

An Oregon Poet Gives Voice to Cambodians

By Christopher Wicks

Poetry by Oregon poets often concerns itself with landscapes and traditions of our own region. However, in her 2006 book *Storytelling in Cambodia*, Portland poet Willa Schneberg considers life in that southeast Asian nation before, during, and after the upheaval caused by the Khmer Rouge.

Schneberg travelled to Cambodia as a member of a United Nations group entrusted with overseeing the first democratic elections in the country after the end of the dictatorship of Pol Pot. That hers is not a book by a self-congratulating angel of mercy is a measure of Schneberg's brave honesty about the breadth and difficulty of that task.

Instead, Schneberg's poems often take the perspective of Cambodians, speaking almost sarcastically of the patronizing element in the relentlessly "good intentions" of the Western visitors, who—literally and symbolically—cannot drink the water that they do. Indeed, their very presence recalls the European colonists of earlier centuries.

In other poems, such as "To The Members of the Archeological Society in London," Schneberg lets us eavesdrop on those earlier Westerners: "... only when Queen Victoria or Napoleon / Takes this god-forsaken place in hand / will something worthy of awe / rise anew toward heaven." The context in which the poet has placed them shows up their complacency.

Many poems in the collection have Cambodians or Westerners speaking with voices other than Schneberg's own. For example, the brief poem "With a Small Typewriter" is mostly a direct quote from the real-life last statement of a newspaper reporter in the capital, Phnom Penh, as he realizes that Pol Pot's revolution is closing in around him and that he will not live much

longer: “I alone in post office / losing contact with our guy ... May be last cable today and forever.”

Schneberg’s poems also record her conversations with survivors of “the killing fields,” who share truly horrific accounts, sometimes very difficult to read. Humbly, Schneberg considers whether the genocide of the 1930’s and 1940’s in central Europe enables her, as a Jew, to understand the violence that the Cambodians have suffered. She quotes a woman who says to her, “*You can’t tell me how happy / you make me, you know the killing fields,*” and comments, “I do not tell her I wasn’t there, / that I read about the Holocaust like any goy / who wishes to understand.”

Storytelling in Cambodia, Schneberg’s third book of poems, is eloquent, passionate, and profoundly challenging.