



Q & A with

Kari Grady Grossman

1) *Bones That Float* is an intriguing title. What is the significance of that phrase?

Kari Grady Grossman: “Bones That Float” is the English interpretation of the Cambodian phrase ch’ung un deahdt; it has a meaning similar to good karma. Bones that float are good luck, they can rise above suffering and float away. My son’s birthmother described him as having bones that float in a letter to us.

2) *Bones That Float* reads like a novel. How did you incorporate your skills as a documentary producer into writing the book? How did you transport yourself mentally and emotionally into the stories you were writing? How did you escape the haunting passages when your writing day was done?

KGG: As a longtime photographer and video producer, I have a visual sense of how a story should look and I try to paint that picture with words. I often close my eyes and put myself in the scene I’m writing about: What does it look like? What does it smell like? How am I feeling about what is happening in the scene? Honestly, during the writing of some of the more suffering-related scenes, I would often get so exhausted I would lay down on the floor of my writing studio and sleep. It was a lot to process.

3) Why did you develop three parallel storylines? How did you do to earn the trust of Maly and Sovann to share their stories?

KGG: I wanted to bridge the gap between the American worldview and the Cambodian worldview and I figured that best way to achieve that was through personal narratives. Amanda is the Cambodian who became American and her story gives us the historical context of the Viet Nam war. Sovann is the Cambodian who never leaves, stuck in the modern day ramifications of that war. I am the bridge between the two, the American who becomes Cambodian in a sense. I want Americans to see Cambodia through Cambodian eyes because much of the suffering is a result of the politics between our two countries caused by cultural differences. I gained their trust through friendship, giving my time to their needs whenever possible, and being genuine and active about helping Cambodia build a better future.

4) Normally, people who adopt internationally have no desire to connect with their child’s birth family. But for you, that desire was strong. Why?

KGG: The initial reason was because we got two different stories of our son’s origins. The official paperwork said “abandoned” and “unknown” but when we asked his nanny at the orphanage, she produced a sheet of paper with the name and village of his birthmother and other children, one of which was dead and another one living with her. If it was true, he had a sister. Little girls in Cambodia are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. We had to find out the truth. But as time went on, it came to be more about letting her know what had happened to her son. As I grew to love him, I could not bear the thought of her suffering with not knowing. I also came to see his truth as his birthright.



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5) What was the most important thing you learned about yourself during the process of writing *Bones That Float*?

KGG: Writing a book is really hard work. The hardest part was digging into my own story and grappling with the guilt that tough questions raise and learning to forgive myself, the system, and the world for its wrongs. It strengthened my faith in God. I feel I've been graced with the understanding that there is a larger, sacred and evolutionary point to all of this cultural interconnectedness that international adoption brings. That's what I tried to communicate through Cambodia's story: Love, Forgiveness and Compassion for a tragic past, a flawed adoption system, and hope for a better future.

6) You subtitle your book, "A Story of Adopting Cambodia," suggesting that when people adopt trans-culturally, they become a transcultural family. What has it been like for you to "adopt" the Cambodian culture?

KGG: I love it that I got to "become" at least partly Cambodian, and now Indian as well with the adoption of our daughter Shanti. This is the secret, extra-special bonus that no one tells you about before adoption – the way your heart suddenly expands to incorporate a much broader cultural experience. The friendships I've gained in the Cambodian community are invaluable beyond measure to me personally (whether my children will feel the same or not remains to be seen). I will admit, however, it does require some changes in lifestyle choices. For instance, we used to be into mountaineering and mountain biking, but you don't find many Asians doing those things, and we find ourselves making different social and recreational choices that put us in closer contact with the Asian community.

7) You established a school in Cambodia. Why? How is *Bones That Float* supporting the school?

KGG: We wanted to give back to Cambodia because we knew that the vast majority of children would never be adopted, and that even children with families are in dire straights. We decided that the best way to affect real and lasting change, so that less children would ultimately end up in orphanages was through education. Also, we wanted to maintain direct contact with our son's birth culture.

Bones That Float was written to explain how we came to adopt a village through it's school, and how Cambodia came to need all the love we can give them. 25% of the proceeds from the book are donated to ongoing education efforts at the Grady Grossman School in Cambodia.

8) How would you encourage people to "give back" to the country from which they adopt?

KGG: I know a lot of adoptive parents support child care and orphanages, important work which is vital and necessary. But I would encourage people to look at the broader issues that create the child care crises, building capacity in education and health care institutions, and economic development for women.



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9) You turned down a publishing offer from Beacon Press, left your agent, and opted to start a new publishing company, Wild Heaven Press, the very opposite of what most writer's aspire to do. Why did you choose to reject the conventional publishing industry?

KGG: This was an extremely difficult decision. Of course, on the personal level, I wanted to publish with a brand name just like every other writer. However, I have 500 kids in Cambodia attending our school who I consider family. I want my literary work to support my humanitarian work and the economic realities of today's conventional publishing model were not going to allow that to happen. To me it was more important for my story of Cambodia to benefit Cambodians, rather than an Americans. Our marketing campaign is a grassroots, word of mouth strategy, and 25% of the book is donated directly to our school in Cambodia. No publisher in America could compete with that.

10 a) What was the sight/experience that most delighted you on your first trip to Cambodia?

KGG: Seeing the sunrise over Angkor Wat, then hearing the whiny music emanating from the modern day temple at the side entrance. We gravitated over there and sat down with a bunch of Cambodian families for a communal meal. It was a Buddhist holiday of some sort, at the time we didn't know much and couldn't really communicate but I was struck by the generosity and the way that the people honored us.

10 b) The sight/experience that most frightened you?

KGG: Seeing a huge wall-sized map of Cambodia made with the skulls of Cambodian people exhumed from the killing fields was pretty gruesome. But the most haunting was the fierce hands of the children clawing at the window for money after they had dove between the car wheels to push boards into place for a makeshift bridge. I will never forget the strength and desperation in those little hands.

11) What's your favorite aspect of Cambodian culture? What's the aspect you have the most difficulty relating to?

KGG: I love the food, the music, the silk, the saffron robes, the generosity, the beauty, the humor, and the relatively egalitarian status of women. I could do without the jealousy, nepotism, and showiness with regard to money.

12) How do you see the future unfolding for Cambodia?

KGG: The future of Cambodia is scary to me because of how the culture of corruption teaches children to live, what the wanton destruction of the environment will do to the water and thus, food resources, and also the disparity between the educated urban dwellers and the uneducated rural people – exactly the same dynamic that fueled the failed communist revolution. That is why I work at the grassroots level with children in rural schools. The Cambodian government is not going to change, change will have to come from the bottom and work its way up.