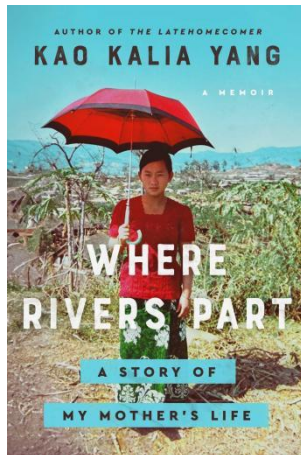


Review: A Hmong American's intimate memoir of war and displacement

Laurie Hertzell



Where Rivers Part: A Story of My Mother's Life

By Kao Kalia Yang

(Atria Books; 336 pages; \$28.99)

Kao Kalia Yang's third memoir begins in Laos as her mother's family is preparing to flee. Intimate and melancholy, it's the last in her trilogy of family memoirs, and it's her best. "Where Rivers Part" takes place over 50 years and is told through the eyes and voice of Yang's mother, Tswb (pronounced "Choo") Muas. It's written in first person, with Yang channeling her mother in poetic prose.

"The soldiers are coming our way," she writes. "It is a matter of days." The villagers have reason to flee — Hmong people had assisted the Americans during the Vietnam War and now are being hunted down and slaughtered by the communist Pathet Lao.

Teen-aged Tswb doesn't want to leave. She loves their wood-and-bamboo house in the mountains. The landscape is verdant, with citrus trees and a garden of chiles and spices. Here, too, is her father's grave.

Yang, who is Hmong American, lives in Minnesota. Her previous memoirs, "The Latehomecomer" (about her grandmother) and "The Song Poet" (about her father) won Minnesota Book Awards. "The Song Poet" was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize.

War and displacement are tragic facts of modern life. There are many books that tell the stories of refugees, and Yang's is one of the best. It moves from the jungles of Laos to a refugee camp in Thailand, where the family lived for seven years (and where Yang was

born) and, finally, to wintry Minnesota, where “the grass... is covered beneath a thick mess of frozen snow, now dirty and gray.”

Kao Kalia Yang is the author of “Where the Rivers Part.”

Photo: Courtesy of Kao Kalia Yang

This journey across the world takes more than a decade, and it is told simply and earnestly in Yang’s limpid prose. She takes her time, and the pace of the book is luxurious. She doesn’t say that it snows; she says, “The wind is angry tonight, and the sky is letting down small flakes.” She never says they are impoverished, or even poor. She writes, “We all existed in a picture of need.”

Hmong culture, traditions and beliefs are woven into the narrative — the connection with ancestors; the importance of shamans; the fake names given babies to keep evil spirits from stealing them; the marriage ceremony that involves a “sacred chicken... flung over their heads.”

This book is about becoming a refugee twice over, and Yang portrays that life in visceral detail — the constant hunger, the deadly crossing of the Mekong River, the filthy refugee camp with its rivers of sewage and predatory guards; the arduous night-shift factory work and casual racism in America.

But she also writes about more intimate things — the ebb and flow of love between husband and wife, Tswb’s six miscarriages, her heartbreaking attempt to end her own life. That section moves into third person, powerfully illustrating how detached Tswb was from herself at that time.

The book’s heartbeat, though, is the immense strength of family and the love between mothers and daughters.

As is Hmong tradition, when Tswb married, she left her family and joined her husband’s, “my spirit freed from my ancestral home and welcomed into his.” But she didn’t realize when she walked away with him through the jungle at age 16 that she would never see her own mother again, and the book is laced with grief. Too many Hmong women, she notes, “had to give up our mothers far too fast, long before we were ready.”

Yang’s memoirs of Hmong life, traditions and displacement are not just powerful additions to the canon of immigrant literature — they are powerful books about life itself.

Laurie Hertzell is a freelance writer.