

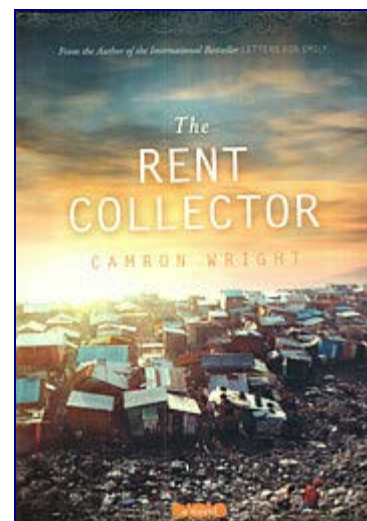
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Rent Collector A Novel by Camron Wright

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2017



This novel is meta-literature, a feature which only becomes clear in the middle of the book. It fits the genre of two novels I

very much enjoyed: [All the Light We Cannot See](#) by Anthony Doerr and [The Art of Hearing Heartbeats](#) by Jan-Philipp Sendker. Doerr takes us into the body of a pre-teen blind girl who reports the dramatic events of her WWII life to us. Sendker combines a young boy who can't see with a young girl who cannot walk and form them into a seeing-walking team with her on his shoulder: he became her legs and she his eyes. In this novel, Wright introduces us to Sang Ly who is *blind* to writing and consigned to eke out a living with her husband Ki Lim, picking trash from Stung Meanchey, the monstrous dump in which they live with their chronically-ill baby boy.

Their home is a cardboard structure with cardboard floors and a canvas flap for a door. Li works the trucks as they show up each morning to dump their garbage, which gives him a good chance at salvaging enough items to buy food for the day. Sopeap is a cranky old lady who shows up drunk to collect rent from them each month. Their toddler son, Nisay, has perpetual diarrhea, whose smell is barely perceptible over the stench of the brown rivers of the dump which surrounds their hovel, making a mockery of the dump's name which means *River of Victory*. Hopelessness hangs in the air like the thick haze of the smoking methane-fueled fires of the dump.

Ki Lim brings home a children's book for his son Nisay and is proud they will have rent money for the Cow, Sopeap the rent collector, who milks the rent money from them. Sang Ly cannot read to her son, but only tell a story she makes up from the colorful pictures, but he grabs the book from her and begins to nibble on the pages. That day Ki Lim is beaten and robbed by the thugs who roam the dump, and Ki uses their rent money for a knife to protect himself.

The Cow is upset when Sang Ly has no rent money and tells her, "Be gone by tomorrow!" As the Cow turns to leave, she is startled by the boy's book lying on the floor, examines it, and the normally brusque and unfeeling Sopeap Sin is speechless, trembling silently. Sang Ly ponders the event.

[page 21] How can a woman so empty and beyond feeling become so overcome with emotion that she can't speak? But there is more to the picture. In my mind, as I watch her study again each page of Nisay's book, it finally hits me.

"That's it!" I exclaim aloud.

I pause to let my head absorb, process, and ponder my discovery.

It was Sopeap's eyes, the way they darted at every picture, the timing of each turn of

the page, the soft movement of her lips. Is it possible? Yes, I'm certain of it. Sopeap Sin, the woman we call *the Cow* — she can read!

The Cow can read! Can Sang Ly ride the Cow and learn to read from her? A plan forms in her head. She gives the book to Sopeap, who wants to pay for it, but Sang says, "I *gave you* the book." Sopeap says, "Thank you." followed by, "I will mark your rent for this month paid in full."

[page 28] I choke, stumble, and the grab at my ears. Sopeap Sin, the Rent Collector, the greediest person I have ever known, has never been concerned about our well-being, and she has certainly never forgiven any rent.

Sang Ly dares to ask her, "Will you teach me to read?" The Cow is taken aback and wants to know why she wants to read. Sang expresses a hope of escaping the dump. The Cow says, "If you're looking for hope, you should know that it died at Stung Meanchey." But Sang persists and Sopeap agrees to teaching her on two conditions, 1. Sang does her homework assignments, 2. Sang gives her premium rice wine each Friday on class day.

Sang's husband is outraged that his wife wants to learn to read and suggests that the Cow is just pretending to know how to read, aiming only to get rice wine to drink. She plans to tell this to Sopeap.

