



Library podcast

Vaddey Ratner discusses Music of the Ghosts

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[00:00:36] In the years since we've been eagerly awaiting and now we're grateful that she is here with a brand new book equally powerful music of the ghosts book that tells the story of a woman who has makes returned to Cambodia where she has not been since she left as a child as a refugee and with some quite deep questions not only what what what how and what is Cambodia now but she has some deep family questions and namely specifically what happened to her father. There's a great mysteries in this as both present day Cambodia's is revealed but also what happened during the Khmer Rouge period. For people who perished to free people who survived and and what this has meant for the state of things in Cambodia today it's powerful extraordinary book which you'll get some sense of tonight. She will she'll talk from it and talk about it read a little bit from it and and what you as readers will really get to immerse yourself in this really full novel that tells us with great pleasure great beauty but also great horror and much of the of some of what unfolds in this book.

[00:01:51] Very painful difficult things but it's also part of acknowledging and knowing what happened there and what happens in places even today in other countries. It's a service that serves that way as well but it. Comes to us now she presently is living in Malaysia. So she live in with us today April 25th. Now that is already April 25th in Malaysia but not not here. But she's been travelling around the US. We're delighted she's doing so and and Tonight begins the the West Coast conclusion to travelling around the West. We'll see her again in the future with other books but. You're in for a great treat tonight. So she'll read she'll sign copies at the table here afterwards we have both both of her books in the shadow of the Banyan and beautiful new music of the ghosts. So with that for all of us again at Elliott Bay and here at the Seattle Public Library we thank you for being here. And now please join in welcoming the extraordinary writer the day runner.

[00:02:54] Good evening everyone. Welcome. Thank you Stesha. Thank you Rick. It's so nice for me to be back here. But first the special thank you to the Seattle Public Library. Elliott Bay Books. Members of your wonderful community and all those involved in bringing me here. I was here last year as you said in 2012 to launch my first novel in the shadow of the Banyan at the Seattle Asian Art Museum. I believe it was at the invitation of Mimi Gates who read the book after you recommended to

her. And then later I saw in Foreign Policy magazine when it listed a group of global thinkers which include Melinda Gates and she had listed in the shadow of the Banyan on her reading list. So I'm so grateful to have the early support of these amazing individuals. I call them my David and my angels. They have helped to kind of give wings to my first book. And this is the reason I have the courage and the energy to take on another book. But before I speak about music of the ghosts I like to share a bit of my personal history and how I became a writer born into a family of royalty in Cambodia my life of privilege came to an end when the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975 the Khmer Rouge regime one of the most devastating and violent social revolutions in the last century claimed the lives of nearly 2 million people perhaps a quarter of the population among those perished who were my father my younger sister and many beloved family members.

[00:05:16] Soon after the fall of the regime in 1979 I set out with my mother on a treacherous journey across through the jungle and across the border to Thailand. Two years later we arrived in rural Missouri to start life anew. By the time I arrived in the United States I had been educated so to speak in the extremes of human brutality and the toxic potential of an uncompromising ideology in ways that I would worship for no child. And I witnessed also unexpected and repeated acts of compassion. Nevertheless I had little way to communicate what I had experience. Toward the end of the regime I had gone mute withdrawing into silence on arriving in the USA I spoke no English. Yet even then I knew that someday I would have to find a way to tell the story of what we lived through what makes one a writer. Ask any group of authors and we all have different answers. For me there is an indelible link between stories and survival. I can recall from my earliest memory that my father told me stories and those stories stayed with me even after my father was gone. Without them I believe I would not have survived. I wrote my first novel in the shadow of the Banyan to give voice to the loved ones I had lost through art. I wanted to make them live again. I didn't expect that novel about a small country about a war in a small country. Four decades ago would be met with such a sympathetic reception from readers and all walks of life.

[00:07:51] Nor could I expect that this book would find its way around the world. Published in 17 languages and places as diverse as Norway Slovakia Korea and Brazil. I'm especially touched when I hear from readers who say they see themselves in my story that reading the book they experience this ordeal as if having lived through it themselves. As if this journey through war and revolution were their own. The pain the loss the hope and love the beauty I tried to articulate in the narrative in the shadow of the Banyan they tell me seemed so familiar so universal. Their reactions only reaffirm my belief that art and stories have the power to connect us to help us discover or common humanity across the divides of geography nationality race and religion. In the shadow of the Banyan is a story of survival. My second novel music of the ghosts. The reason I'm here is about the survivors. People like myself but also people who took part in the violence by varying degrees of choice and cohesion. It's about the lives that endure after such trauma and the questions that haunt us. Music of the ghosts is also a love story. It follows tiara a Cambodian American woman in her 30s who fled to Cambodia as a child refugee and is now returning for the very first time after more than two decades from the safety of her adopted home.

