



Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy

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On one side of the door, the rich smell of sweet, spicy food and the calm of Buddhist devotion; on the other, the strangeness of a new land.

When Ira Sukrungruang was born to Thai parents newly arrived in the U.S., they picked his Jewish moniker out of a book of “American” names. In this lively, entertaining, and often hilarious memoir, he relates the early life of a first-generation Thai-American and his constant, often bumbling attempts to reconcile cultural and familial expectations with the trials of growing up in 1980s America.

Young Ira may have lived in Oak Lawn, Illinois, but inside the family’s bi-level home was “Thailand with American conveniences.” They ate Thai food, spoke the Thai language, and observed Thai customs. His bedtime stories were tales of Buddha and monkey-faced demons. On the first day of school his mother reminded him that he had a Siamese warrior’s eyes—despite his thick glasses—as Auntie Sue packed his Muppets lunch box with fried rice. But when his schoolmates played tag he was always It, and as he grew, he face the constant challenge of reconciling American life with a cardinal family rule: “Remember, you are Thai.”

Inside the Thai Buddhist temple of Chicago, another “simulated Thailand,” are more rules, rules different from those of the Southside streets, and we see mainstream Western religion—“god people”—through the Sukrungruang family’s eyes. Within the family circle, we meet a mother who started packing for her return to Thailand the moment she arrived; her best friend, Auntie Sue, Ira’s second mother, who lives with and cooks for the family; and a wayward father whose dreams never quite pan out.

Talk Thai is a richly told account that takes us into an immigrant’s world. Here is a story imbued with Thai spices and the sensibilities of an American upbringing, a story in which Ira practices English by reciting lines from TV sitcoms and struggles with the feeling of not belonging in either of his two worlds. For readers who delight in the writings of Amy Tan, Gish Jen, and other Asian-Americans, Talk Thai provides generous portions of a still-mysterious culture while telling the story of an American boyhood with humor, playfulness, and uncompromising honesty.

Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy Details

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Sarah says

I had to read this book for my memoir class, and--thankfully--I enjoyed it! It's well-written, wonderfully evocative, and downright entertaining. Sukrungruang has a great style and voice, and this story really rang true. I'd recommend it, especially if coming-of-age, immigrant-family memoirs are up your alley.

Denise says

A very entertaining book. It was sometimes sad and often humorous. I enjoyed reading about the author's struggle to grow up in the U. S. while living in a family with strong cultural beliefs. I highly recommend this book!

Maureen Stanton says

This is an affecting and lyrical coming-of-age and identity memoir. Sukrungruang tells his story of growing up near Chicago as the only son of Thai parents with beauty and grace. Luminous and eloquent scenes serve emblematically and metaphorically to show the challenge of developing a sense of self when the world you inhabit inside your home is different from the one outside.

Cole Watts says

I read this for a university non-fiction class about life narratives. Most of the books from this class had a sense of macabre about them that were tough to read at times. However, they were thought inspiring and shed light to the tribulations of those that are halfway around the world from Americans.

This was the worst of them all

Lotte says

As fair and memorable a memoir as I have read. I was grateful for being in bed sick, allowing me to finish it in one read. Ira is an unlikely Hebrew name for a young Thai boy who struggles to find an identity and a place in America.

Fran says

Talk Thai: Adventures of Buddhist Boy

Children need rules. These rules need to be clear-cut and easily understood to be followed. However, when one set of rules off sets and contradicts the other, what does a kid do? Imagine moving to the United States and having to become assimilated in our culture but adhere to your old traditions too. What if you were born to Thai parents and could not deviate from their ways in order to learn those of the friends you might make in America? Ira Sukrungruang had a problem. He wanted to please his parents and yet fit in with the traditions of those he met while growing up in a new country during the 1980's. It is hard enough for kids to try and please everyone all of the time. What about pleasing yourself? Trying to deal with his Buddhist heritage and the new country he lived in, Ira Sukrungruang needed to find a happy medium. Poor Ira, if he is anything like me, he is going to do his best to please both sides of his family's cultures and what happens will definitely make you laugh. Growing up in America in the 1980's was difficult enough but trying to fit in when you look like a geek is even harder, I should know, I was one too.

Poor Ira had a real dilemma. He wanted to honor his Thai traditions, he wanted to be a warrior and not let the kids in his first grade class bully him anymore, and he wanted to be Ricky on the program Silver Spoons. Ira wanted an identity of his own and kept trying to find one that would be him, but could not. Instead of enjoying himself and having fun he had to speak Thai, follow the customs and try and fit in with the other kids. Poor, Ira do you remind me of me in so many ways. My parents wanted me to follow the rules, the Jewish customs and traditions of my grandparents, wear what she thought was appropriate for a chubby little kid, and fit in and make friends. I can sympathize with you and what you went through on your first day of school.

Ira lived in two different worlds that of a child of Thai decent and second of a young boy growing up in an American world. Two worlds and two sets of values and friends. Breaking the rules in one world would yield different consequences in the other. Remembering to speak Thai in his house was essential, forgetting would mean reciting the rules that were posted on the refrigerator until, he states, "I graduated from college." Sounds like my mom who made sure if I broke one I wrote them a hundred times or more. I made sure to follow them because writing them would definitely make my hand cramp. Poor Ira, perfection was the only solution to his woes. Wanting to be super strong, super powerful and who else, Superman.

