

PHNOM PENH

# Skyfall

**S**outh African journalist Rob Carmichael's book, *When Clouds Fell From The Sky*, is a telling portrayal of the Khmer Rouge's murderous regime. The narrative is anchored by the story of Martine and Neary, a French mother and daughter who lost husband and father Ouk Ket when he heeded the call for Cambodian nationals to return in 1977 to help rebuild the country. The author spoke to *Fah Thai* about his research, the people he met and what we should take away from the book. [whencloudsfell.com](http://whencloudsfell.com)



**SOMBRE SITES**  
(Above) The S-21 genocide museum; (left) a stupa at the Killing Fields

## How did you meet Martine and Neary?

I met them entirely by accident at a Phnom Penh restaurant over breakfast. This was the beginning of 2009 and I'd just come back to cover the trial of Duch [Pol Pot's security chief, in charge of the notorious S-21 prison]. I thought they were tourists but they'd come back here to see the start of his trial and they told me why – because of Ket. We became friendly and I'd been thinking of writing a book at that stage. As the trial went on, and eventually after its end, I decided that actually their story would potentially make a good bridge for foreign audiences seeking to better understand what happened in Cambodia.

## Were there any surprises for you when you started your research?

Yes, the human fertilizer angle. A Cambodian friend of mine told me that his staff had come back from Battambang province and there was a building on the road out there that local people had said might have been used for this purpose. So when I started looking into that element of it, it did surprise me because that's about as utilitarian as you can get – using people to fertilize fields. That was symbolic to me of the base nature of the regime – that people

had no value at all beyond their work. You can't get anymore inhumane than that and I thought that was indicative of what ordinary Cambodians had to suffer through in those years.

## You managed to speak to Prak Khan, a former S-21 interrogator, and very briefly to Chan Youran, a former Cambodian diplomat who lied to Martine about the safety of her husband. What was that like?

Prak Khan was an uncomfortable interview because he talks very matter-of-factly about some of the things he did. For example, one of the things he said was that the most effective torture was shoving needles underneath people's fingernails. And I'm sure he'd done worse than that; he certainly played down how many interrogations he'd done. But knowing what people like him have done is uncomfortable in itself. Chan Youran, on the other hand, was a diplomat; he came back, worked in the foreign ministry, and sent a letter telling Martine that Ket was fine when he couldn't have known that. I really thought that he ought to have spoken more than he did. When the tribunal investigators went round to see him, he claimed to remember nothing. And I thought that was disappointing... he had said that he

was a "great friend of the family." For a man who's trying to gain Buddhist merit by studying the scriptures, it looks like a pretty abject failure on his part.

## What do you hope readers take away from this book?

Ultimately, people overseas don't know a lot about what happened in Cambodia and it's one of the more significant crimes of the century. So hopefully, they'll take away what happened here and what we can learn from it. Also, that it's too easy to just dismiss the people like Duch who we put on trial as simply being unlike the rest of us. They're a lot like the rest of us and it's important to recognise that Duch is not a sociopath. He's a man who believed in something and he did his utmost to ensure that it succeeded. He ultimately failed and it was at a huge human cost but he's not that unusual. We see people like that all throughout history and we're all a bit like that. What happened in Duch's case were these little moral slippages – and sometimes, big moral slippages – through the '60s and '70s when he became a revolutionary. I think these incremental decisions are what turned him into the person he became and the person we know. If people get that out of the book, I think that's useful.



## THE ISSUE

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia – more commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal – finally got under way in 2006. Tasked with trying the regime members most responsible for the killing of roughly two million people in less than four years, the court has been plagued with problems of corruption and political interference. Owing to the time it took for the cases to reach trial, some senior members of the regime died before their sentencing dates. To date, the court has tried five former Khmer Rouge officials, sentencing three of them to life in prison for crimes against humanity. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected to the Vietnamese, has stated repeatedly that the tribunal must not move forward after Case 002, as he claims that its revelations risk plunging the country into another civil war.