



From the Land of Green Ghosts

By Pascal Khoo Thwe
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Introduction

"Nearly every night I dream of the Shan State, of Mandalay, of the jungle. The landscapes of my dreams resemble real ones, yet they shift like images on silver screens..."

For Pascal Khoo Thwe, his childhood as part of the Padaung tribe is a time defined by the closeness of family and the rhythms of life in the small village of Phekhon. His grandmothers spin mesmerizing stories about the myths of creation, which blend with the teachings of the Catholic Church. The daily practices of the Padaung -- rice-wine making and drinking, playing football, and tending to crops and animals -- are punctuated by BBC radio broadcasts that tell of the political turmoil rumbling throughout the country. As a young man, Pascal journeys to Mandalay to study English literature at the University -- where students are forbidden to express their opinions about the texts or they face severe punishment. Outside his village for the first time, Pascal is witness to the harsh reality of how decades

of war, foreign occupation, and a totalitarian regime have devastated the country. In Mandalay, where he works as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant, a chance encounter leads to a meeting with Dr. John Casey, a professor at Cambridge University on a tour of Burma. An unlikely connection is forged between the two men, instigated by a shared love of the works of James Joyce. Forced to abandon his studies when the government orders the closing of the country's universities, Pascal heads home to the sanctuary of Phekhon. But the conflict soon reaches even the most remote parts of Burma, and although he shuns the violence of war Pascal discovers he has a gift as an orator and speaks out against the government's atrocities. Soon the Burmese Army is on the hunt for Pascal and other students, and he is forced to leave Phekhon and join the rebel forces. He spends the next several months in the jungle on the Thai-Burmese border, where illness is rampant and attacks by the Burmese Army are frequent. A second chance encounter occurs when a Western journalist visiting the rebel camp offers to hand-deliver a letter from Pascal to Dr. Casey, and a correspondence develops between the two men. When Dr. Casey arranges to have him smuggled out of Burma, Pascal is consumed by feelings of guilt at abandoning his home, his family, and his comrades. With the hope that he will be able to help his people by revealing their plight to the outside world, he journeys to England. Under the guidance of Dr. Casey, Pascal becomes the first person from the Padaung tribe to attend Cambridge University. With language that is by turns lyrical and poignant, laced with humor and told with an insight that is well beyond his years, Pascal Khoo Thwe has created in *From the Land of Green Ghosts* both a mesmerizing autobiography and a powerful tribute to the homeland he left behind.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the Foreword John Casey writes, "There is a good measure of humor both in his observation of his tribe and its customs and (which is more surprising) even at some of the most dangerous moments in the jungle fighting." Did Pascal's sense of humor surprise you? What do you think was his motivation for writing *From the Land of Green Ghosts*?
2. "My grandmother Mu Wye was the first woman who influenced my way of thinking. Her influence was as strong as the teachings of the Church" (pg 58). The women in the Padaung tribe are revered for their storytelling ability. What role does storytelling play in this culture? How would you describe Pascal's relationship with his mother and grandmothers? How about with his father and grandfathers?
3. Tradition and ritual form a large part of the everyday existence of the Padaung. Of the rituals and traditions the author describes, which did you find the most interesting and why?
4. Why does Pascal decide not to pursue a life in the seminary? How might his life have been different if he had chosen to stay on this path?
5. Pascal became friends and then lovers with Moe, a young woman he met while at the university in Mandalay. What is about Moe that attracted Pascal to her? How was he affected by Moe's death?
6. Twice the Burmese government demonetized the currency. Why did they choose to do this? How did it affect not only the country's economy but also the circumstances of individual people, including Pascal?
7. While he is in the jungle with the rebel forces, Pascal chose to help others in many different ways -- he shares the money Dr. Casey sent to him, he taught the rebels' children, and he regularly crossed the border into Thailand for medical supplies. What do his actions during this time reveal about his character?
8. When he leaves Burma to journey to England, Pascal states that he believes there is a "terrible egoism" in his leaving his comrades (pg 235). Do you agree with this statement? Why do you think he ultimately chose to leave?
9. What scene in the book did you find the most compelling, and why? How does this scene relate to the overall story?
10. Why do you think Dr. Casey chose to help Pascal, a stranger to him? How does Pascal's life change once he is England? What adjustments must he make as he enters life at Cambridge?