

"MOST OF US ARE CAPABLE OF INFLECTING SEVERE PAIN ON OTHERS GIVEN CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES"

In 2009, journalist **Robert Carmichael** returned to Cambodia to cover the trial of Khmer Rouge prison chief Comrade Duch. His new book, *When Clouds Fell from the Sky*, examines the regime through a family whose loved one disappeared into the S-21 killing machine

Q Can you give us a brief overview of *When Clouds Fell from the Sky*?

A The book recounts the lives of five key people to describe the causes and consequences of Cambodia's descent into the catastrophe of Pol Pot's rule. The book's sub-title conveys something of that: *A Disappearance, A Daughter's Search and Cambodia's First War Criminal*. The disappearance was of a 30-year-old Cambodian diplomat called Ouk Ket who, in 1977, was ordered back to Phnom Penh by the foreign ministry. Ket left his French wife and their two young children in France with the promise that he would send for them once he knew what the new regime had in store for him. They never heard from him again.

It was years before his family learned he had been taken to S-21 [prison] within days of arriving in Phnom Penh. He was held there for six months, interrogated and then executed. Decades later his wife and daughter testified at Duch's trial. The fourth key person in the book is Ket's cousin, Sady, who remained in Cambodia during that period and survived. The fifth is Duch himself.

Q How did you meet Ket's family?

A I met Martine and Neary – Ket's wife and daughter respectively – quite by accident at La Croisette restaurant in Phnom Penh. They were sitting at a nearby table and we started talking. I wrongly assumed they were tourists; they told me they had flown to Phnom Penh in early 2009 to see the start of Duch's trial, and why. What drew me to their story was the impact of Ket's disappearance and how that had utterly transformed their lives.

Q What moments during the research process stand out?



Pen and ink: author Robert Carmichael

A Some of the most memorable moments revolve around S-21 itself: one was visiting S-21 with Martine and Neary for a Buddhist ceremony the day before Duch's verdict was handed down; another was interviewing S-21 torturer Prak Khan inside the prison's grounds. A third was interviewing a man whose life had been saved by his village chief in 1978. At great risk the village chief went to Siem Reap prison to bring him out, and then repeatedly kept him safe from the Khmer Rouge's regular sweeps. I particularly liked that because it showed that even in the worst of times some people take extraordinary risks to help others.

Q Where does the title stem from?

A It came from Youk Chhang from the Documentation Centre of Cambodia. He told me that many Cambodians refer to the near four-year period of Khmer Rouge rule as *new pel del porpok thlak pi leu mek*, or "the time

when the clouds fell from the sky". Clouds, he explained, evoke beauty, freedom and spirituality, and in that way stand as the epitome of human aspiration. But individualism was anathema to the Khmer Rouge – they referred to the urban evacuees as "clouds", and promised to bring them down to earth, as indeed they did.

Q What led those at S-21 to commit or oversee such horrific crimes?

A Duch's trial showed clearly that he is a man who needs to believe in something bigger than himself. Duch subscribed to the doctrine that the individual had no value and that the revolution was all. Once you reach that stage, torturing and killing – or in his case, ordering those actions – seems an easy next step. In some important ways, however, Duch isn't that different to most of us. He's not a sociopath, for instance, and you don't need to look too far to understand that most of us are capable of inflicting severe pain on others given certain circumstances. In other ways he is different: the few people that survived his prisons spoke of him as a cruel and violent man. There can be little doubt that he enjoyed what he did, despite his protestations to the contrary.

Q Has the Khmer Rouge tribunal been a worthwhile endeavour?

A So far it's cost \$240 million. Although some raise that as an issue, it seems to me that the financial cost is a poor measure when we consider that it is assessing some of the 20th Century's worst crimes. Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh says it is valuable because this is the first time society has recognised Ouk Ket and millions like him as victims of the Khmer Rouge. It's hard to put a price on that. ■