[00:10:01] America in the midst of this journey to uncover her past Tiara also rekindled her ability to love and to love with a passion she could not have expected. So while the novel explores the aftermath of genocide I can assure you the story is not all darkness and despair. If anything I write always to find hope to find light tears returned to Cambodia is prompted by a letter she receives from an elderly half blind man living on the grounds of a temple in Bombay in the capital city of Cambodia. Disabled and impoverished the elder survives earns his keep by playing traditional music for various ceremonies and rituals. He's known to those around him only as The Old Musician. In the letter Tiara learns that the older musician may be the only one who can shed light on her father's disappearance decades ago amidst the fever of the revolution. The story is told in the alternating perspective of these two central characters. I will read to you now from excerpts from the beginning of the novel.

[00:11:38] First from the perspective of the old musician and then from the perspective of Tierra he feels this way in the confined space of the wooden cottage hands groping in the dark searching among the shadows through the blurred vision of his one good eye for this adieu the lute has called out to him in his dream blocking its way persistently into his consciousness until he is awake aware of its presence beside him. It lies this land on the bamboo bed deeply reposed in its dreamless anus his fingers inadvertently brush against the single copper straining coaxing a soft thump similar to the click of a baby's tongue. The Old Musician is almost blind. His left eye damaged long ago by a bludgeon and his right by age he lies much on his senses to see. And now he sees her feels her presence not as a ghostly apparition overwhelming the tiny space of his college nor as a thought occupying his mind but as a longing on the verge of utterance incarnation. He feels her move toward him. She who will inherit this adieu this ancient instrument used to invoke the spirits of the dead as if in that solitary note he has called her to him. He lifts the letter to his chest rousing it from its muted sleep holding it as he often held his small daughter.

[00:13:23] A lifetime ago how hard against his heart her tiny head resting on his shoulder of all that he's tried to forget. He allows himself without reservation without guilt. The reprieve of this one memory the curve of her neck against his paired in the concave and convex of tenderness as if they were two organs of a single anatomy he plays a song. He plays the song he wrote for her. Upon her entry into his world into his solitary existence as a musician I thought I was alone. I walked in the universe looking for another. He remembers the day he brought his daughter home from the hospital. Her breath so tenuous still that he wanted to buttress it with notes and words. I came upon a reflection and saw you standing at the fringes of my dream. He often dreams of her not his daughter but the little girl to whom this Lute rightly belongs. Except that she's no longer a little girl. He wonders about the person she's become the woman she's grown into. He dares not confuse one with the other. The young daughter he lost a long ago and the woman he now waits to meet. They are not the same person.

[00:14:52] He reminds himself he has a hand on her arm. She looks up and sees the flight attendant smiling at her. The young woman reminds her to bring her seat to an upright position. The plane has begun its descent into plumping International Airport terrain of slender sugar palms and straw hats comes into view desolate and scarred the earth. A deep saffron color for some reason Tyra expects

to see more green to be greeted by a lush tropical landscape of coconuts and antiques. Emerald rice paddies lakes and ponds are filled with Lotus and a water lily instead. What lies below resembles a battleground pockmarked by dark waterholes and a bomb crater like gashes a fractured geography.

[00:15:51] What can it tell her. What lies beneath those patches of grey and brown. What secrets does this wounded earth hold for her that she doesn't already know. Does it conceal in its crevices her father's dying scream his shattered ideals and dreams. Evidence of his alleged crime the possibility of his redemption as well as her own the plane swoops down then touches ground with a light bum. Her heart skips a beat Dera clutches her shoulder bag to steal herself inside all the valuables her passport some cash and a couple of credit cards the old musicians letter. My dear young lady I don't know how to properly begin this letter. She's read it so many times. She can recall it word for word. There's so much to say it isn't a long letter but the empty spaces between the lines resonated with inexpressible sadness. Their parallel sorrows. I knew your father. He and I were the words that were crossed out a single straight line running through them as if the mistake was immutable impossible to obliterate or retract by a new beginning. Tiara was touched by its honesty its self-revelation when she first read it. We were in complete time together during the last year of Pol Pot's regime. In the last day in prison how I survived such a place I do not know why I survived at all is a question that has plagued me until now. Jiro fears the aircraft coming to a full stop. I don't know how much time is left or if it is already too late. I have in my possession three musical instruments that once belonged to your father. He would have liked you to have them. He would have liked you to know that some part of him lives even if only in these instruments. In her mind Tiara he is the music of her father said you. She doesn't know why but of all the instruments he played. She remembers the sound of this ancient Lute most vividly. She remembers a song not its name but its melody. Each note like a drop of predawn rain on bamboo.

