



LUCKY CHILD

Luong Ung

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Teachers' Notes prepared by Dr Pam MacIntyre

Loung Ung lost her mother and father and two sisters during the terrifying regime of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a story told in her first book *First They Killed My Father*. *Lucky Child* continues the story of the remaining members of the family, focussing on Loung, and her sister, Chou. This remarkable story is one not often told. While ten-year-old Loung travelled to America with an older brother and his wife, her best friend and sister, twelve-year-old Chou remained in Cambodia with two remaining brothers, in a small village, learning the skills of survival, and becoming a dutiful 'daughter' to the aunt and uncle who took her in. Her schooling is interrupted and then abandoned. The contrast between the lives of the two sisters could not be greater. Because of embargoes on contact with Cambodia by the US, the sisters lost contact for five years. Eventually, fifteen years later they meet again. Loung and Chou's stories are told in alternating chapters across the span of those fifteen years, from 1980 to 1995. It is an affecting, poignant and powerful story of familial love and inspiring resilience, told with restraint dignity and humour.

Before Reading/Context Setting/Activating repertoire

- To be able to appreciate and understand the terrors that haunt Loung's dreams, and which motivate her decisions and construction of herself in America, as well as the circumstances of Chou, students need some background information about Cambodia's history, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s.
- Brief but shocking and evocative information is presented in the preface, and if *First They Killed My Father* has not been read, then sections could be chosen to fill in the students' background knowledge. Additionally, the list of references at the conclusion of the book could be used for research. Expanding one's factual repertoire is one of the pleasures of reading, and activating that knowledge would enhance this reading experience for students.

Biography and Narrative

- As well as being a rich resource for expanding students' knowledge of world events and their personal impact, *Lucky Child* is a rich resource for appreciation of the construction of narratives and biographies. For instance, Loung outlines the difficulties of writing about a life in which she was not present, that is Chou's as well as translating the languages. She acknowledges that it involves interpretation of events, coloured by memory.
- It is valuable to look at the sources Loung used – and what they reveal about different cultures, and how powerful the written record can be. However, she also values the oral tradition and it is the documents of everyday life that are important in telling these life narratives (pxiv).

Story

On many levels this book is all about story.

- For instance, on pages 96-97 story is all Chou has to offer badly burnt Kung, but nevertheless it is soothing and calming
- Television narratives have significance for Loung, such as on page 29 when she describes the violent cartoons in which no one is irrevocably hurt or killed, and on page 30 the story Brady family: story as consolation? Fantasy? Buffer against reality?
- On page 119 Loung and little Maria construct their story together – shared experience and connection between the two.

Style

- The style in which Loung writes immediately draws in the reader. It might be useful to talk about the choices she has made: it is conversational, first person, with strong visual imagery (consider her description of how she imagines growing up 'wrong' on page 4) but perhaps what gives it immediacy is the use of the present tense. Perhaps have students rewrite a short section in the past tense to see what the effect is on the story, on the reading experience, and how the reader reacts to it.
- It is also frank: on page 135 Loung expresses her rage and anger at Maria's blessed childhood, which is a kind of grief for her lost childhood and the safety that was taken from her.

Use of vivid anecdote

- Loung has an acute ability to capture small but significant events.
- A particularly good example is how she prepares herself for America on pages 3 and 4. This incident is not only about washing herself, but is revealing of her personality and intent to annoy.
- On page 29 when visitors come to the flat in the US and Loung doesn't understand the conversation she plays imaginative games in her head.
- Have students find other examples that they enjoy or consider to be revealing and talk about what makes the writing so vivid and appealing.

Narrative Structure

- As indicated above, the sisters' stories are told in alternating chapters, Loung's in the first person, and Chou's in the third person. Examine the differences between first and third person, whether this is limiting for an understanding of Chou, and whether it affects the reader and how they react to Loung and Chou.

