



River of Time

Jon Swain

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"A splendid memoir...a tale, at once tragic and beautiful, of love and loss, of coming of age and of witnessing the end of Indochina as the West had known it for more than a century."—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*. From the writer immortalized in the Academy Award-winning film *The Killing Fields*.

River of Time Details

Date : Published October 1st 1999 by Berkley (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9780425168059

Author : Jon Swain

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Cultural, Asia, History, War

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From Reader Review River of Time for online ebook

Wang Hesper says

There is a sad story behind every smile...

Sam Romilly says

This is certainly an interesting story. Few people would have experienced all the events in Vietnam and Cambodia and the author does a great job to document all that he saw. What I disliked about the book was the insight it gave into the mind of someone who would deliberately put himself right in the middle of a war for effectively the thrill of it all. There seemed little sense of horror and disgust - it was more just like a great adventure, and the local people, the victims, were just to be taken advantage of whilst the western journalists lived their lives of privilege. I did not have a sense that his journalist contributions were written with the idea to give insight or to try and make things better. As a book it was more like an extended diary without too much self-awareness. Certainly worth a read for the first hand accounts of what happened during the fall of Vietnam and Cambodia. Refers to the North Vietnamese massacre of South Vietnamese at Hue which I had not known about - apparently 3,000 or more civilians were killed whilst the town was occupied. On the other hand despite going out with the American troops to battle there is no mention of US force atrocities - which were much more than what was revealed at My Lai. Time will bring out more truths but I fear this book has not unearthed as much as it could - or should.

Adam Alston says

One of the favourite books I've read, a really intoxicating memoir of an amazing place in a crazy time. This book briefly captures the magic of one individual's experience of Cambodia at a special time which has now past into pages and memories. The powerful and colourful recollection of the somewhat magical 'pre-war' Cambodia, and also the somewhat darker magic of War-era Vietnam, from a working journalist's point of view, I found to be an extremely rewarding read. Finishing the book in 5 weekdays (outside of work) all I can think of is how unlucky I am to have missed such an amazing place, one which was irreversibly changed forever. I thank the author for providing us a glimpse into it, of his life, of the characters he got to meet, of the happiness and sadness he encountered along the way.

If you're thinking about going to Cambodia, or even Vietnam, you seriously need to read this

Brad says

This book suffers from ambiguous writing and missed opportunities for insight. For instance, there are various ethical dilemmas he faced that receive superficial treatment and a failure to consider in depth the connection between his wonderful colonial experience and the later suffering and abandonment of the Cambodians. The book also contains maddeningly incomprehensible sentences and long phrases of French and Vietnamese, which the author uses as important parts of paragraphs and yet pretentiously leaves

untranslated.

The book nonetheless was a valuable read while I traveled in Vietnam. Swain provides accounts, mostly first-hand, of the many horrors of the conflicts in Cambodia and Vietnam. I found his narration empathetic and sometimes heart-breaking.

The second half of the book seemed much stronger than the first, maybe because Swain's romanticized calm before the storm is less compelling than the storm itself. (Here, the storm is the wars reaching his beloved cities, Phnom Penh and Saigon, and his friends there.)

Mary Ann says

Picked up River of Time while in Cambodia. Fast-paced, enthralling and not a book to be put down, it filled in much of the tragic story of Cambodia for me through the eyes of journalist and author, Jon Swain. Followed it up with watching Swain in "The Killing Fields". Must read for all those interested in Southeast Asia, Indo-China history and the turbulent times of the war in Vietnam and the tragedy of Pol Pot regime's reign in Cambodia.

Les Dangerfield says

A journalist's account of the horrors of the final phase of the war in Vietnam and of the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia. Depressing how the history of man's inhumanity to man repeats itself in endless circles.

Korynn says

This book is haunted. This book is not so much a biography as a pouring out of love and guilt and sadness. On every page the author recounts a treasured memory mixed with people and places tragically erased by horrific circumstances. There is a sadness and a helplessness in the pages, it reads like a confessional at times, a need to get events on paper to exorcise the ghosts and experiences that haunt him. The most complete sections are those that deal with the author's witness to the fall of Saigon and the fall of Phnom Penh.

Vikram says

It's filled with hopeless exoticism, but a beautiful account of a war correspondent's time in Indochina and to a lesser extent Ethiopia. His portrayal of Cambodia and the rise of the Khmer Rouge is particularly evocative and moving.

