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Book Review: No Dream Beyond My Reach by Sopheap Ly

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No Dream Beyond My Reach is an autobiography of Sopheap Ly, a Cambodian American medical doctor. Given that a portion of the sale of this book will be donated to the Twins Scholarship to assist students with financial needs in higher education, Ly’s main purpose for writing her memoir is to encourage readers to pursue their dreams via education. From early on in Ly’s life, there were many people who encouraged and guided her, for example, her father, Uncle Heng, the Thai nurse, her relative (donut shop owner), her high school teachers, her medical school friends, colleagues, and mentors. There were also moments of discouragement. For example, she had an uncle who chastised and abused her when she was struggling with her studies in Cambodia. Another time, her teacher at the rice field “school” attacked her for not paying attention to a boring lecture about communism. As an adult, Ly briefly mentioned how her relatives in California blamed her for going to a medical school so far away from them and that her loneliness was Ly’s own fault. During these moments of loneliness and sadness, Ly found comfort in her father’s encouraging words to never give up her dream.

The Introduction is the most important chapter to read in this book. Ly includes a “thank you” letter that she wrote to the dean of Howard University’s College of Medicine before her graduation. The letter is not only a brief summary of Ly’s journey to becoming a medical doctor, but a window into the author’s character and appreciation for the life she has created for herself despite the obstacles she faced as a child in Cambodia and later as a refugee growing up in a rough southern California neighborhood.

In the beginning of the book, Ly describes the good life in Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge raided the homes, separated the families, and forced the prisoners to work in the rice fields. Ly’s early childhood was spent trying to stay alive. Every day some prisoners were either killed or died from starvation. Regardless of age, all prisoners had to wake up by 3:00 a.m. and be at the rice fields by 4:00 a.m. without anything to eat until the end of the day. Four years later, the prisoners were released to face new challenges of rebuilding a new home. Ly and her 22 family members lived in a stranger’s basement for nearly a year until the family could afford to build a one-room bamboo house. During this period of uncertainty, Ly worked full time to help supplement her family’s income, and she attended school part time. Like her father,
she viewed education as a means to leave poverty behind. Ly makes it clear throughout the book that her high regard for education was a gift from her beloved father. This belief continued to shape her decisions throughout her formal education in Cambodia and later in the United States.

In order to come to the United States, the family hired a guide to help them escape to Thailand. They took a boat and walked for hours in the dark through the rainforest. The exhaustion, hunger, and thirst finally paid off when they arrived at the transition refugee camp, Chum Rum Tmei. Soon after, the family hired another guide to take them to Khao-I-Dang camp. The journey to Khao-I-Dang was just as dangerous as the first trip out of Cambodia, but the family was determined to increase their chance of coming to the United States. During the three years at Khao-I-Dang, Ly had to share a crowded space with twenty thousand other refugees. In addition to the danger of being attacked by Thai bandits, the refugees struggled with thirst and hunger during the days the delivery truck did not show up. Regardless of the harsh conditions at the camp, Ly was determined and eager to learn basic math, the Cambodian language, art, English, and the American way of life. She knew that her dream of going to America was not too far away.

That dream of coming to America became a reality for Ly and her family when their application to come to the United States was accepted. The family arrived in Dallas, Texas on a hot summer afternoon. On her way to her relatives’ house from the airport, Ly observed the homeless people looking hopeless and lost. For the first time, she realized that in America she must work hard to achieve her dreams. She did not want “to end up living in poverty in a country full of opportunity and hope” (p. 39). She was eager to learn English by watching TV and holding a Cambodian–English dictionary in her hands. Her first English teacher was TV. Soon after arriving in the United States as a teenager, Ly and her family moved to Fountain Valley, California. They lived in a violent, low income neighborhood. Although Ly escaped the torments under the Khmer Rouge regime, she found herself struggling to survive and fearing for her life in America. While attending Santa Ana High School, Ly remained resilient. At the same time, she set high standards for herself. While maintaining good grades, she also worked after school.

The middle part of the book describes Ly’s life as an undergraduate at California State University, Fullerton. She worked various jobs to support herself through college while maintaining As and Bs. For the first time, Ly was enjoying her formal education experience. She became even more determined to succeed in her studies and eventually achieve her dream of becoming a medical doctor. Ly also applied for any research opportunities available to increase her chance of getting accepted to a medical school. Ly’s effort helped her get accepted to Howard University’s College of Medicine.

In the last part of the book, Ly highlights the sacrifices that she made throughout her medical school career. No matter how difficult the path seemed, Ly somehow found a friend or a stranger who was ready and willing to give her a hand. In a way, her father’s spirit was always guiding her. Whenever Ly needed encouragement and support, the right people came into her life at the right time. Ly’s gratitude towards these individuals is evident throughout the book. In this part of the book, Ly expressed gratitude towards her friends and even her cousin, Uncle Heng’s daughter. Ly never mentioned her cousin’s name. In fact, she never revealed her parents’ names either. Perhaps Ly left out their names for privacy reasons, or she may have merely overlooked this detail. After all, half of Ly’s memoir focuses on her academic life.
Ly had to jump through many hoops to become a medical doctor. Not only did she have to maintain good grades, she had to pass the USMLE, a series of three board exams. The exams were endless! Her days were spent in classes, labs, and study sessions. Ly compared her experience of trying to pass the exams to the time when she was leaving Cambodia. Both experiences were miracles to her. Throughout her medical school career, Ly was always in a predicament due to pressure, lack of sleep, and financial hardships. In Ly’s fourth year of medical school, she passed the USMLE II and continued with her rotations from general surgery to internal medicine. Chapter 14 presents a more celebratory tone than the previous chapters, because everything that happened during this time was in anticipation of Ly’s graduation. Ly was also hopeful in other areas of her life. With graduation approaching, she could focus on romance and marriage for the first time. While waiting for her residency at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center to begin, she spent some time reading non-medical textbooks, particularly relationship books, since her focus shifted to getting married after graduation. It is interesting that Ly should mention a prospect at the end of this chapter with little to no details about him other than that he was like her father and Uncle Heng, with a good and kind heart. Again, Ly left out the details about her personal life which could make her seem distant for some readers.