- The juxtaposition of the end of one chapter and the beginning of another is carefully considered as are the openings of each chapter. For example, the first chapter ends with Loung in her room in the US and then the second begins with Chou in her hut in Cambodia. Chapter 12 opens with thirteen-year-old Loung waking to Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' and the next chapter with Chou cutting grass for the cows outside her hut. Students might like to examine this aspect throughout the book and the way it impacts on their reading and response.
- The book is further divided into two parts, the first, 'Worlds Apart' being set in 1980 and describing the disparate childhoods of the sisters. Part II 'Divided We Stand' begins three years later and moves through the 1980s and 1990s until the sisters finally meet again. This section follows the sisters through adolescence to adulthood.
- Finally, there is an epilogue updating lives to 2003. Perhaps discuss why this is an epilogue rather than a continuation of the book proper. Why did Loung end the story where she did? How important are narratives – beginnings, middles and ends – to organising and understanding our own lives and what happens to us?
- Discuss with students what sort of stories we tell about ourselves and what happens to us and why we need to do this. Beginning with relating an embarrassing or humiliating event is a good place to start. Does the telling lessen the mortification? Is that its role?

Language

- The language used, particularly in the voice of Loung, is rich in simile and metaphor. The following are a few examples, but students might like to find and record their own favourites
- Page 19: 'her body felt like an old dead tree, her insides hollow, and her toes dug into the dirt like roots.' And later 'Kim is like a willow tree that can sit in dirty water and still grow beautiful and provide shade for the family'.
- Page 59 is a description of Amah: 'This old woman has eyes so black, they look like coals hidden behind layers of folded brown skin. Her lids hang from brows so jutted, they look like they've been molded out of clay; her lips are dried fruits that cover only a few resilient yellow teeth stumps.' While this is vivid writing that allows the reader to see Amah, it also represents an imaginative child's view of the world and perhaps a particular cultural view too.
- Find examples of Loung making language do more than one thing at once.
- Language can be a source of humour too. For example, when Loung says 'condom' instead of 'condo' during her talk (p152) and when she identifies 'turd' as being a work within 'Saturday' without knowing its meaning (p114).

Written Response

- If students enjoy the style of imagery and metaphoric language, they might like to try writing some of their own descriptions using simile and metaphor.
- Another aspect of language is Loung's reaction to idiom and colloquialisms. For example, on page 113 she tries to understand expressions rather than just accept them – have students think of some they use that would be hard to explain.
- Invite students to recollect an incident from their childhood - how they felt, etc, and write it as they wish. Then have them write it again using simile and metaphor in the style of Loung.

Significant events

There are many confronting events evoked in the book that readers will want to focus on and 'process'. Some that might be fruitful to talk about are:

- Page 7: Meng estimates how old Loung is: the Khmer Rouge destroyed all records, such as birth certificates. He has to invent an age and a birthday for Loung, choosing a date whose significance 'made sure I will never forget Cambodia'.
- Discuss how important, or not, it is to students to have records of their birth, to know when they were born. If they could choose a significant birth date, what would they choose that has significance in their lives?
- Pages 98-101 describe little Kung's slow death and what little can be done for her without hospitals or doctors. The family does everything to save her and make her last days the best that they can. However, we have to remind ourselves that this was the 20th century, not the dark ages, and that had they been in a city with antibiotics most likely Kung could have been saved. This highlights that the book, although ostensibly about the sisters, is also about the wider confronting inequities between the first and developing worlds, and within countries, between the politically powerful and oppressed, and the wealthy and the poor. Also, consider the significance given to everyone being able to say good bye to Kung.
- Perhaps contrast this with page 179 when Meng and Eang become citizens and buy a house. Meng says 'we are living the American dream, and in thirty years we will own a piece of that dream'. What is 'the American dream' and why is it so powerful?

Family

Consider the following pages

- Page 7 family structure – head of household and family
- Page 37 evokes the lively family life before the war
- Page 134. While Loung tries to suppress her memories, every so often the loss of family surfaces powerfully.

Identity

- Loung applies herself to the task of becoming American. Find examples of her adoption of clothes, musical tastes, hairstyles, fluent English etc.
- Chou feels both Chinese and Cambodian. She speaks both languages, celebrates religious events and festivals in both cultures. She loves both cultures but wants to stay in Cambodia.
- P1367 Meng, according to Loung is happy to proudly announce his 'foreignness everywhere he goes'.
- All three people belong to the same family.
- Do/can we choose who we are?
- How important are circumstances, place and context in shaping identity?

Characters

Loung dominates the book. She has a dramatic character with an extrovert personality a large and humorous imagination. For example, on page 10 she labels the people she sees as 'chicken face' and 'pig's cheeks', and on page 116 when she gets hit in the head by the hockey ball she imagines she has amnesia. Yet she is also a very troubled child with suppressed anger and hurt and a keen appreciation of

how complicated life is. For example on page 89 after having such fun at Halloween, she makes her self hard again because Meng is so sad and long-faced.