Bronwyn says

This book grew on me. At first I was disgusted with the author's exotification of Southeast Asia -- his love of foreign women, French colonial culture, opium. Add to that his addiction to war and social unrest as an excuse to throw off the tedium of life in Western society. That he enjoyed the decadence of prostitutes, drugs and "free living" while the societies around him decayed slowly seemed reprehensible.

However, I just couldn't help being moved by his account of the fall of Vietnam and Phnom Penh. The latter, in particular, is heart-wrenching. The author's account of the fall of PP to the Khmer Rouge is a brilliant piece of journalism and an essential historical account of a critical point in Cambodian history. Swain may have flown back into PP for the thrill of the chase, but not even I could deny the humanity in his account of this dreadful, unspeakable event.

I read this book while traveling in Cambodia which increased its poignancy for me but it will appeal to anyone interested in learning more about a critical part of recent world history. For those traveling in SE Asia this book is a MUST to understand what Cambodian and Vietnamese people have endured over the past 50 years. And while Swain may be nostalgic for a French-ruled Indochina, readers will understand that what these people really needed and continue to need is foreign aid and support, not cultural imperialism.

Thomas Barrett says

Holy shit this book was powerful. Beautifully written love letter/requiem to Vietnam and Cambodia and his own shocking experiences during the wars. Yes, its a bit orientalist with lots of descriptions of 'exotic' landscapes but the writing is so damn good and I polished it off in 2 sittings.

Becky says

It took me a while to appreciate this book. I knew any memoir of Vietnam and Cambodia during this time would be full of atrocities, drugs, bad guys, exploiters, politics, grim images etc. so I was a bit taken back with the author's statement "This was the best time of my life." However, the author's perspective is very well written with vivid details of the day to day incidents that surrounded him. His small personal and humane stories warmed me to him. Having just been to Cambodia and Vietnam, the brutal history made me cringe and I can't say I "enjoyed" reading it.

Ellen says

I would not recommend this book at all, unless you enjoy reading bemoaning about how the colonial days are gone and those 'pesky natives' tried to run things for themselves, but 'oh what a jolly mess they made'. The book is thoroughly racist, and politically very confused making no distinction between the neo-maoist nationalist force the khmer rouge and the vietcong, for example, seeing them all as 'communist'. He makes no attempt to engage with any of the events he is documenting, and he completely ignores the role of western intervention in the conflicts. Even if you can move past the terrible politics, the book is rather boring and difficult to sympathise with - for example when he is in Phnom Penh at it's fall he spends 5 pages droning on

about how terrible it was, despite him and the other white people being inside the air-conditioned rooms of the embassy with plenty food, water, even alcoholic drinks and cards, while thousands of Cambodians were kept outside with no shelter, water, or worse of all any sympathy by the author. When reading this book it almost feels like it's a parody of the disgusting attitudes of the imperialist countries towards indo-china ... then you realise that unfortunately these are actually the author's real views. Gross.

Rebecca McNutt says

I was initially drawn to this book because I recognized the name Jon Swain from the 1980's film *The Killing Fields*. Swain, a British journalist and photographer, was portrayed in that by Julian Sands. That said, this book is about the real man before his experiences in Cambodia with Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran, back when he did work covering the Vietnam War. It really takes you right into the harrowing nature of what happened back in Vietnam, the chaos, the violence and the people, both soldiers and innocent civilians, who were affected. Swain's book is as emotional as it is factual, and he brings his own personal feelings on war into the accounts without losing track of the actual story.

Something great about *River of Time* is how honest it is. There's nothing glossed over about the war yet the human beings involved are not trivialized or written as merely "collateral damage". I'd say this is one of those books that everybody should read, and probably one of the best books on the Vietnam War I've ever found.

AC says

Beautifully written, poignant, exotic -- a travelogue, war diary, and introspection -- this book is many cuts above the usual of this genre. Highly recommended.

Prince Arora says

I read this book whilst in Vietnam, given to me by a friend, and it greatly effects the atmosphere the book creates. It's devastatingly shocking and sad, yet an eye-opening read.

Yanhong Zhang says

Quite intense...reflective...and beautiful prose which is definitely a plus.

