



The Gate

François Bizot

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Selected as a Book of the Year in 2017 in the *Scottish Herald*

'The beauty of the prose is in contrast with the horror anticipated by this superbly subtle narrative'
Kapka Kassabova

In 1971, on a routine outing through the Cambodian countryside, the young French ethnologist François Bizot is captured by the Khmer Rouge. Accused of being an agent of 'American imperialism', he is chained and imprisoned. His captor, Douch - later responsible for tens of thousands of deaths - interrogates him at length; after three months of torturous deliberation, during which his every word was weighed and his life hung in the balance, he was released. Four years later, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh. François Bizot became the official intermediary between the ruthless conqueror and the terrified refugees behind the gate of the French embassy: a ringside seat to one of history's most appalling genocides. Written thirty years later, François Bizot's memoir of his horrific experiences in the 'killing fields' of Cambodia is, in the words of John le Carré, a 'contemporary classic'.

The Gate Details

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Author : François Bizot

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Jim says

John Le Carre writes in the foreword, "Now and then you read a book, and, as you put it down, you realize that you envy everybody who has not read it, simply because, unlike you, they will have the experience before them."

It might smack of blasphemy to compare this to "Life and Fate," but this memoir reads like a novel and Bizot covers personal psychology and granular and moving characterization in the midst of enormous historical earthquakes in a way that reminded me of Grossman's magnum opus.

One of the many amazing scenes: while in captivity and mostly manacled by his ankles, Bizot saves a little girl from dying of malnutrition; once healthy, she visits him and rewards him by tightening his manacles... for he is first and forever only an imperialist.

Also I was amazed by his honest view that "... fear of appearing to support the Americans so froze minds that nowhere in Europe were people free enough to voice their indignation and denounce the lies (of the Vietnamese and Cambodian communist revolutions)."

I found myself somewhat disappointed when his imprisonment is over not even halfway through the book, but the consequent scenes in Phenom Phen five years later and the ending at the border are far more chilling, in that his tenuous freedom during the triumph of the Angkar at the dawn of Year Zero is far more dreadful than the brutal binaries of the prison camp.

Also the postscript of his visit to his captor in prison, when he learns the true stakes of a meal long ago, and how one of the most jovial participants at the repast had in fact repeatedly demanded that Bizot be killed, is a reveal worthy of narrative fiction. Bizot learns that only the persistence of the man who became the head of the secret service (who became one of the world's most notorious torturers) and the decision of Brother Number One himself spared Bizot, with him none the wiser!

In the aftermath of "Life and Fate", I read a few books on Stalin; I am now doing the same with "The Gate", as a testament to how evocative I found it.

Korynn says

Mr Bizot is definitely passionate about Cambodia, in fact he seems the epitome of the volatile, emotional Frenchman. His love for the country and its customs that was given so wholeheartedly is corrupted by the destruction of the country he loved by the Khymer Rouge.

He writes in a possessed non-linear fashion about his capture and imprisonment, his eventual tenuous friendship with a man who became a mass-murderer, who astoundingly gave him a precious gift, that of freedom. That Douch or Duch was undoubtably a torturer is well documented in these pages, but it is the all too human Bizot tormented by his helplessness at how Cambodia is changing for the worse around him that is the soul of the book.

The latter half of the book is spent on his final month in Cambodia in a newly-invaded Phnom Penth at the French Embassy, forced to witness no end of indignities and continually forced to accept less and less in the desparate hope he wouldn't have to leave and accept that Cambodia and his work there with Buddist

traditions was over.

It's true his writing has a bit of an imperialist taint to it. I love it when he says things like "the French knew how to treat Cambodians!" It's kind of hilarious. But I know what he means and I appreciate his kind intentions.