[page 42] I wonder if she'll be angry, but instead the notion brings her obvious pleasure. "Sang Ly," she answers, "I have been called many names in my life. Some call me *Sopeap Sin*. Here at Stung Meanchey many call me *Rent Collector*. Still others call me *Cow*. But my most cherished title, the one I most revere, was a long time ago in the Department of Literature at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. There, for nine wonderful years, the most cherished of my life, my students called me *Teacher*.

Have you ever taught yourself how to read a foreign language? I did so with Greek. I knew how various letters of the alphabet were pronounced. "Alpha and Beta" formed the very name *alphabet*. In mathematics I learned theta, omega, sigma, and in physics, delta, gamma, kappa, psi, phi, rho, and so on. But knowing how to say *phi* didn't help me say the letter when used in a Greek word. I was reading Carl Jung and he gave footnotes in Greek, so I tried to decipher the various words, unsuccessfully, for a long time. Then, one *magical* day, I transliterated the Greek word *φαρμακων* into *pharmacoon*, and I knew how to say that Greek word for the first time! Our English words, pharmacy, pharmacology, etc, all came from the Greek word, *φαρμακων*! The letter *phi* sounds like our *f*. When Sang Ly successfully reads her first word, I celebrate along with her, experiencing her jubilation as I did when I had read my first Greek word.

She is examining a wrapper for an American Hamburger and trying to decode the word that was translated into her native language.

[page 53] I am about to toss the wrapper and resume working when my eyes roll across each of the letters that follow. I have been repeating the tones of the individual letters for so many days that my head doesn't realize it should quit. As my brain stitches the sounds together, my tongue and mouth work in unison to pronounce them. It's a short word, and in an instant, I understand that the letters grouped together spell the word *smanang* — meaning *luck*.

I am so astonished, I speak it aloud a second time, emphasizing each sound as my eyes pass over the letters, forcing my mind to confirm what my lips have already declared. "Sam-na-ng."

Without any help from Sopeap, I have read my very first word!

I glance around for someone with whom I can share this amazing moment. Ki is picking. Nisay sleeps. Other gatherers work at a distance. I alone am aware of the miracle that has just occurred.

I have read my first word!

What Rudolf Steiner said in [The Spirit of the Waldorf School](#) about never giving explanations to children after telling them a story made very good sense to me. Here are brief excerpts from my review of this series of lectures:

If we tell a story to our children before bedtime, they will have all sorts of feelings arise in them and we do best if we allow them to take these feelings to sleep with them. Steiner says we should avoid giving explanations after telling children stories, but rather we should allow them to take those feelings home with them.

[page 38] You destroy everything you want to achieve through telling the story by following it with interpretations. Children want to take stories in through feeling. Without outwardly showing it, they are dreadfully affected in their innermost being if they must listen afterwards to the often quite boring explanations.

If the teacher wishes to give helpful explanatory material, they do best if they give this material before the story. After the story each individual child will leave for home having had different reactions to the story which will live inside of them. Giving explanations after telling the story squelches the feelings, the delight, and all the various sensations, replacing them with some abstract explanation. This is a disservice to the children and quite the opposition of education, the very essence of which is *educare* — to draw out of the children their individuals feelings, reactions, and understandings.

[page 38, 39 italics added] When they hear the story, you must bring them to the heights of their souls for them to understand it. This process must conclude in reading the story, telling the tale, doing nothing more than allowing the children's sensations, already evoked, to take their course. You must allow the children to take their feelings home.

Sopeap, as the Teacher, fully understood this process and Sang Ly explains her subjective reaction to her Teacher's approach to stories, and an important lesson she learned about how literature differs from other writing.

[page 101] Since I am new to learning and still trying to grasp the depth of the stories we read, on occasion Sopeap will explain what is going to happen beforehand, so that when I come to relevant passages, my brain will click and whir, my eyes will light up, and I will make her feel as though she is doing an adequate job.

"In this tale today," she begins, "some say Captain Ahab represents evil as he seeks revenge. The white whale, on the other hand, is said to represent good."

"Does everything always have to mean something else?" I ask before we get started. Who knew that literature was so tangled and complicated?

"That is a wonderful lesson, Sang Ly. Remember it."

"What was it again?" I ask, not certain to what she was referring.

She repeats it for me. "In literature, everything means something."

