

“The best memoirs are riveting peeks through literary curtains” (“My Back Pages”)

**by Katherine A. Powers**

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George Bernard Shaw once observed that “the things most people want to know about are none of their business.” I assume he meant this as criticism, a snooty castigation of human peccadillo; in other words, it’s the sort of schoolmarmish comment that one might expect from an avatar of vegetarianism, Fabianism, and Esperanto. Well, I, personally, am hopelessly addicted to other people’s business – as long as I’m not called on to participate in it, of course. That’s why I love memoirs.

When I say this I am not talking about the ever-burgeoning variety of memoirs that take it for granted that I’m as fascinated by the subject as the writer is. A memoir must exercise art, or at the very least, manners and cunning. I still shiver with disgust at the memory of Nuala O’Faolain’s self-congratulatory, inexplicably popular *Are you Somebody?....*

***When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge*** by Chanrithy Him (Norton, \$23.95) is an astonishing and heartbreaking memoir of a girl who was 10 years old in 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. As I read it, I felt sick with anger and sorrow, drawn completely into the lives and personalities of the members of the author’s family.

Written in spare, visual prose that makes the world it describes tangible, the book follows the trials, expedients, lives, and deaths of the members of Him’s extended family. Once middle-class, they take the brunt of the Khmer Rouge’s program of “reeducation.” Execution, starvation, and disease take person after person. The scramble for food, water, shelter, and warmth, the separation of family members from each other, and the ever-present threat of extermination make up their circumstances. But overwhelming and dehumanizing as this is, Him’s pen illuminates individuals, revealing character, quirks of temper, and habits of thought – not always in a complimentary way. The result is that what could have been a tale of unrelieved, surreal horror and victimhood is a fully realistic and nuanced account of particular people in particular circumstances....