Edgar says

This book comprises two main parts: concerning Bizot's incarceration by the Khmer Rouge in the early 1970's and later in 1975 when he was the official go-between at the French Embassy dealing directly with the Khmer Rouge. Bizot's captor, Kaing Guk Eau, alias Duch, just last year had his sentence increased to life imprisonment at the Cambodian UN backed war crimes court. It was thanks to Duch that Bizot was eventually freed and he does show gratitude to Duch for sticking his neck out on his behalf. He concedes he is a man of principle, however misguided he may be. At the start of the book he writes: " I detest the notion of a new dawn in which Homo sapiens would live in harmony. The hope this Utopia engenders has justified the bloodiest exterminations in history." That Duch had appealed his 19 year sentence reveals that, despite all the atrocities, he still believed his cause was just and the end justified the means.

At the French Embassy in 1975, there are desperate accounts of Cambodians frantically trying to get out of the country. The most harrowing episode involved a French journalist, one Laporte. His papers were in order for his Cambodian wife and child to leave with him, but at the last check point, Laporte baulked, fearing the consequences when reunited with his French wife and family back in France. When he refused to confirm it was his Cambodian wife, Bizot, who was there intervened "answer him, for fuck's sake" (the book's only expletive). In no time they were harrowing scenes as the wife and child were dragged back into Cambodia. Bizot spares no details of this heart wrenching scene, ensuring everlasting shame – one hopes - for Laporte. Its strange that a number of reviewers are unsympathetic to Bizot, and find his book badly written - I found him a most elegant and stylish writer, with nothing lost in translation. Is it that something about the French that irks people ? Or, more likely, reaction to his attitude towards America's intervention in Cambodia - "....their irresponsibility, their colossal tacklessness, their inexcusable naivete, even their cynicism frequently aroused more fury and outrage in me than did the lies of the communists". One American reviewer (on Amazon books site) goes so far as to suggest Laporte was Bizot himself, because of his guilty conscience towards his own Cambodian wife – about whose fate he is, admittedly, strangely silent. But isn't that a bit over the top ?

Lauren says

The Gate is Francois Bizot's account of his experience with the Khmer Rouge: of his own imprisonment (supervised by the now-notorious Duch) and, a few years later, of his struggle to assist those who were caught in the crossfire of the Khmer Rouge's "liberation" of Phnom Penh. Bizot, who at the time of his imprisonment was an academic researching Buddhist traditions in rural Cambodia, uses evocative prose to tell a compelling story. I would recommend this book to anyone looking to gain a more personal perspective into what can otherwise be a simply overwhelming tragedy.

Cameron says

Bizot's book describes his captivity in Cambodia during the latter months of 1971 and then moves to spring, 1975 when the Khmer Rouge capture Phnom Penh, forcing him to take refuge at the French Embassy with several thousand others (as depicted at the beginning of *The Killing Fields*). His writing is lucid, elegant and insightful, and his role during this event was crucial: he was one of the few foreigners who spoke Khmer fluently and the only one with any real experience with the Khmer Rouge. The book reads like a great adventure novel and Bizot's love for Cambodia and its people contrasts sharply with the brutality of the communists as they seize control of the nation. Bizot had a unique opportunity to engage them in intelligent debate and expose the contradictions and flawed thinking behind their quest for power.

Oddly enough, Bizot barely mentions the fact that he was forced to abandon his Khmer wife and daughter, who almost certainly died during the Pol Pot regime. In a book so full of pain and sorrow, this seems puzzling, although the author may have been reticent to touch this deepest of all agonies.

As a historical document, this book is a marvel of detail and considered analysis, totally eclipsing Schanberg's (*The Death and Life of Dith Pran*) crude description of the embassy drama and going far beyond Jon Swain's brief chapter in *River of Time*. Bizot owes his life to the Khmer Rouge Executioner Douch, who persuaded Pol Pot to release him over the bloodthirsty demands of Ta Mok. These three Khmer Rouge leaders went on to kill hundreds of thousands of Cambodians and at least 30 non-Asian foreigners, of whom Bizot was the only one to be released.

Easily the best work of non-fiction I have ever read.

Shomeret says

Although Francois Bizot's ordeal as a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge is central to this memoir, I was also interested in his work as a scholar of Buddhism. When he described village Buddhism in the countryside of Cambodia as possibly including aspects of pre-Buddhist shamanism, I was reminded of Tibetan Buddhism which includes aspects of the pre-Buddhist shamanistic religion of Tibet, Bon-po. I also found it highly ironic that the Marxist materialist Khmer Rouge considered the peasants the most ideal citizens apparently without realizing that many of them were practitioners of this very mystical form of Buddhism.

