

FOREWORD BY JO CAULFIELD

My sister Annie started writing this book because she was fascinated and moved by story of Sophea, a classical Cambodian dancer who survived the Khmer Rouge.

After she made her first visits to the country she told me about the vivid colours of Cambodia and about this woman whose life - like that of countless other Cambodians - had been changed forever when the Khmer Rouge soldiers came to power and unleashed four years of genocide and madness.

This is a story of brutality and ballet. Sophea was determined to help heal her damaged fellow countrymen and woman spiritually, through traditional Khmer dance. That was the story Annie was telling.

I loved hearing about Sophea. Although she clearly trusted Annie, the relationship between them was, at times, spiky. This was not the typical hagiography you get from West meeting the East. Here were two outspoken, irritable and funny women; a million miles from the world of "Eat, Pray, Love".

By the time Annie was able to return to Cambodia to complete her travels for this book everything in her life had changed.

She had been diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer.

She had endured months of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She was in the limbo stage where your body has to recover, and you wait to see what the cancer will do next.

On the day she got her diagnosis, the oncologist, Dr Tom, asked her what was important to her; what did she most want to do with her time.

She said she wanted to go back to Cambodia and to Sophea, and finish telling her story.

Her partner and I think the oncologist, and maybe this is the profession's great skill, had managed to get to the essence of Annie. He didn't say it in words, but the message is clear: "You may have a limited time; what is important to you."

And Annie wanted to finish this book.

On her final trip to Cambodia, she sent Dr Tom a photo she took high up in the Dangrek Mountains. It was her way to thank him for helping get her there.

She told me she had 15 years or more. She didn't and she knew it. Well, that's too simple; I think she knew the truth of it, sometimes.

This was the last book that Annie wrote. You might argue that you don't need to know about the author; that the work should speak for itself. But I think what Annie was going through as she wrote it informs so much of this volume.

Within a few days of her return from Cambodia she had her first seizure. The cancer had spread to the brain. She continued writing. The morning after brain surgery she was sat up in her hospital bed, demanding her laptop.

She was so relieved that her brain was still her brain, that she was still 'herself'. Thrilled to be propped up in bed and writing; full of funny stories about her drug induced hallucinations and the

other people in the ward. She already had new ideas and was making notes, planning what she would write after she had finished this book.

She knew it was a cliché, but she felt very 'look at the trees - look at the sky'; a gleeful smile on her face.

For me this book is about those joyful moments in life. About recognising, creating and enjoying those small moments. That whether it's the Khmer Rouge or cancer, these forces of evil can't stop us from trying to make life a little bit better, trying to help and heal as Sophea does, by teaching kids to dance, or by doing something well.

Annie barely mentions her cancer in the book. She does tell Sophea but it's a few lines and she then dismisses it. But the fact of her cancer and that she was writing with an increasingly pessimistic prognosis is there, on the pages.

There is joy and wonder at life, but I can also hear her fears and her thoughts on the big life/death questions.

She would have written about the cancer, afterwards, if she had come through.

After coming home from Cambodia that last time, Annie died 11 and half months later. She continued working right up until a few weeks before her death.

'Be useful, be busy and try and do whatever you do well.'

That's what I learnt from my big sister.

And I can hear her voice now, adding: 'Jesus Jo, would you at least tell them that the book is also very funny and interesting?'

It is.

Jo