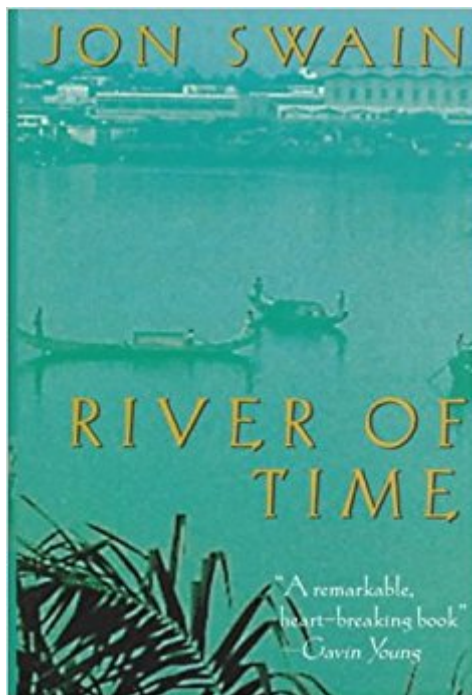


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# River Of Time: A Memoir Of Vietnam



## Synopsis

"A splendid memoir...a tale, at once tragic and beautiful, of love and loss, of coming of age and of witnessing the end of Indochina as the West had known it for more than a century."#151;Los Angeles Times Book Review. From the writer immortalized in the Academy Award-winning film The Killing Fields. --This text refers to the Digital edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

British journalist Swain will be familiar to many as one of the Western newsmen who worked so tirelessly to save their Cambodian colleague Dith Pran from the Khmer Rouge in the early days of the Communist victory in Cambodia. Presently a reporter for the Sunday Times, Swain spent five years in Cambodia and South Vietnam as a war correspondent. Those years were a time of American retreat, Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese victory, and seemingly unendurable suffering for the civilians of both countries caught in between the several armies. Written as a journalist's memoir, this is not a well-researched, definitive historical account of the Communist victory but an emotional, impressionistic view of the tragic experiences of people like Dith Pran who find themselves forced to deal with events far beyond their ability to control them. Already published in England, Swain's sympathetic portrayal of the collapse of Cambodia and South Vietnam is suitable for comprehensive Vietnam War collections.?John R. Vallely, Siena Coll. Lib., Loudonville, N.Y.Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A British foreign correspondent's often stirring chronicle of his life and times covering the war in

Indochina during the years 1970-75. Swain, an award-winning Sunday Times of London reporter, looks back at the most memorable moments of his life: his assignments in Phnom Penh and Saigon during the last five years of the American war in Indochina. He does so with a no-frills memoir that also contains, among other things, his trips back to Cambodia and Vietnam in the 1980s, and his three-month kidnapping by revolutionaries in Ethiopia in the late 1970s. The heart of the book, though, is Swain's white-hot recreation of the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge. Acting on "an irresistible impulse," Swain scrambled aboard the last flight into Phnom Penh from Bangkok on April 12, 1975. Along with several other journalists, he witnessed the first weeks of the infamous Killing Fields, the holocaust waged by the Khmer Rouge against the Cambodian people. Swain's account of the insane forced evacuation of the entire population of refugee-swelled Phnom Penh is not for the faint of heart. He sets out in often gruesome detail what he calls "the greatest caravan of human misery" he saw "in five years of war." Swain includes an account of his personal brush with death, after he and the American journalist Sidney Schanberg and the latter's Cambodian assistant, Dith Pran, were detained by guerillas and threatened with execution. Swain's version of that incident, and of Dith Pran's subsequent surrender to the Khmer Rouge, jibes with what Schanberg wrote in "The Death and Life of Dith Pran" (on which the movie *The Killing Fields* was based). Swain, Schanberg, and Pran lived through their Cambodian nightmare. But Swain also tells the stories of many others who perished along with hundreds of thousands of their fellow Cambodians. An accomplished memoir that will be remembered for its evocation of the horrors of the Cambodian Killing Fields. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

What a transition! "River" begins like a two-star autobiography of a self-centered journalist whose experiences with the country he writes about were confined to brothels or brief hedonistic excursions to the front lines (le Carre described such journalists as "war tourists"). However, when the author witnesses the Khmer Rouge taking over Cambodia in 1975, "River" abruptly and masterfully changes into a documentary of Hell. No painting, no movie, no poem could ever convey the comprehensive description of horror the author gives as the communists took over and began their auto-genocide in Cambodia. So many people promised a Worker's Paradise in Southeast Asia if America departed; instead, the region became an epic human catastrophe. The author writes well, and his style changes right along with the subject matter. He begins arrogantly enough, but as he encounters the Khmer Rouge takeover -- the fierce hatred in their faces while they shove hospital patients, with their bandages and IV lines, into the streets -- the author transitions into a strange kind of detachment, which doubtlessly helped him survive some intense psychological trauma. It

seems unbelievable that humans could do all he describes, but other authors and sources back up the events, so I am left believing him. At the end of the book, the author returns to postwar Vietnam and looks for a trace of its former identity amidst the destitution and depression. He finds his girlfriend's old cat near their former apartment, and it seems only the cat's combination of emotional aloofness, wariness around people, and ability to take advantage of Luck have allowed it to survive while so many humans perished, either mentally or physically. I bought this book to help prepare for a medical trip to Cambodia, and it helped understand what the people endured. Perhaps this book shows, no matter how optimistic we may be about the potential of the human spirit, we must also be cautious.