This book shows that the Khmer Rouge had a very contradictory relationship with France. On the one hand, they wanted to court France as an ally because France recognized the Khmer Rouge. On the other hand, they certainly didn't respect France's embassy. I suspect that the history of Cambodia having been colonized by France is largely responsible for this ambivalence. They probably didn't want to be too cozy with their former colonizer.

Unlike other reviewers, I found Bizot very sympathetic. He tried to do the best he could for his Cambodian friends. I would never judge someone in such desperate circumstances. It seems to me that if you haven't been imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge, you couldn't possibly know how you yourself would react. Maybe you would have responded in the same way as Bizot.

Deva says

I keep picking up books about the Khmer Rouge that narrate fascinating survival stories but are poorly written. I had higher hopes for a book written by a French academic, but I think it's actually worse. He tries too hard to be poetic, sets up a confusing timeline of events, and comes across as an *sshole. (For example his total apathy toward his Khmer wife who gets left behind while he makes it out--spouses of westerners were allowed to leave with them. Having been married to a westerner would have meant torture and execution under the Khmer Rouge).

There were some interesting things though. One was the description of French academics enamored with the people's revolution. Probably most engaging was his imprisonment under a young Comrade Duch before he became the notorious head of S-21. That Bizot formed a strange friendship with Duch and was ultimately released is revealing that the Khmer Rouge's had more complicated feelings about their former colonial masters than their hardline ideology would suggest.

Horace Derwent says

Putain!

Je remarque simplement qu'en Chine, le communisme qui est normalement le parti du prolétariat (défendre le paysan et l'ouvrier) est tout le contraire du vrai idéal.

Alala le communisme...A titre personnel, vous ne possédez rien?

Le communisme dont l'Occident a peur est le communisme "impérialiste" contre lequel il lutté "à la vie, à la mort" pendant quarante ans.

Le jeune héros a fait sans balancer le sacrifice de sa vie pour la cause du communisme!

Baise le Communisme

Thinn Thinn says

This is one of the painful book but I chose this on purpose. I bought this book when I visited to one of the Killing Fields in Phnom Penh. I have read 3 books about Khmer Rouge but this is the book that gave me different perspectives of Khmer Rouge and Angkor.

When I first read it, I thought it's only about Bizot's arrested in Anlong Veng Camp. But it is more than that. His camp experiences were different. He went through a lot but as he was a foreigner, he obviously got a lot of advantages like allowed to take shower in the stream. Also he made a good friendship with Douch who was the camp leader. I really like their conversation on the last night Bizot was in the camp. Here is a spoiler 'We want peace and prosperity. It's not for the Americans to tell us what to do. Their intervention is hypocritical and calculating. Besides, they know nothing about us or our traditions. They're bullies who have never had the slightest consideration for our customs and have never respected our feelings.' Douch also wanted peace for his country.

The another part of the book was about Bizot days at the French embassy. I feel like that part of the book is more relevant to the title 'The Gate' because the gate of the embassy meant a lot for refugees. Some of them just need to leave because they don't have proper documents. Some of them bring good and bad news through the gate. Whenever the gate was opened, something happened.

The book gave me a lot of flash back as I had been to S-21. The remorse feeling come back to me. Each and every characters in the book were very human. Overall, it is a really good book for me.

Orsodimondo says

URLA DEL SILENZIO

François Bizot è arrivato in Cambogia nel 1965 per studiare il buddismo locale. Ha viaggiato il paese in lungo e largo, ammirandone la bellezza e la storia. Ha sposato una cambogiana e nel 1968 è nata sua figlia Hélène. Parla khmer e inglese, oltre al francese.

Un'immagine presa dal film di Régis Wargnier del 2014 'Le temps des aveux', a volte chiamato anche 'Le portail', basato sul romanzo di Bizot.