Below are some examples that reveal the complexity of Loung. Students could be asked to locate incidents - parts of the text that they find evocative of the many sides to Loung and consider why these incidents are important and have been chosen by Loung to describe herself:

- Page10 she recalls having her shirt on the wrong buttons and the impression it created..
- Page12 missing Chou
- Page14 marking the X on her foot to keep away the ghosts – victim of her older brother’s teasing.
- Loung has a powerful imagination which she calls on to cover embarrassment and loneliness. She can imagine herself to be someone else, or be somewhere else, or her adversaries as weird animals. How important is this imagination to her survival? How important is it to her writing of this book?
- Page120 Loung blocks out Cambodia: ‘The truth is all I care about is becoming an American. Already I wear jeans and baseball caps wherever I go...I even make myself eat boring cafeteria meat loaf, hamburgers and shepherd’s pie without making faces’. Why is Loung so intent on transforming her (outward) identity?
- She is lonely without her sisters.
- Her complex identity is expressed clearly in :‘But I’m no proper Cambodian girl. And in English the bad words blow off my lips without much shame or fear, yet I can’t even silently mouth these same swear words in Chinese or Khmer without feeling like a very bad girl’ (p110)
- On page 234 Loung says of herself :‘Being a peaceful person is not an automatic thing with me...I have to constantly choose it everyday’. Is this fighting spirit what enabled her to survive? What about Chou’s ‘quiet strength’?

Chou

- Is very different from Loung. Her life is in complete contrast and so are the choices she makes. She does not rebel, does not rail against what life has dished up to her, but works hard with dignity, strength and self control.
- Chou, while born in the city, learns to love the country: on page 85 is an evocative description of the countryside and its beauty. For her, the landscape gives her life value.
- When Loung and Chou’s lives are contrasted, it appears that Loung’s independent spirit and freedom are ideal, especially in contrast to Chou’s self-sacrifice and self-denial in her determination to be a good ‘daughter’ of whom her parents would be proud, to her uncle and aunt. However, Loung recognises that her mother (of whom she was so critical) and Chou ‘possess a quiet strength that I don’t understand’ (p233).
- Is it only circumstances that have made the sisters so different? Have the students imagine Chou in America and Loung in Cambodia. Would their lives be readily interchangeable?

Kim

- Is not as strong a presence in the book but he has many of Chou’s characteristics of patience and self-control, but also Loung’s determination to be architect of her own fate – which he actualises eventually in France.
- On page 129 when Kim and Khouy visit the family’s former apartment in Phnom Penh and Kim reflects that as a boy, he thought he would study in France, we

are given a firm insight into his character: 'Never did he dream of becoming a village peasant'.

Khouy

- Feels he has to *do* something. He joins the army because he has a different view of the world and himself from the others who just hope to survive as a family. Each member has values in common, but there are strong differences too.
- On page 82 Chou describes him as a hard worker who wants action and control over his life.

Meng

- Is clever, multilingual, patient, responsible, reliable, everything a surrogate father has to be. He is a quiet force for keeping the family together and understands that Loung must return with him to Cambodia to lay her ghosts.
- He is rewarded with a loving wife and successful children, home ownership, US citizenship and the reunification of his family.
- Is he too good to be true? Or is it that as he has been a father to Loung she can only write about him from that distance of respect, rather than getting 'inside' him?

Importance of education

- Page 92 Meng confesses to Luong that's why he chose her. As the youngest, she had the best chance of being educated, which his father saw as the key to a better life. Is that the role of education across cultures?
- Page 93 'In their worlds, having an educated Ung brings honor, prestige, pride and dignity to the whole family'. Again is that true of most cultures, or is particularly a family or class view of education?

Dreams and symbolism

There are many dreams described in the book. Talk about what you think their importance is. Students may like to relate this to their own lives: do they have dreams they remember and have puzzled over for significance?

- Pages 64-65 is a dream about death beckoning Loung – what might it mean more symbolically than literally?
- Pages 80-81 Chou dreams of Khouy being chased
- Page 106 describes another frightening dream of Loung's. Does it represent the terrors Loung doesn't allow in her conscious life?
- Page 184 Chou dreams about her parents the night before her marriage. In this case is the dream reassurance?
- Page 5 describes the white shirts Meng bought for their arrival in America. What cultural significance do we attach to white? Would any other colour be appropriate or so symbolic?
- Page 26 describes how the Khmer Rouge allows only black clothes as colourful clothes 'separate people'. Do you wear school uniform? What is its purpose? On page 32 Loung tells us that she now only wears bright colours.
- Loung's closet 'once a place to hide from the world is now a library where I can escape into my books (p119). Trace the changing function of the closet throughout the book. For example she says on pages 23-24 that it allows her to keep her world manageable. Why do you think she needs to do this?
- While Loung says it was a place to hide from the world – of visitors to the flat etc, consider it may also symbolise her retreat from facing her past and her strong feelings about it.