I purchased this book to read as I will be traveling to Cambodia in 2 weeks. I have also traveled in Vietnam. The book is a quick read and beautifully written in general. Sometimes it seemed to jump around a little in terms of telling the story. A major point to note is that he frequently includes phrasing (quotes from others) in French without translation (also sometimes in Khmer). I am able to understand much French so it didn't impact me much but could be clunky for anyone reading it who may have to use a translator or just do without understanding those points in the book. Without the translation the French phrasing came off as arrogant instead of genuine. *Mais je suis seulement une Americaine.* (see what I mean?) The book begins with the writer discussing his feeling of a compelling, romantic attraction to SE Asia and in particular Indo-China. He is spellbound. If I was younger maybe I'd be more riveted by the allure of it all. The colonial good-old days of opium dens and prostitutes and living the high life as an expat. Read: spoiled. Well, many adventurous young men with "all the advantages" are drawn to living out wild dreams in "developing countries". Luxury is cheap and you can get away with doing things illegal (maybe even considered immoral) that you could not in your home countries. Plus it's all so exotic. And as an expat you are wanted after and special (for your money and connections) except for when you're loathed and discriminated against. Well, the bad with the good. Fast forward a little in the book and Swain begins to be exposed to the raw and dangerous aspect of real war. He has close calls but somehow emerges alive. He goes through much emotional and mental gymnastics over how he feels about his privilege as a Westerner while the local people are being sent to certain death. It comes off as preoccupied in ways that are not necessarily self-examining. I missed the perspective on the experience that he was one man and there were many circumstances simply out of his control - as tragic and gut-wrenching as it was. A slightly confusing mixture of pure self-shaming and then almost glib reporting of terrible conditions and situations encountered during this period. During this time in VN

and Cambodia he develops a romance which he cannot sustain due to his obsession with war reporting. Going back to Europe is just too dull. He interjects into this book an episode wherein he is captured while reporting in Ethiopia which seemed a little out of place and added-on as it does not fit with the premise of the book "a memoir of Vietnam and Cambodia" (right there on the front of the book) but is an important part of his overall experience as a journalist. Swain has a strong distaste for Americans and the role of America in the war. (la meme histoire). A little America bashing. Similar to what Americans often meet from Europeans (we are simply too crude "gauche" and self-centered). Interestingly twice in the book he points out the heroism (his word) of two Americans who are supremely brave in helping Cambodians in danger. It would help me to have known more about developments leading to the war (including Dien Bien Phu, etc) as this book does not offer many details/facts about the war in VN and Cambodia. Not that this detracts from his story at all but I think it could have helped me put his stories more in context. Tales about particular people such as foreign mercenaries and boat people added much to a personal account of the war. A nice addition are the poems included at junctiures in the book which were written by a serviceman (killed at war). En fin, c'est un livre que j'aime mais, quel dommage, avec quelques problemes. (Swain made me do it).

This is a very beautiful book, written by a thoughtful and poetic writer with an incredible life story and a unique insight into Cambodia and Vietnam at an important time in their history. It is tragic, gripping, beautiful, personal, and historical. He shows true compassion for the suffering of the people in these countries, and a lot of deep personal introspection. The only fault I can find is a strong romanticization of French colonialism. He is clearly deeply in love with the world of French Indochina, and this passion is touching, but he fails to acknowledge that the French were outside powers taking of advantage of and imposing their will and their culture on these countries, and that that should be viewed as problematic. The deep loss he feels as this world crumbles is tinged with a colonialist stain, in which one feels that his love was not purely for Cambodia/Vietnam, but for the French version of them.

Utterly absorbing and brilliant. The best writing to come out of the Vietnam/Cambodia wars. Made famous by the movie The Killing Fields this memoir is so much more as it tells the story of a young handsome journalist's arrival in a world of exotic scenes smells drugs and women. The actual drama shown in the movie at the French Embassy in Phnom Penh is a small chapter in a long story of love adventure captivity and loss. Emotional and emotive, it must have been desperately hard to

write yet comes across as easy to read. Full of history, social commentary and personal memoir, this is a story of beauty and anguish told by a master story teller. If you have any interest in Southeast Asia you must buy this book. It is amazing and unforgettable. How I came across it I don't know but I am glad I did. Top flight story telling.

I got this book for my parents who were going on a river cruise of Vietnam and Cambodia. They LOVED this book and would highly recommend.

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