[00:18:29] She closes her eyes and lets the melody wash over her so as this story unfolds we learn that Tyra and the old musician are drawn to each other not only by their hidden interwoven history and by remember melodies but also by the questions they ask themselves. How do we account for the crimes that we have committed knowingly and for the suffering we contribute to perhaps without knowing what is possible and to forgive. What does it take to atone. And what hope can there be for reconciliation for redemption. Unlike my first novel music of the ghosts is not autobiographical but the question it confronts are deeply personal. The older musician grew out of my desire to know what happened to my father who was taken away at the beginning of the regime by Khmer Rouge soldiers for who he was not only a prince but a pilot a man of education something of the regime deeply feared.

[00:19:54] To this day I can't say with absolute certainty what his ultimate fate might have been. I believe though that um he um did not survive long after he was taken away and that he suffered profoundly before he died.

[00:20:17] The disappear can haunt us more persistently than the ghosts we feel their shadows as our own. We never stop searching stop longing for them. But tears yearning to know the truth of her father's disappearance and her deep rooted ties to Cambodia echo my own. Despite the geographical

distance the decades in America the sanctuary and peace she has found in her adopted home a part of a part of her heart is still bound to that land. To those she loved and lost there she is American and Cambodian. Her identity challenged and forged anew at each turn. Yet in other ways and tears a passage through loss and discovery is a familiar universal journey.

[00:21:24] I believe even those of us so fortunate enough to have lived a relatively comfortable life cannot help but recognize that our world is increasingly interconnected. Whether we travel or stay in one place we come into contact daily with those of different backgrounds experiences and belief nada. All of us are like the characters in my novel all refugees of war or survivors of atrocity. Still even the most privileged among us no matter where we live. Over the course of our life cannot escape heartbreak and loss.

[00:22:09] Um if we pay attention to the ones we love. If we were alert to the world we live in we will confront the pain and suffering and how we respond. Can either deepen the suffering or pave the way toward healing music of the ghosts is a love story because it traces tears and discovery of a passionate love in the midst of a journey to understand and to reconcile her own to reconcile with her own history with devastating loss in a more personal sense. The novel is also a love story for a country and that is my birthplace for him the beauty of the land the poetry the music that one he is to this day and the ensembles of the wounded and the blind I was inspired in my writing by the countless streets street musicians I had spoken with during these those early years of my return to Cambodia. These impoverished musicians most of them crippled by war would sit down on the street and play these beautiful haunting melodies.

[00:23:41] You could easily mistake them for beggars but I recognized them more than just performers trying to feed themselves. They had so much to say in their music and their expression and their solemnity and even in their silences. In Cambodia culture music plays a vital role in every aspect of life births and deaths unions and separations illness and healing. There is music offered to the gods to the spirits to ancestors to travellers. Music is blessing its new tree and its medicine where no words fail. MUSIC BECOMES other voice I hope that music of the Go sound would speak to those of you who have been displaced and longed for home to those who have suffered and dared to imagine a new beginning to those who believe in the capacity of love to mend our wounds. And perhaps this reflects my purpose as a writer in times of separation to find love in places of darkness to find light in moments of fear and loss to find hope amidst pain and discord to discover the possibility of music I have dedicated the novel to the lives and the beauty that inspired its pages. I would like to now close with one short passage from the novel that reflects the awe and inspiration.

[00:25:45] I continue to draw from my homeland every time I return beverage to an intersection.

[00:25:54] There are neither traffic lights nor stop signs but like all the cars around them they slow to a crawl.

[00:26:02] Looking past the couple of cars ahead of them Dera expects to see a motorcade escorting a convoy of armored Ford Rangers favored by high ranking officials and oligarchs or worse a hummer

barreling down at 60 80 kilometres an hour in a zone marked 20. No such vehicle emerges. Instead she notices an older man tall and stately but otherwise dressed in the patchwork clothes of a medic and a bamboo cane in one hand and a cotton satchel on his shoulder. He takes a cautious step from the sidewalk into the humming traffic then pauses tapping the bamboo cane on the asphalt swinging it from right to left his head cocked it to one side listening observing with all his senses. Then he lifts his freehand straight past his head and proceed forward weaving across the intersection his blind hero realizes in astonishment though he can't see. He raises his arm in the air so others can see him. Everything stares inside her in this chaotic little city where traffic stops for no one except out of fear for those with power and fatal accidents occur daily. So it can seem human lives or as dispensable as those of chickens and bakes on their way to slaughter.

