killing Fields. And just as the country is about to be liberated from the Khmer Rouge, Arn is handed a gun and forced to become a soldier. He lives by the simple credo: Over and over I tell myself one thing: never fall down. Based on the true story of Arn Chorn-Pond, this is an achingly raw and powerful novel about a child of war who becomes a man of peace, from National Book Award finalist Patricia McCormick.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As was true with her National Book Award finalist, *SOLD*, Patricia McCormick uses her fiction writing skills and her journalistic writing ability to share a child victim's harrowing tale. In this case it

is Arn Chorn-Pond, survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. *NEVER FALL DOWN*, named for one of the first things the captured boy learned to survive, travels the full arc of his experience, from the last days of normalcy before the Khmer Rouge takeover through the years of captivity, forced labor, and eventual conscription as a Khmer Rouge "soldier" when the Vietnamese invaded. And as was the case with *Sold*, this is a young adult book with some adult themes, in this case, violence, death, murder, and other atrocities. At times the descriptions get quite graphic. Adding to the effect is McCormick's decision to tell it as Arn himself would after he has learned but not mastered all the nuances of English. The contrast of this young, naive voice in broken English and the brutality it witnesses is stark, adding to the effect. Example: "We walk three day. One long line of kid, all in black, one black snake with five hundred eye. Very tire, my leg heavy like boulder, my mind think only of the next step, then one more step, just walking, no thinking, no caring. Some kid die on the way. They die walking. Some kid cry for their parent or say they tire, they hungry. They get shot or maybe stab with the bayonet. Now we don't even look. We only walk." In its way, *Don't Fall Down* reminded me of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, where we start with a healthy, happy boy, and end with a shadow, physically and mentally. It would make a perfect companion read, in fact. It is short, easy to read, and wise in its straightforward style of narration. McCormick lets the horror speak for itself. And, as was the case with the young Wiesel in 1943 Hungary, Arn faces choiceless choices in his bid to survive, to someday reunite with his family. He uses considerable guile around adults and learns how to make himself valuable through his musical ability. Still, Death is at his elbow most every page of the book, and the motives of various Khmer Rouge soldiers are always suspect, lending the book a sustained sense of horror and suspense. As you might expect, happy endings are hard to come by for people who go through such trauma. Arn is no exception. Author McCormick spent countless hours interviewing not only Chorn-Pond but surviving family members, his American adoptive family members, and even former members of the Khmer Rouge he interacted with. Many of these people now live in a northern enclave of Cambodia, and McCormick and Chorn-Pond flew together to meet the most important one for what must have been a memorable reunion and interview to make this book as accurate as possible. "I asked Arn difficult, probing questions about his actions," McCormick writes in the Author's Note, " -- the heroic and the horrific. I verified, as much as possible, the truth of his story. Then I wrote his story as a novel. Like all survivors, Arn can recall certain experiences in chilling detail; others he can tell only in vague generalities... So I added to his recollections with my own research -- and my own imagination -- to fill in the missing pieces. The truth, I believe, is right there between the lines." It's a sobering truth, too -- one that once again reminds us there are no depths to which man is incapable of sinking.

As a senior citizen who spent most of my years in education, I have always been amazed at the resiliency of young people. Although not facing obstacles such as Arn Chorn-Pond faced, I have seen young folks face extreme poverty, dysfunctional family life, even life-threatening diseases and yet, through it all, keep moving forward with a spirit you wish you could 'catch in a bottle and save'. I think these young people have been able to find a certain "spark" within themselves. I believe that spark is made up of three essential parts: one part faith that there is something greater ahead, one part hope that despite all the obstacles they can reach it, and one part courage that allows them to keep on keeping on when it would be so easy to quit. One of the great things about a book such as this is that it encourages each of us to look deep within ourselves for that same "spark" to get us through our daily mundane problems. Patricia McCormick does a wonderful job of keeping that "spark" evident throughout the pages of this novel which are filled with so many horrific examples of man's inhumanity to man. In the spirit of Eli Wiesel and others, Arn Chorn-Pond is not only a voice of conscience for all of us but a real, genuine hero. You will not be disappointed in the quality of this book's writing or its message and, if you are really lucky, you will also become more aware that the same "spark" lies within each of us.

Many who work in the education field will be familiar with the issues of ethnicity and class as they relate to teaching English writing. In this book, the author writes that every time she tried to impose the rules of grammar and syntax on Chorn's story, his voice was lost. The book is published in "broken" English. Only people who spend a lot of time talking with people of "limited" English will know the unique descriptive and emotive power of these accents, word choices, and the simple "less is more" aspect of English as a second or third language. As an Asian-American, it was wonderful to read a book written in the voices of my first generation family. It is a voice we don't hear enough. This book will show kids that learning to read and write is about communicating things that are important, and ebonics, accents, etc. do not need to hold them back, but, in the end, will make their writing and their stories more powerful. This is an empowering book for anyone of immigrant descent, highly recommended for English teachers who work with diverse student bodies and especially for those whose students may not be exposed to such diversity. "A people without history is like a tree without roots." Asian-American kids need to know their history, and at the end of the day, the American bombs in Cambodia make this everyone's history. It must be respected and understood. And in an era of post-9/11 anti-immigrant prejudice, it doesn't hurt for people to have a little insight into why people may come to this country.

I now understand how it is that barbarians are able to "recruit" child soldiers. Or at least I know how the Khmer Rouge did it; and it is a horrific thing - truly ghastly. Don't read this book for pleasure; read it if, like me, you really have no idea what the Cambodian mass slaughter was about. Having said that, I do wonder what horrors the original Khmer Rouge had themselves endured to make them as depraved as they were. We learn from the book how the later ones were affected. The author explains that they were all afraid of each other. But "afraid" is a milk-sop word for perpetual terror and misery on top of starvation.

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