



## Singing to the Dead

*Victoria Armour-Hileman*

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## **Singing to the Dead** Victoria Armour-Hileman

It is 1992, and the Burmese government's current war on its indigenous people runs into its fourth year. In neighboring Thailand, a small band of Buddhist monks harbors refugees from Burma inside their modest temple in the slums of Bangkok. The monks and refugees are all natives of the Burmese Mon State. All have the same residential status in Thailand: illegal. Under surveillance, and overwhelmed by the needs of their charges, the monks reach out to international aid agencies in Bangkok for help in ministering to the tortured, the wounded, the diseased, and the orphaned.

*Singing to the Dead* recalls a Catholic lay missionary's work alongside the Mon Buddhist monks of Bangkok. For more than two years, Victoria Armour-Hileman was a go-between for the monks, interceding with the world outside their temple walls for everything from a cornea transplant for a land mine victim to money to buy shoes for barefoot orphans. At the same time, *Singing to the Dead* details an aid worker's ongoing education: how to weave through an embassy bureaucracy, how to stave off burnout, how to pull money out of thin air at the eleventh hour, when to trust and when to be cautious, when to kowtow, when to pray.

As the centuries-old conflict between Burma and its Mon people worsens, police raids on the temple in Bangkok increase. Refugees have never been safe, but now even the monks' unofficial immunity seems tenuous. When one of the monks is threatened with repatriation to Burma and possible imprisonment and torture, Armour-Hileman begins the desperate race to secure a new home country for him. She knows that these final efforts are as selfish as they are humanitarian, for what kind of God, and what kind of universe, will she believe in if she fails?

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