School

Loung's early experiences at school reveal how her expectations do not match a harsher reality:

- Page 67 she wants friends who are not Asian, not different. She is excited imagining her new friends but that is not what happens. We all need to feel we fit in, don't we?
- Page 73 documents her difficulties in making friends in America because she doesn't know how to be funny in America or English
- Page 74 'Even though Tommy and I rarely spoke, I felt tied to him in our Asian-ness'. What does she mean? Do you understand how she feels?
- Page 93 describes the physical and intellectual toll: 'It takes so much energy, work, and effort to listen, understand, talk, study, learn, and remember everything in class that I often go off by myself during recess to be quiet'.
- There are also examples of incidental, but no less hurtful racial prejudice, such as on page 112 when the boys laugh and turn their heads away.

Sections for discussion:

- Page 77 'In my mind the war rages on, even though I know I live in a peaceful land.'
- Page 94 Loung doesn't fit in America but she doesn't want to go back to war – she has become too soft and doesn't even want to join Chou. Are comfort and safety more important than happiness and family? Ask students what they think.
- Page 74 'In one another's company, the adults speak easily in Khmer, shed their shy and unsure refugee skins, and change into funny, confident, and vibrant individuals.'
- Page 276: why is Loung afraid to go back to Cambodia? What is she afraid of?
- Page 284 America is Loung's home 'for the moment [but] Cambodia will always be in my heart and soul'. How can home be in one place and heart and soul in another?
- Page 235: 'There's no "their world" and "your world", Mike. There's only our world.'
- Page 265: Loung realises that her choices of '...living life to the fullest, of not missing a single moment, and making every minute count had been all about me and had involved only me...I know that...living life to the fullest involves living it with your family'.

Culture and community

The book highlights how different cultural communities, events, conventions and ways of looking at the world shape us as human beings:

- Pages 21-22 describe Chou's remote village, the lack of communication from the centre, and the constant fear of attack.
- Page 27 describes the insulting visit from the well-meaning American, who shows her own ignorance by treating the family as ignorant, rather than as the cultured people they were before surviving as refugees. Do you think this is a common assumption made about refugees?
- Page 28: is it an obligation to feel gratitude? Contrast this with the issues of respect and gratitude for Chou (p39).
- Page 3: the family meets the McNulty's, an Irish/Italian family with an adopted Korean daughter, Ahn – an example of successful cultural acceptance.

- Page 38-39 describes the hard physical work of Chou, and that she is surrounded by sadness and reminders of loss of her siblings. There is no infrastructure – doctors hospitals, nor even simple things such as soap and shampoo.
- Pages 42-43 give graphic descriptions of the effects of landmines, yet there is such dignity in the telling and the dying: the image of the man's wife smoothing his shirt and pants, and wiping the blood from his face.
- Page 154 contrasts the American and Cambodian attitudes to dating
- Page 168 after the arranged marriage for Hong, Chou is worried that her lack of education means she will be married off early.
- Page 184 Chou has worked hard at being a 'proper woman' and daughter to her aunt and uncle. Contrast this with Loung's determination to be independent. Is one better than the other?
- Pages 188 onwards describe Chou's wedding and its preparations; the participation of the community and the attendance of over 400 people mark the respect and love her parents engendered; the provision of food for the wedding is an important gift to the guests, and the preparations are joyous.

Further reading

- *Mao's Last Dancer* by Li Cunxin – inspiring true story of his life plucked from a village to becoming a renowned ballet dancer.
- *A Step from heaven* by An Na - about a Korean family settling in America

Films

- Watch 'The Killing Fields' (1984) (p136) that is mentioned in the book. The Cambodians don't want to watch it, they lived it. Also consider that (p138) a film can't tell you what it is really like: 'Americans will never know what it was truly like'.
- It might be useful to compare the Hollywood version with that of a Cambodian in 'S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine' (2003) by Rithy Panh.

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