Quattro anni prima che Pol Pot entrasse a Phnom Penh (1975) e scrivesse una delle pagine più allucinanti della storia dell'umanità (l'obiettivo era ricominciare tutto dall'anno zero attraverso l'annientamento totale di ogni forma di modernità, della società e dell'essere umano stesso), Bizot fu catturato dai khmer rossi con l'accusa di essere una spia della CIA e incarcerato in un campo nella giungla (M 13 ad Anlong Veng) dove rimase incatenato per tre mesi e quotidianamente interrogato (pare che gli fu risparmiata la tortura fisica...).

La persona che lo interrogava tutti i giorni era Duch, che in seguito divenne famoso come capo del famigerato campo Tuol Sleng nella capitale del paese, tristemente noto anche come S-21 – famoso anche per essere stato il primo (e forse unico) khmer rosso giudicato e condannato molto dopo il crollo di Pol Pot e del suo regime.

Foto di persone detenute, torturate, uccise, scomparse nell'Ufficio di Sicurezza S21 di Phnom Penh, così tipica di tutti i luoghi macchine della morte col tempo diventati musei del genocidio.

Duch era un khmer idealista, convinto fino al midollo delle sue idee.

Duch era un fanatico (adesso sembra che sia pentito).

Dopo 90 giorni Duch si convinse dell'innocenza di Bizot e lo liberò, caso unico nella storia, visto che poi a Tuol Sleng sotto i suoi ordini furono uccise decine di migliaia di persone e Duch stesso è stato ritenuto personalmente responsabile della morte di almeno dodicimila.

La liberazione di Bizot acquista ancora maggior risalto.

Non si capisce bene quale fosse lo scopo di quegli interrogatori, altro che piegare e distruggere la vittima: erano già tutti colpevoli prima ancora di rispondere.

I cosiddetti controrivoluzionari venivano tenuti in gabbie piene di ragni e scorpioni e poi decapitati con fibre di foglie di palma, non si sa se per povertà di altri mezzi o ricchezza di fantasia.

Esposta al Museo del Genocidio di Tuol Sleng di Phnom Penh.

Bizot tornò in Cambogia durante il processo a Duch, i due s'incontrarono di nuovo, vittima e carnefice uno di fronte all'altro (Duch è poi stato condannato per crimini contro l'umanità al carcere a vita, morirà probabilmente in prigione, e potrebbe essere l'unico khmer rosso a farlo, visto che gli altri imputati hanno già più di ottanta anni).

E' la storia che questo libro racconta. Io non posso che far mie le parole che John Le Carré ha dedicato a "Il cancello":

Ogni tanto leggiamo un libro che quando è finito ci spinge a invidiare chiunque non l'abbia ancora letto, semplicemente perché, diversamente da noi, ha ancora quell'esperienza da provare.

PS

Per chi ha voglia di documentarsi, raccomando caldamente anche il film di Rithy Panh del 2003 *S 21, la macchina della morte dei Khmer Rossi*. Panh è un regista cambogiano scampato ai campi. In questo lavoro intervista due dei soli sette sopravvissuti a S21, e li mette a confronto con i loro carcerieri.

S21, Tuol Sleng a Phnom Penh. Prima una scuola. Poi una prigione e centro di tortura, denominato Ufficio di Sicurezza S21. Oggi un Museo del Genocidio. Un iter che ricorda altri luoghi sinistri in tutt'altra parte del mondo.

Pascale says

Although it is futile to fault a book for not doing what you thought it should have done, I couldn't help being frustrated Bizot didn't provide more context for his testimony. Being ignorant about the tragic events unleashed by the Khmers rouges in Cambodia, I would really have appreciated it if Bizot had given us more of a frame. What you find in this book is a detailed account of 2 highly stressful periods of his life: the few months he spent as a prisoner of the Khmers rouges in the jungle in 1971, and the few weeks he spent helping to run a refugee camp on the grounds of the French Embassy in Phnom Penh after the fall of the city to the Khmers rouges in 1975. Here and there he makes scathing comments about the willfully misguided attitude of the French intelligentsia towards the Khmers rouges, but by and large he doesn't provide much background either about his own trajectory or about the reasons why Cambodia plunged into chaos and murderous madness the way it did. Some of the scenes he describes are very vivid, and maybe his accuracy is the great strength of the book, although I find it hard to believe that anyone who lived in fear of his life and half starved in a camp could remember the sort of details he comes up with. Be that as it may, for me this book didn't have the emotional impact of the movie "The Killing Fields", and maybe that's why I was disappointed. It doesn't help that Bizot's old-fashioned idea of poetic style reads ponderously at times.