Every boy tries to emulate his father and be just like him. Ira was no different. His father was somewhat of an enigma and all too often he managed to displease him and not live up to his expectations. Until Ira and his father decided to do something my father I did together, play golf. Practicing as often as possible Ira entered many tournaments only to be disappointed in some of the results and elated with others. The one thing I was really great at was playing 18 holes of golf with my uncle and shooting golf balls with my father at the driving range. It was the only time during the week that I had him all to myself while my sister and my mom went on all of the rides, we played golf. However, like Ira's dad expected him to adhere to the rules posted on the refrigerator and those ingrained in him at Temple, my parents expected me to do the same.

Trying to become assimilated in our culture and yet stay true to some part of his creates a conflict for Ira that is evident throughout this memoir. Ira's mother and her best friend Auntie Sue have two goals to which they devoted their lives: the wat and Ira. Instilling in him that he is a brave warrior and wearing a tiny Buddha around his neck, Ira like many children goes off to school feeling courageous, brave and protected. But, when reality sets in Ira realizes that in order to survive he needs to find his own niche and place in both worlds.

Throughout the memoir Ira encounter many obstacles. One is his childhood nemesis Simon who enjoys

putting him down and getting a rise out of him. Second is his mother who hopes Ira will learn about the world from the Monks but in reality he learns from his friends, the media and reading comic books about superheroes.

As the book draws to a close Ira's world as he knows it begins to change. His family makeup is no longer staple and the reasons behind it will surprise the reader and bring to light many harsh realities that children and families face today. A mother who would not give up her Thai traditions, a young man torn between two worlds and a father whose acceptance and love is all he wanted. The memoir brings to light many issues many kids face today growing up in America- delusions of grandeur, standing up to bullies even in his own mind, creating a persona for his father as man who wrestles gorillas in the forest and learning the truth about a friendship that brings his whole world crashing down.

The voice of the author is heard throughout the book. As he relates stories about the humorous sleepovers with his friends, struggling with becoming a man and living two separate lives in one body.

At the end he relates a story about a prince that cannot find his way up a mountain and keeps falling until he finally opens his eyes and sees where his legs have led him. Ira has finally landed on solid ground. This is a heartfelt, heartbreaking and yet humorous story teaches the reader about Thai customs, some Thai words to remember, and about a family who is really not any different than yours or mine.

What I really loved about his memoir is the way the author is speaking directly to the reader as you hear and feel his frustrations when dealing with a strict mother who believes in total adherence to the rules and respect for your elders. Well written, engaging the reader from the first page this is one memoir that should be on everyone's must read list. To learn more about his life and his conflicts while growing up and the friendships made and lost, you have to read this memoir for yourself.

Ira Sukrungruang has definitely found his place in this world as a great author, poet, Assistant Professor and now one of my favorite authors.

I give this book: Five Gold Stars

Michelle says

I loved reading about Ira's story and the growth he goes through. Very moving and telling in the current age and society we live in.

Kelly Ferguson says

Poignant and humorous memoir about the author's struggle to balance his Thai and American identities. What made the stories for me, was the consistent (and painfully honest) view through the prepubescent teen self--the unfettered love you feel for your friends, the confusion over seeing your parents as people, boobs-video games-TV-pop music-boobs, and the fight for an agenda of your own, versus the one foisted on you by everyone else.

Joshua Buhs says

The ingredients are there, but they don't quite make a stew.

Ira Sukrungruang is the son of Thai immigrants, raised in Chicago, now teaching at a college in Florida. This book is about the weird balances required of being both Thai and American. The whole set of issues can be read out of his name. His mother chose Ira to sound American; the last name sounds anything but.

The memoir starts with an overview of Sukrungruang's childhood, then carries forward, episodically, until he reached high school. It's hard not to read the last pages in the voice of Richard Dreyfuss from "Stand By Me," with Sukrungruang's forward-glances at what would happen to his friends in the coming years. Still, it's a fairly short book, and the chapters function more as essays than as breaks in the development of his life.

The writing can be too precise at points--he is clearly showing off when he writes about his aunt's cooking, forcing himself to dwell in details. The prose is often too prosaic, and the insights relatively standard: it is hard to be an immigrant. He refuses to draw lessons from several of the stories, which I respect, but also seems to keep him distanced from the moments. At other times, the writing can be anachronistic. In the mid-1980s, for example, someone called him, when he was a quarterback on a football team, another Favre. This is about a decade too early for such a comment.

More problematic is that Ira himself never coheres as a character. He presents himself to the reader as a fat, bookish boy cowed by his mother. But there are references to his athletic life--he played football, golf, track, tennis. He even seems to have been good at golf, at least. Of course, every individual is complex, and our view of ourselves is never accurate, but the point behind a memoir is to find some meeting place of these contradictions--or to set them at odds with each other explicitly. The inconsistencies here felt not fully thought through.