[00:27:39] There's a muted gesture feels like a revelation of sorts to your nose in this very instant that if all she has to take with her when she leaves this land is the image of the raised hand. She will have gained more than what she came with. She may never fully grasp the source of inhumanity. What drives people to massacre one another. The potential for hate that lurks in every heart or at what point ideas turn rancid with venom so that they poison and corrupt murdered the very beauty they aspire to create. What is clear before her is the simple fact that it takes conviction to do what this blind man does in the absence of sight when all is dark around you. It takes a deep seated belief that others will and so you appear that their humanity will rise to meet you are lifted a hand your raised hope and in that brief moment you crossed the otherwise arbitrary divide between death and life thank you.

[00:28:53] I will take some questions now. I was wondering how often you go back to Cambodia and when you go. What is it like for you. What do you do when you're there.

[00:29:06] Well I'm living in Malaysia at the moment so it's very close to Cambodia. So I go as often as I needed them as I guess every now and then I need to put things in perspective when I go there to feed my soul. So every chance I get I hop on the plane and it's just one plane ride away when I'm based in. We still have a home in Maryland. So when I'm based in Maryland I try to go there twice a year. I get so excited when I am preparing for a trip to Cambodia and I imagine all these things that I'm going to do and then I get on the plane and the excitement is still there and then I I get there and I start to see the landscape and the way I describe the landscape and you know how it's fractured and how it's wounded this is how I often. That's how Cambodia often greets me and I feel like it is a reminder of how much has been broken how much has been destroyed and it is my duty to try to rebuild what is broken what is destroyed. And and I have to. Gather that strength of that sense of duty every time I returned because the moment you stepped outside of the airport your heart breaks your heart breaks every time. Cambodia can make a poet out of anyone because the tragedy and the beauty lives live side by side constantly and you feel inspired and heartbroken all in the same moment.

[00:31:14] That's how I would simply describe it.

[00:31:20] Hello again thank you for coming. I read your synopsis about this show tonight. I was interested that you had a degree in Southeast Asian Studies. I'd be interested to know how to go about it since I have a personal interest in it as well. In my case I'm tackling some mysteries leftover from the Vietnam conflict an art project I'm working on reflects on that. So where I could get started on the studies.

[00:31:53] Oh how. How would I. How could you can get started on this study.

[00:31:58] Yes like you say like an actual college course are where Well Cornell has one of the best Southeast Asian program and one of the best.

[00:32:12] One of the best Asian Study program would start again. I'm Cornell University. Yeah thanks. Thank you.

[00:32:24] It's an honor to have you here. Thank you so much. I want you to know. Are your books Campbell. Are your books translated into Khmer.

[00:32:32] No it's not translated into God. Yes it is very sad. In Cambodia there's not a real publishing house. There is one publishing group I think it's a non-profit a radioman. They have done a lot in terms of publishing non-fiction books but I think it's hard. First of all to translate my work in to my because I think the generation right now with ten jaw writers off of the fiction. Georgiana is very young. They still perhaps learning how to write and then a huge part of the older generation there too I guess too old to take on this task especially those who have both there that has the knowledge of both the languages English and Maya to be able to translate it in.

[00:33:47] In a way that I would want this book to be translated. Yes it is very sad and some time I do toy with the idea that perhaps I should try to translate it myself.

[00:34:01] As a modern Cambodian do you feel any heritage to the Khmer civilization of the 12th century and the Korean empire from your ancestors. Do you feel that or do you.

[00:34:14] Only I think I of my identity as a my is inseparable from the ancient civilization. I think when we when we say when we call ourself my we you know the image of Uncle of the temples come to mind. And if that you know it's interesting throughout the various regime some of the various governments that have ruled Cambodia has that that image becomes a very. Powerful force of legitimization for for you know for their rule.

[00:35:00] But as a as an individual as a modern Carmi I feel that my identity as a Cambodian is inseparable from from that whole history.

[00:35:18] So this is a follow up to the translation question. So even though you're not translating into Carmi for the people of Cambodia do you think there is any interest in hearing or reading these stories other people who are currently living in Cambodia or is it still a sensitive topic that they might it

might be a difficult story to read about or would it bring healing interest among Cambodians living in Cambodia in a story like yours. Yes. Yes. And read on your for certainly.