Though half of the book focuses on her experience as a medical student, Ly made it seem like medical school had no room for extracurricular activities, personal relationships, or hobbies. For instance, Ly left out her spiritual beliefs, her relationships with family and friends, and her private thoughts and longings. Perhaps some readers might relate to Ly on a more personal level had more personal details been shared. As it is written, Ly is portrayed as a focused individual who had been programmed to achieve her dream without any personal or social life.

It should be noted that Ly left out her family. In Cambodia, for instance, after Ly ran away to see her mother in the rice field, she never again talked about her mother or any specific family member other than the ones she lost at a very young age. What was the role of her mother and other family members in Ly’s success? Moreover, her mother and other family members are missing from the photos that were included in the book. Other than the two pictures of Ly and her sister Sopha, most of the photos were of classmates and coworkers. Given that her family is so important to Ly, it would be nearly impossible for her to become a medical doctor without the support of her family. Instead, the memoir centers around Ly as the only family member working to support her family while studying hard in school.

Though the book is meant to inspire, it may be discouraging to some readers. Ly’s tone at times is very cut and dry. At some points, the book can come off as preachy in terms of how to achieve one’s dream instead of allowing readers to figure out what success means to them. If Ly’s story is a formula to achieving the American Dream, then it falls short in reaching a wide audience. For a first generation immigrant student, the book may be inspirational. To readers beyond the first generation however, of which many Southeast Asian youth are, Ly’s story may be discouraging. It is important to recognize that not all people share Ly’s perspective of the American Dream. Some people may question that if Ly could achieve her dream, why not other Southeast Asian American students? Other aspects of Ly’s life must be considered in order to avoid the generalization that her life represents all Southeast Asian American experiences. Depending on the reader’s purpose for reading this book, it can be seen as a guide for getting into and succeeding in medical school. For those who want to pursue their dreams, not necessarily the American Dream, Ly’s book can possibly be a source of inspiration. In either case, Ly’s story is a snapshot of her life as a first generation Southeast Asian-American woman.
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Should this book be used in a classroom to teach about Southeast Asian students, Chapter 16, Pearls of Wisdom, would be the chapter to begin the lesson on themes such as how the human spirit and the strength of love can overcome pain, suffering, and losses across time and space. Another important theme that stood out in the memoir is change. Ly’s life was changing constantly. Yet, her dream of becoming a physician remained unchanged regardless of the challenges and obstacles along her journey out of Cambodia to the United States. In the midst of these uncertainties, Ly found endless moments of appreciation and beauty to help her cope with the hardships. With so many themes throughout the book, this chapter summarizes the wisdom that Ly gained from her journey of personal growth and development while staying focused on her dream of becoming a medical doctor. The readers can appreciate and make sense of Ly’s pearls of wisdom while reading about her experiences from childhood to the day of her graduation from medical school. In each chapter, the class could find the pearls of wisdom and relate them to the readers’ lives. Perhaps the students could dramatize some of the scenes to make Ly’s story come alive and more personable.

In spite of the book’s shortcomings, Ly succeeded in telling the story about a daughter’s love for her father and how a father’s love continues to fuel a child’s dream, a woman’s determination and sense of gratitude, hope, and love. In almost every chapter, Sopheap Ly refers back to her father’s words: “Never give up on your dream. It is never beyond your reach.” Soon after Ly’s family and many other Cambodians were taken as prisoners, the Khmer Rouge soldiers brutally killed her father. In many ways, her father’s words symbolize the bloodline of the book and of the author’s life. She worked hard to keep her father’s dream alive as she struggled to achieve her childhood dream of becoming a medical doctor.

About the Reviewer

Rassami was born in Hoi Sai/Hoi Monh, a small village in northern Laos. At the age of five, she arrived in the United States with her family and lived in Oakland, California for the first four years before relocating to Fresno. After high school graduation, Rassami attended the University of Southern California, where she earned her bachelor’s degree, a preliminary Multiple-Subject Teaching Credential, and a minor in Creative Writing. After a couple of years of teaching in Fresno and earning her Professional Clear Teaching Credential from Fresno State University, she pursued a master’s degree in Language and Literacy Education at San Francisco State University while teaching full-time at the middle school level in various school districts in northern California.

In 2004, Rassami was offered the opportunity to pursue a doctorate degree in Cultural Perspectives and Comparative Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she co-authored a paper, “Drawing on Students’ Experiences, Cultures, and Languages to Develop English Language Writing: Perspectives from Three Lao Heritage Middle School Students,” with her academic advisor Dr. Jin Sook Lee. The paper is published in the Heritage Language Journal, volume 5, which can be accessed at http://www.heritagelanguages.org/. Currently, she is working on her dissertation. Rassami’s research interests include adolescent language and literacy education, academic writing development, Southeast Asian American students’ educational experiences and academic achievement, and multicultural and comparative education.
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