As was the case of this book qua book. It's titled *Talk Thai*, an odd and off-putting title that is a reference to the rules his mother posted for him to follow. She wanted him to grow up to be a good Thai boy. (But named him with what she thought was an American name, so already knew, on some level, there would be conflict.) The book's cover has Sukrungruang in a Superman costume from when he was young--but there is no real use of Superman in the book; it's a stand-in for his love of popular culture.

Or maybe it's a reference to the subtitle, "The Adventures of a Buddhist Boy," in that Sukrungruang doesn't really have a firm grasp of Buddha, at least as he portrays it here, beyond some Superman, akin to God, but different. Really, though, the subtitle is, like the main title, not really descriptive of the book. There is one chapter on his relationship to Buddha, and many references to him going to Buddhist temple and Sunday school, but these are excuses for social interaction. By his own admission, the ideas go over his head and never really inform the story.

The real leitmotif tying together the various essays is the image of the white elephant--and that would have been a much better, warmer, welcoming title. One of his Thai teachers calls him Ilya, after the white elephant of Thai legend that helped in the war against Burma. The size of the animal echoes Sukrungruang's issues with his body size. The color his longing to be American, white American.

For all that, though, there are charms here--the chief one being that Sukrungruang is excellent at evoking the

confusion of childhood: a child is always an immigrant, a visitor to the strange world of adults, never really knowing the rules--constantly corrected--never quite at home. If he is sometimes to on-the-nose about his immigrant status, he tells the story of his childhood with just the right mix of detail and insight. The end, when he meets his childhood nemesis, who only remembers those early years as a great time, and them as friends, captures well how much he still relives, in a visceral sense, those moments.

I think the best part of the book for me was the description of his friendship with another Thai boy--most of his friends were white. He captures the insane longing between best friends in those twilight years of the latent period and very early adolescence, the homosocial bonding. There is an erotic current, of course--there is an erotic current in any strong relationship--but Sukrungruang, in contrast to so much modern literature--refuses to reduce friendship to that. It is more, much more.

Indeed, I do not think that America has a very wide vocabulary for discussing such friendships, and perhaps it is especially impoverished when it comes to men, since anxiety over homosexuality is so intense. But Sukrungruang does capture it, even if he cannot fully describe it. And that is no mean feat.

Maura says

Ira Sukrungruang was one of my daughter's professor's at SUNY Oswego, so this is how I came to read this book. It's a slender memoir of his early years growing up in Chicago with parents and "Aunty Sue", who was really a friend of his mother and not an actual relative. In some ways, it's a typical story; his mother wants him to be Thai instead of American, his father wants him to reach that American dream of fame and fortune, while Ira just wants to be a regular kid and fit in with everyone else. Ira tells his story in a straightforward way, without a lot of padding or embellishment to make the book longer. In some ways I wished it was longer - he leaves us at a point when his life was undergoing some major changes. I'd be interested to hear about his high school and college life. He mentions once about meeting a half-sister from his father's first marriage, yet never tells us much about how that came about. So I hope he adds another volume to continue the story.

D.e.e.L/Dan Leicht says

I had the pleasure of meeting this author in person during a reading. This book was a great read, a story that is told so wonderfully. Meeting this author only made me love the book even more, a great person that has crafted a great book. Reading this also kick started my reading before bed every night habit. Well worth checking out!

Catherine says

Quick read that's comprised of a few essays (some apparently previously published in a few different periodicals) rather than a cohesive memoir. Some chapters were more interesting than others, but the writing felt more like an impassive chronicling of events rather than deep reflections from Sukrungruang's life.

Hannah says

As the mother of a Thai boy, I found this a nice little glimpse into Thai-American culture. An insight I otherwise never would have known. It's nice to see/hear some beliefs from a culture I hope my son will be a part of.

Alexandra says

Talk Thai details the sometimes frustrating, sometimes difficult, but always funny (as he tells it) childhood of Ira Sukrungruang, the son of Thai immigrants who are living in Chicago. His childhood is filled with dichotomy: his mother requires him to be a good Thai boy, but in the suburban American world that is the only one he's ever known, Ira just wants to fit in. Which to his mind is, to be white. And to have a normal name, not a Jewish one that his parents picked out of an American naming book and cannot even pronounce properly (in their Thai accents, it comes out as "Ila"). Keep Reading...

Priscilla says

Ira Sukrungruang's memoir Talk Thai is painfully beautiful. He tells things straight: being bullied himself, being ashamed (not protecting a female relative--an aunt--from degradation at the hands of bullies), being immersed in two seemingly contradictory schools of identity (Thai / American). Most unusually and powerfully, like no other writer I have encountered, Sukrungruang writes scintillatingly of the pain/intimacy/love/hate/together-separateness inherent in male adolescent friendship. "Everything about his face was red and wet and sloppy. Snot clung to a nostril. It moved when he breathed. I felt a strange vindictive power over Sampan. I wanted him to suffer." Unflinching in his documentation of his experiences, Sukrungruang has my admiration, gratitude, attention. So worth seeking out!