After Sang Ly reads Sy Mao's *Advice for Growing Rice*, she notices a scribbled addition to the title "and Children". Suddenly the mundane instructions for rice farming take on a new aura of meaning. She re-reads the *Advice* aloud to her mother, replacing the word *rice* with *children*, and soon her mother is smiling in acknowledgment of the new meanings. Her mother asks, "Do two written words turn ordinary instructions into literature?" Sang Ly said that the effect seemed to be quite magical. When Sang Ly shares the *Advice* with her, the Teacher says "Words are not only powerful, but they are more valuable than gold." (Page 106)

Sang Ly, for whom gold is so valuable, doesn't quite take her meaning, so Sopeap gives examples, ending with this one:

[page 107] "If you want to tell your husband how much he means to you, what do you do? Do you give him gold?"

"He would no doubt prefer that."

"If you gave him garbage trucks filled with gold, you would give only empty riches.

To convey true love, Sang Ly, you whisper . . ."

She waits for me to fill in the answer, "Words."

"What words? What would you say to him?"

"I guess I would say, *I love you.*"

"Three words, Sang Ly, three simple words that communicate more, mean more, than worldly riches. Words provide a voice to our deepest feelings."

Sang Ly is beginning to question why Sopeap, who is such a wonderful teacher, is living in a garbage dump and collecting rent for a living. The teacher tells her the beautiful story of Sarann and her beautiful skirt. As the story unwinds we recognize it as a Cambodian story of Cinderella, a story whose plot appears in many cultures under different names. This is a pattern which Sopeap explains to Sang Ly.

[page 125, 126] It's not just Sarann and Cinderella. Look at all books, plays, movies — we keep writing the same plots, with the same characters, teaching the same lessons. Why do you suppose that is?" . . .

"I'm suggesting writers can't help themselves," she says. "Our trials, our troubles, our demons, our angels — we reenact them because these stories explain our lives. Literature's lessons repeat because they echo from deeper places. They touch a chord in our soul because they're notes we've already heard played. Plots repeat because, from the birth of man, they explore the reasons for our being. Stories teach us to not give up hope because there are times in our own journey when we mustn't give up hope. They teach endurance because in our lives we are meant to endure. They carry messages that are older than words themselves, messages that reach beyond the page."

Sang Ly is moved by her words and says, "Your words today are all so beautiful. Why did you ever quit teaching? Why would you give up on literature?"

[page 127, 128] "We all want to be Sarann, to have hope for our future. While I also want to have my story end happily, there's a problem that keeps getting in my way — I wake up most days to find I'm just another ugly stepsister . . . drinking rice wine at the dump."

Only when Sopeap forces a smile do I understand that her last comment is meant to be funny. "Besides," she adds, perhaps to relieve us both from an awkward moment, "if every story ended with a handsome prince, there wouldn't be anybody left in the kingdom to stand around and cheer."

Sang Ly gets confused about the stories she and Teacher read together, and is not sure how to take their meaning. As so often is happening now, Teacher jokes, and then answers her request for help with a quotation.

[page 174] I smile, and then, in true Sopeap fashion, she answers with another quote. "The poet Hunt said, 'There are two worlds: the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world that we feel with our hearts and imagination.' I think if you follow his advice, you'll do okay."

Engineering is the world we measure with line and rule. Literature is the world we feel with our hearts. The former is the material world; the latter is the spiritual world. What works in one world is useless in the other.

When Sang Ly first expressed interest in learning to read, Ki Lim said it was useless. But when they leave

to visit her uncle and are dumped on the streets of Phnom Penh, Sang Ly can read which buses to take. She is approached by an elderly woman who asks, "Can you tell me which bus leaves for Seim Reap?" Sang Ly finds the sign and confidently points out the bus for the woman.

Later on the old bus that the author describes as "a rickety old thing that bears the scars of boisterous children who long ago grew to adulthood," Sang Ly reads a long story to comfort her son, and soon everyone on the bus is listening to her. When the bus arrives before the story's end, one man keeps the driver busy for a few minutes so Sang Ly could finish the story. The man insists on paying her for telling the story. As she waits with her family as the bus leaves, everyone on the bus is waving goodbye to her. Ki Lim wants to know what the man told her.

[page 184] I pull out the folded money and look at the amount. It's enough to cover all of our fares and then some. "He said I'm better than *buk-on-tape*," I tell him. Ki wrinkles up his nose. "Who is *buk-on-tape*?"

When they arrive back at the River of Victory, Sopeap is nowhere to be found. Sang Ly puzzles over where she might have gone. Then she remembers the elephant story and knows where to go. When she arrives there, we learn the rest of Sopeap's story, as the people show up to thank her for the many blessings she bestowed upon them, a story which will leave you with renewed faith in humanity and good feelings for a long time.