[00:35:50] I think so. I. That's has been one of the most rewarding experiences for me is to get letters from young Cambodians living in Cambodia. Reading this story in the English language. Because as a work of fiction both in particular Banyan me with music of the ghosts it you know it was out to just two weeks ago but with Banyan I think it has provided a safe space for people to learn about their history. Safe in the sense of Yeah that it's removed from politics but safe also in the sense of providing a story that they can slip into and that they can call their own a story that is at once personal. But at the same time give us and so if not I wouldn't say distance. But you know when it gets too much people can step out of it. That's what fiction does is that they can say OK I'm reading about somebody else's life and this is a work of fiction. This is a work of literature but for young Cambodians there's among young Cambodians. There is a lot of interest a tremendous tremendous interest because this is something that their parents cannot talk about and that they cannot fully talk about

[00:37:38] It in Cambodian society at least not in a way that I think that would get to you know get at the roots of of of the cause. You know what happened.

[00:37:58] Thank you. Thank you.

[00:38:03] I'd like to hear your perspective on the situation of for example some of the ancient traditions that traditional arts. Are they still being maintained or are they still flourishing. It was my understanding that during the Khmer Rouge regime so many of as you mentioned the educated class had been killed. So how how are they. What is the situation with the traditional arts and crafts.

[00:38:32] And actually there's a great deal. You know there's been a huge movement of revival of the angel night. And I think a huge part of that is through the help of of NGO sort of nongovernmental organizations self outside help.

[00:38:54] I think art in Cambodia is still perhaps in most part of the world even here now is them being relegated to kind of to the side and push to the margins. And so in that sense it's safe. But once it becomes a force then the government will start eyeing it again and seeing. You know how it can be challenged to stop.

[00:39:29] But right now there's a great deal of revival and preservation of this the effort to preserve to not only preserve but to expand.

[00:39:48] The the the art sun the Indian arts both music and the performing arts.

[00:39:56] Some of the girls such as dances and the traditional dances that traditional music carving up there and now because there's this here and an intense interest in visiting the ancient temples the

you know this get a lot of young Cambodians interested in them the art of of making these sculptures again of carving and so forth. Yes.

[00:40:31] So in that way it's good. I have another question for you. Yes. If I may.

[00:40:38] I just be interested to hear your perspective about how the nation has recovered with this generation. I mean when I think about how the educated class in education and the culture that Cambodia had in the modern history 1950s and 60s how that was all lost. How does it how can a country recover from that. I mean I know steps are being taken and the U.N. was in there but just from your perspective I mean I've just I mean it's just about how that can happen.

[00:41:10] Yes. Well it's a continuing process. And we have been trying to we cover for the last four decades since the end of the Khmer Rouge rule.

[00:41:23] And it's I think it's some I've always felt that it's it's it's not an easy process.

[00:41:33] And even if we manage to recover it's never going to be complete. But I have a lot of hope in the younger generations. I see that just through the media through you do you know social media. I mean it got much more information is available and therefore of the young. Well young people are much more brave these day to question the society to challenge it. And I think we can't recover we can't change you can't move forward unless the people within the country themselves have the courage have the need to really demand for those changes. And so I. But yeah it's a good question how can you know. It takes a long time. It takes a very long time. And I think that's why with the music of the ghosts I really want to get people into thinking about how to respond to violence. You know we live in a world in a time in which one violence one form of violence after another compete for attention and and I think it's it's really important how we react to that if we react to it with compassion and so forth.

[00:43:25] I think it will have different consequences than if we respond to violence with violence. And if you know an individual respond with violence and then another individual and then it takes on a societal scale it will take generations to recover from the scars of that violence.

[00:43:58] Yes but I can't think of you know any right now at the moment. I have a hard time with Eddie and still you know it is just.

[00:44:10] And then slayings are hard for me and partly the reason Banyon and music of the ghosts these two books are written are written in the narrative style that I write in is because I feel like I started off in the English language reading British classics and a home. Even though I didn't understand what I was reading I loved the long sentences and the long paragraphs.

[00:44:50] But I I I feel like the languages you get are the English language can can change so fast.

[00:45:02] And I when I write it is to find a sense of stillness. And so the style that I embrace is the style that that uh gives me that sense of calm that sense of stillness but cash I can't think of an expression now that is hard for me to you know to to understand.

[00:45:32] I'm sorry.

[00:45:32] I can't think of one right now. Yes. Huh. But.

[00:45:38] But I love taking a certain gun my phrase and trying to explain it in language. And not only to make sure that the meaning can carry through but to at the same time retain the rhythm of it in the original.

[00:46:06] My thank you.

[00:46:08] Thank you.

[00:46:16] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.