Philippe Malzieu says

It is the history of a crime. How we gave up a people to insane bloodthirsty men. How this young people, who studied in France with gauchists teachers put into practice their absurd theories by assassinating a quarter of the population (intellectual, professors...) A lawsuit against the French intellectuals would be necessary so much their responsibility is committed.

Bizot like Cambodia. He was a khmer's specialist. He married a cambodian. He has been arrested by Dutch a first time and he escape to death miraculously. Dutch was a leader of red khmer. He was the director of Tuol Sleng or S-21 center in Pnom Penh. I advice you to visit it. It's terrifying. No abominable thinks but photos, many photos. The red Khmer photographed pervertedly each prisoner before killing them with blow of stick. I moved by the glance frightened by these people who fix the objective. There is the innocent smile of these young girls. This wall of photographs is one of the worst things that I saw.

Bizot understood the criminal nature of red Khmer. He will inform all the embassies of them but people will not listen to him. When the Khmers invade Pnom Penh, occidental people withdraw to embassy of France. will make attack of cowardice and will give up their Kampuchean friends to a certain death. It's really a story of a crime.

Monica says

This is a very difficult book - the descriptions of the horrors inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, and of the surreal, multi-faceted war in which there were so many enemies both internal and external - are painful to read. It is an intensely personal account of Bizot's capture by the KR and his subsequent life until the evacuation of all foreigners from Phnom Penh. It is also a portrait of his captor Douch, who seems thoughtful and approachable and who ultimately releases him (he is the only French prisoner to be so released), but who then goes on to become the head of the brutal torture facility at Tuol Sleng.

A young historian studying Buddhist texts and antiquities, fluent in Khmer and with a Cambodian partner and child, Bizot has a unique viewpoint on the events which overtook him. He has no use for the European intellectuals and leftists who approved and encouraged the KR, which made it safe and easy for the West to ignore the awful realities, nor for the misguided and naïve intervention of the US and its allies who only made things worse before finally leaving.

Other views and biographical information at these links.

<http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/gate.htm>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/27/boo...>

Kristen says

This is one of the best memoirs ever written, and certainly the best book I've ever read about Cambodia. I know that reveals some Euro-centric bias on my part; I agree that some of the memoirs of the Killing Fields written by Cambodians are just as eloquent and perhaps show an even clearer picture of Cambodia during the awful ascendancy and throttling years of Pol Pot.

Still, Bizot was the only Westerner taken and released instead of killed by the early Khmer Rouge squads. In his case, his captor was no less a monster than Duch himself, murderer of hundreds of his countrymen and women.

Bizot was heroic during his days in Cambodia. The genocide going on there wasn't really his war; he was

just an anthropologist, he could have gone home. Except it was his war - he was human. And he loved the people, the country, and its history. For me, his insights into what happened and his descriptions of how it happened are brilliant - and the book is a page-turner. It's amazing that he survived, and amazing how many people he saved. (Not many, considering the numbers who died, but considering the circumstances, many indeed.) It's as if the Raoul Wallenberg of Cambodia were also a gifted writer.

Becky says

3.5 stars. This is a book with a really fascinating subject that unfortunately isn't written all that well. The author, a French academic studying Buddhism in Cambodia in the 70s, has the distinction of being the only Westerner to be voluntarily released from imprisonment by the Khmer Rouge. Then a few years after his release, he helped negotiate the removal of French citizens from the country after the Khmer Rouge won the civil war. So clearly this guy has had a fascinating life. I hate to be that girl who's all like, "I know you barely escaped execution by a genocidal regime and had to leave your family behind in Cambodia when you were forced to leave the country, but I have to dock you a star or two because your sentences lack logical transitions" ... but I guess I am. Oh well.
