

The Rent Collector

by Camron Wright

Reading Group Discussion Questions

See www.TheRentCollectorBook.com for more questions and additional information, including author comments on many of the discussion topics.

1. In the opening pages of *The Rent Collector*, Sang Ly's grandfather promises that it will be a very lucky day. What role do you think luck plays in our lives? How does the idea of luck reconcile with the novel's epigraph, the quote from Buddha on the opening page?

2. After reading *Sarann* (the Cambodian *Cinderella*), Sopeap and Sang Ly discuss how story plots repeat, reinforcing the same lessons. Sopeap calls resurfacing plots "perplexing" and then asks, "Is our DNA to blame for this inherent desire to hope? Is it simply another survival mechanism? Is that why we love *Sarann* or *Cinderella*? Or is there more to it?" How would you answer? What are possible explanations for the phenomenon?

3. Sang Ly says that living at the dump is a life where "the hope of tomorrow is traded to satisfy the hunger of today." How might this statement also apply to those with modern homes, late-model cars, plentiful food, and general material abundance?

4. Sang Ly mentions that Lucky Fat has an "uncanny knack of finding money lost amongst the garbage." Do you suppose someone may have been helping him by placing money for him to find? If so, who?

5. Speaking of her clock, Sang Ly says, "Sometimes broken things deserve to be repaired." What might she be referring to more than the clock?

6. The shelters at Stung Meanchey are built to protect the resting pickers from the sun. What other purposes do they serve? What "shelters" do we build in our own lives? How would you react if the "shelters" in your life were constantly being torn down?

7. At first, Ki is reluctant to welcome change, specifically to see Sang Ly learn to read. He says, "I know that we don't have a lot here, but at least we know where we stand." What do you think he means? When have you found it hard to accept change?

8. Sopeap tells Sang Ly: "To understand literature, you read it with your head, but you interpret it with your heart. The two are forced to work together—and, quite frankly, they often don't get along." Do you agree? Can you think of examples?

9. *Koah Kchol*, or scraping, is an ancient remedy Sang Ly says has been practiced in her family for generations. Do you have your own family remedies that have been passed down? What are they, and do they work?

10. Sang Ly and Sopeap discuss dreams. Have you ever had a dream that changed your attitude, decisions, or outlook? Was it a subconscious occurrence or something more?

11. In a moment of reflection, Sang Ly admits that she doesn't mean to be a skeptic, to lack hope, or to harbor fear. However, she notes that experience has been her diligent teacher. She asks, "*Grandfather, where is the balance between humbly accepting our life's trials and pleading toward heaven for help, begging for a better tomorrow?*" How would you answer her question?

12. Sang Ly speaks often to her deceased grandfather, but not to her father, until after her meeting with the Healer. Why did her attitude change? How might the same principle apply to relationships in our own lives?

13. Sopeap always wears thick brown socks, no matter the weather. As Sopeap lies dying, Sang Ly notices that the socks have slipped, exposing scars on Sopeap's ankles. How would you presume Sopeap got these scars? How might Sopeap's scars (or rather their source) have influenced her appreciation for the story of the rising Phoenix? In what ways does Sopeap rise from her own ashes, literally and figuratively?

14. The story ends with Sang Ly retelling the myth of Vadavamukha and the coming of Sopeap to Stung Meanchey. By the time you reached the final version in the book's closing pages, had you remembered the original version in the book's opening pages? How had the myth changed? How had Sopeap changed? How had Sang Ly changed?

15. When the story closes, Sang Ly and her family are still living at Stung Meanchey. Are you satisfied with the ending, that they remain at the dump? Why or why not?

Additional Questions

1. Lucky Fat is generally cheerful. In fact, most of the people who actually work and live at Stung Meanchey are happy, despite the fact they are only "earning enough money to buy food on the very day they eat it." If you had to move to the dump today, could you be happy in your circumstance? Explain why or why not.

2. Sopeap warns Sang Ly: "Life at the dump has limitations, but it serves a plate of predictability. Stung Meanchey offers boundaries. There are dangers, but they are understood, accepted, and managed. When we step out of that world, we enter an area of unknown." What boundaries do we accept or create for ourselves? In reply, Sang Ly says, "I'm just talking about literature." Sopeap

responds, “And so am I.” What do you suppose Sopeap is trying to imply? What might literature represent?

3. When returning from the province, Sang Ly declares, “Home. I let the word ring in my head. Stung Meanchey—a dirty, smelly, despicable place where our only possessions can be carried in two hands. ‘Yes,’ I confirm, ‘we are home.’” Contrast this with her declaration that for Sopeap, “the dump was never her home—no matter how hard she tried to make it so.” Why the difference? Where is home for you and why?

4. Sopeap’s last name is Sin. Do you think this was intentional by the author? If so, what are the implications and what parallels might be drawn?

5. Sitting beside Sopeap on the garden roof, Sang Ly says, “As the clouds close in, an evening rain begins to fall. The drops are large, like elephant tears, and as they smack the floor, they break into tiny beads that dance and play across the tiles.” How is the rain symbolic? What other symbolism did you notice?