Jade says

I read this memoir during my travels through Vietnam and Cambodia. Being in the presence of these countries has made learning about the tragic events of Indo-China a journey in itself. It was really difficult to hear about the privileges of foreigners and the harsh abandonment of the innocent and helpless. The guilt and

passion for these countries and their people is strongly felt throughout - it's still hard to believe this all happened not that long ago...

Robert Dodds says

A harrowing account of the horrors of war in Indo-China, lightened somewhat by Swain's reflections on his own youthful captivation with Cambodia, Vietnam, and their people. It is also a story of how the romantic love of his life is blighted by his own compulsion to travel to war zones and report on them. He forces the reader to face up to the desperate sadness of what we like to call 'inhuman' behaviour - although unfortunately it is all too human. We are left marvelling at the bravery - or foolhardiness (he acknowledges the ambiguity) - of his journalistic passion.

thereadytraveller says

River of Time is a beautifully written memoir by an English journalist living in the lands of the Mekong during the wars in Indo-China in 1970-1975. An outstanding and moving account of personal experiences during one of the most tumultuous periods of recent history, River of Time is essential reading for anyone interested in the haunting history of this region.

Swain arrives in Indo-China in his early 20's, at an age not much older than the average American soldier after being posted to Vietnam to cover the war as an Agence France-Presse (AFP) correspondent for a 3 month assignment. Addicted to the countries on whom he is reporting and the adrenaline rush of war, Swain falls in love with a beautiful French-Vietnamese woman, Jacqueline, and ends up staying longer than five years in this amazing part of the world.

Written as if in a beautiful haze some 20 years after the events that took place, River of Time is now seems shrouded and enveloped by the mists of time. Beginning from when Swain first arrives in Vietnam and including a brief period in Cambodia before authorities revoke his Visa, we are swept along with Swain's story of his love-infused moments with Jacqueline snatched amongst the ever present dangers of his reporting. Describing Jacqueline as the person whom he loved the most in the world, they manage to escape from the war by visiting such idyllic and beautiful places as spiritual Hue and Dalat within the Vietnamese Central Highlands.

River of Time perfectly captures the exoticness and enticing danger of the times. Whether watching entrancing woman dressed in áo dài riding cyclos, sampans drifting down the Mekong or describing the fumeries and opium dens of which he frequents, Swain's portayal of Indo-China is beguiling. Accompanied by amazing stories of the colons resident in both countries, River of Time is a genuinely spell-binding read.

All the beauty he depicts, however, is juxtaposed against the horrific scenes that also accompanies both the ongoing Vietnam War (American War as called by the Vietnamese) and the Cambodian Civil Wars. Be warned, Swain describes scenes that are heart wrenching and extremely moving and whilst not graphically described, the horror is in no way diminished.

Anyone who has seen the Roland Joffe directed movie, The Killing Fields, will recognise Swain as one of the central characters. Leaving Vietnam on the last flight into Phnom Penh before its impending fall to the

Khmer Rouge, he meets up with Dith Pran and Sydney Schanberg, the New York Time correspondent who wrote the book *The Death and Life of Dith Pran* on which the movie is based. Describing both the events that occurred up to and the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's conquest, there will be very few people who aren't moved to tears of both frustration and sadness. Swain's human witness to the death of friends, colleagues, soldiers, civilians and even a piece of himself and ability to convey this to the reader is what makes this books so amazingly good.

Alongside *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung, *River of Time* is a must read before viewing the marvels of Angkor Wat and more especially before visiting the killing fields of Choeung Ek or the genocide museum of Tuol Sleng. By gaining an understanding that violence is as much a part of the Cambodian character as that of the smiling peasantry portrayed in tourist posters, it provides a deeper context and understanding of the events that have taken place and shaped the countries and people of both Cambodia and Vietnam.

Richard McGeough says

Immensely moving memoir. John Swain witnessed some of the worst that human beings can do to each other in 1970s Cambodia and Vietnam. This is necessarily a sombre book, yet full of colour as the author brings to life the people and street life of Phnom Penh and Saigon before they fell. He describes the horrific, pitiful emptying of Phnom Penh, and of the ruined lives he encounters on returning to both cities years afterwards. Unsurprisingly, it's not a rosy book, but it's powerful and very, very moving. It brought the lives of real, ordinary people to me in a way that a straightforward history book couldn't have. Highly recommended indeed.
