

Professor Bunkong Tuon's Study Guide Questions for *When Broken Glass Floats*

Dr. Tuon has developed this list of discussion/reading questions over the years when teaching *When Broken Glass Floats*. He has taught this book at three different institutions.

1. "Asian-American Literature, Film, and History" and "First-Year Preceptorial," Department of English, Union College.
2. "Introduction to Asian American Studies," American Studies Program, Smith College
3. "Good & Evil," Department of Comparative Literature, at the University of Massachusetts

Study Guide Questions:

1. Studying the cover art, ask yourself what kind of story we should expect from this book. Explain your reasoning.
2. What is the message in "Please Give Us Voice"? Discuss the addresser and addressee of the poem. Why does Chanrithy preface her story with this poem?
3. Why does Chanrithy include maps, family tree, family pictures and drawings, newspaper articles, and many other para-textual elements in her autobiography?
4. Describe the life of a survivor as depicted in the prologue. Why does Chanrithy feel unsafe even though she is living in Portland, Oregon, many miles away from Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge? Is it better to confront one's past than to run away from it?
5. According to the prologue, why does Chanrithy write this story? Please consider the ethical, political, and psychological dimensions of her writing. Can writing change people's hearts and minds?
6. Describe Chanrithy as a child character. Is she someone to whom you can relate? Why or why not?
7. When was the first time you heard the word "war"? What images did that word conjure up for you? Now, discuss the effects of war on young Chanrithy's life. Why and for whom does she provide the historical context of this war?
8. Describe how war is personified in the early chapters of *When Broken Glass Floats*. How does the personification of war allude to its nature?
9. Who are the Khmer Rouge? How are they described by Chanrithy? How does Chanrithy's father feel about the Khmer Rouge cadets?
10. Describe Chanrithy's relationship with her father. How does she cope with his loss? Is it better for her not to know what happened to her father?

11. How has the world changed for Chanrithy and her family since the Khmer Rouge took control in Cambodia? Consider how the following have been impacted: (1) language, (2) clothing and appearance, (3) religion, (4) morality, and (5) parents. Why is religion a threat to the regime? What is the effect of calling your parents “comrade”?
12. Discuss the various ways Chanrithy and her family resist the Khmer Rouge.
13. Who is Vin? Describe the way he deals with his own dying.
14. Identify the numerous ways the Khmer Rouge dehumanize the Cambodian people.
15. Which aspects of life under the Khmer Rouge can you relate to, and which you find foreign? Consider the last time you felt *really* hungry (I mean, *starved*). What are you willing to eat to keep yourself alive?
16. How does Chanrithy feel about leaving her mother to work in the children’s labor camp? What are the choices does she have?
17. In this story of human cruelty, are there any moments of goodness? Are there certain aspects of yourself that you can never shed, regardless of the circumstances?
18. Discuss the many ways the Him family copes with the loss of their father. What is the driving force that keeps Chanrithy alive in the children’s work camp?
19. Who is Cheng? Why is she important in this story?
20. Are there any good Khmer Rouge? Why did they join the Khmer Rouge in the first place? How do they feel about the regime now that it is in power?
21. Describe the living conditions at the “hospital.” Who are the doctors and nurses? What ‘medicine’ is there? Describe the last conversation Chanrithy has with her mother.
22. How does Chanrithy survive after her mother’s death? What is the spirit of survival that she talks about in this chapter? How does she maintain hope and faith?
23. Describe Chea as an older sister. Why does the author include Chea’s poem? How does Chea’s death affect Chanrithy?
24. How does the Khmer Rouge address the diminishing Cambodian population? Describe the mass wedding scene. Who or what is the witness and judge to this wedding? How could this problem have been prevented? Why do you think Chanrithy ends this chapter on mass marriage with a scene depicting the execution of a couple?
25. What is life like for the surviving members of the Him family after the fall of the Khmer Rouge? How do they maintain semblance of family, culture, and tradition?

26. Who is Bang Vantha? Why does Ra want to marry him? Is Vantha a good husband and brother-in-law? Why do you think Vantha and Than are always fighting?
27. Discuss Chanrithy's definition of home. Do you agree with this definition?