

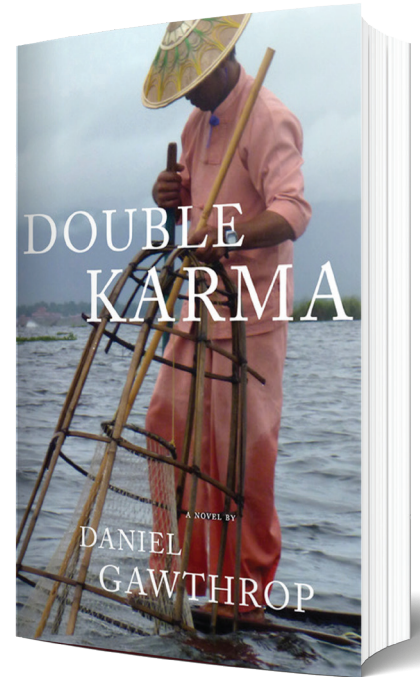
CORMORANT BOOKS READER'S GUIDE

DOUBLE KARMA by Daniel Gawthrop

INTRODUCING *DOUBLE KARMA*

Curiosity about his father's homeland sends American photographer Min Lin to Burma to immerse himself in its culture and build his portfolio. But it's 1988 and pro-democracy activists are trying to overthrow the military regime. Min gets caught up in the movement after falling in love with one of its leaders. When she's arrested, Min flees to the jungle and, joining the rebels, comes face-to-face on the battlefield with a Burmese army captain who looks exactly like him. After an explosion kills his double, Min awakes in a hospital misidentified as a hero of the regime, causing him to pose as the dead soldier for his own survival.

Escaping in 1990, he returns to Los Angeles, where he builds a new life based on his acceptance of his homosexuality while adjusting to the shock of discovering his father's secret history in Burma. Decades later, a new wave of religious persecution and ethno-nationalism in the country now known as Myanmar compels him to return. Still haunted by the events of '88, and knowing his ex-girlfriend is to be released from prison, Min must come to terms with his actions while seeking the truth about the double he met on a battlefield a lifetime ago.



Fiction
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IMPORTANT THEMES

INFORMATION CONTROL The Burmese government exerts control through its military regime, but they also wield propaganda and cultural messaging to shape the country's history and to coerce complacency from its population.

POLITICAL STRUGGLE Min joins Thandar in the fight for democratic rule in Burma in 1988 and learns about the difficult choices, the hard sacrifices, and the role of violence in a revolution. Decades later, the explosion of ethno-religious violence reveals both the dangers of nationalist tribalism and Min's mistaken assumption of solidarity with the Burman Buddhists he knew in '88.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES Min's American upbringing sets him apart from Burma natives in both his values and his privilege. Throughout the novel, the influence and intersection of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class inform each character's biases, ideologies, and relative power.

FAMILY RELATIONS Both Min Lin and his father, Ko Lin Tun, suffer the consequences of secrets kept for too long from each other and, over the course of the narrative, must work to rebuild their relationship.



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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Language, name, and storytelling hold power. How do the SLORC wield these powers to maintain control of Burma and to oppress minority ethnic groups?
2. What kind of prejudices, both unconsciously learned or consciously maintained, do the various characters hold? How do their identities and upbringings influence these biases? Are they able to become aware of and to start overcoming them?
3. Consider Min's character development during his first visit to Burma and his increasing commitment to The Cause. How does his view of violence change over this time?
4. In times of despair, how do various characters maintain their ideals and hold on to hope?
5. In what ways do governments and the media intersect throughout the novel? How do the governments aid or censor journalists?
6. "Empathy is lethal to the cause of nation and religion," says a character on page 246. What does he mean by this? How do the events in this novel demonstrate this idea?
7. Though both Min and his father have trouble discussing their past, their trauma still manifests in other ways. How does their unspoken trauma affect them and their relationship? How do they change as they start to open up?
8. When Min returns to Burma in the final section of the book, it is partly to, as he says on page 203, "improve [his] karmic balance sheet." To what extent have secrets and lies compromised him by this point? And what do we, as readers, think we might have done in his position?
9. *Double Karma* is set during a specific period in Burma's modern history, ending in the early days after the SPDC dictatorship. What signs do we see, during Min's visit, that another military coup — the actual one that occurred in 2021 — might be on the horizon?
10. As an American photographer in Burma, Min is cognizant of unequal power dynamics when he interacts with Burmese locals and when he portrays them through his photography. What sort of consideration should journalists or writers take when portraying stories of people from a different cultural background, in non-fiction or in fiction?



ABOUT DANIEL GAWTHROP

Daniel Gawthrop is the author of five non-fiction books including *The Rice Queen Diaries*, which was shortlisted for a *Foreword Reviews* Book of the Year Award and an Independent Publishers Award, and *The Trial of Pope Benedict*. He has worked as a freelance writer and journalist in Vancouver, London, and Bangkok, where he was a sub-editor for *The Nation* newspaper. During a leave of absence from the Canadian Union of Public Employees, where he was hired as a communications representative in 2004, he spent several months living and working in Burma to prepare for writing his debut novel, *Double Karma*. He and his Burmese husband, a native of Karen State, live in New Westminster, British Columbia, traditional Coast Salish territory of the Qayqayt First Nation.



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