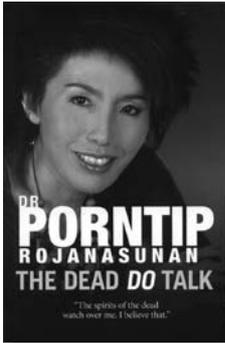


## Review: Two Thai Women; Their Experiences in the Justice Systems of Thailand and the United States



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Porntip Rojanasunan. *The Dead Do Talk*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011.

Benjawan Poomsan Becker. *The Interpreter's Journal*. Bangkok: Paiboon Publishing, 2011.

*The Dead Do Talk* and *The Interpreter's Journal* are two autobiographical works written by two Thai women who have found success in their respective fields. Dr. Porntip Rojanasunan is the Director of Thailand's Central Institute of Forensic Science, which she co-founded in 2002, and is widely recognised in Thailand. Benjawan Poomsan Becker has run her own translation company in California since the mid-1990s. Both *The Dead Do Talk* and *The Interpreter's Journal* are written in English. Their authors share with their readers in-depth information regarding their family background, their personal growth, and, particularly, their involvement in the justice systems of Thailand (Dr. Porntip) and the United States (*Ajarn* Benjawan).

### Early Years

Dr. Porntip grew up in Bangkok. Both her parents had degrees in science from Chulalongkorn University and worked in the food industry in Bangkok. From an early age, she boarded at Wattana Wittaya Academy, where she developed an intense interest in the natural world. *Ajarn* Benjawan was also born in Bangkok, where she lived until she was six, when her family moved to Yasothorn, in Northeast Thailand, where her relatives had lived for many generations. She grew up learning both Central Thai (the dialect of Bangkok and the national language) and Lao (which is widely spoken in Northeast Thailand). In Yasothorn,

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her mother opened a restaurant specialising in northeastern food while her father, after an initial stint at farming, found work as a foreman supervising Thai workers in Saudi Arabia and Libya.

Dr. Porntip, in recalling her primary school years, writes: ‘Behind the primary school was a small ornamental garden where we ran around spying on nature. Sometimes we could follow the life cycle of the insects we discovered there. Probably the most frequent creatures whose lives we observed were frogs and butterflies. There seemed to be an awful lot of butterflies, as I recall. I was fascinated by these micro life cycles. My mind was full of questions. All the time I was asking myself, ‘Why?’ (28-9). This fascination with nature played a role in her decision to study medicine: ‘It was the idea of looking closely at living beings and working out what makes them tick that fascinated me. I therefore chose to study medicine’ (39).

*Ajarn* Benjawan, likewise, was interested in learning, but whereas Dr. Porntip was drawn to nature, *Ajarn* Benjawan often spent her free time surrounded by books: ‘While waiting for customers at the restaurant I read a lot, in both Thai and English. And once a week I volunteered at the school library, helping the librarian check books out as well as put them away. It wasn’t long before I was so adept in English that I could tutor the younger kids in school’ (36). In addition, she practised her English with Westerners who found their way to Yasothorn.

### Career

After studying medicine at Mahidol University and working as an intern in Phitsanulok, Dr. Porntip chose anatomical pathology as a suitable field to specialise in. While studying pathology, she met an accountant in a bank, whom she married in 1982. Two decades later, she played a central role in setting up an institute of forensic science under the Ministry of Justice.

For *Ajarn* Benjawan, following a degree in languages from Khon Kaen University and a degree in sociology from Kobe University, a chance encounter with an American at the airport in Seoul led to marriage and migration. In her new home in California, she became involved in translating for people of Thai and Lao origin in the American court system.

Both Dr. Porntip and *Ajarn* Benjawan – with experience in the justice systems of Thailand and the United States respectively – have been involved in high profile cases, which they discuss in *The Dead Do Talk* and *The Interpreter’s Journal*.

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## Cases

*Ajarn* Benjawan discusses her role as a court interpreter for a man who ‘had been indicted in California on federal charges of smuggling 42 tons of marijuana into the United States over a fourteen-year period’ (89); as *Ajarn* Benjawan tells her readers, he ‘finally pleaded guilty to one charge related to obtaining marijuana for suppliers in the United States’ (91). Many of the cases she is involved in, however, are low profile cases. In her book, she discusses in detail her everyday work of interpreting in American courtrooms.

Dr. Porntip discusses her role in various investigations including that of the Tak Bai tragedy of October 2004 and that of the death of a nursing student at a political rally in 2008. She also goes into detail regarding her role in identifying victims of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that devastated parts of southern Thailand. Additionally, she comments on her varied experience of working with the Thai police (see, for example, pages 124-32 & 187).

While *The Interpreter’s Journal* contains a lot of information regarding legal procedures and the role of a court interpreter in the United States, *The Dead Do Talk* is mainly focused on high profile cases in Thailand. Dr. Porntip provides her readers with concise observations regarding fame, noting that ‘Fame can obscure reality [...] If you stop clapping, the fame evaporates’ (11); she also writes: ‘It is important to deal with fame, but I believe that if the fame comes from doing good works then it becomes secondary to the work itself’ (17).

*The Dead Do Talk* and *The Interpreter’s Journal* attest to the contributions to society that Dr. Porntip and *Ajarn* Benjawan have made in their respective fields of forensic science in Thailand and courtroom interpretation in the United States of America. On the cover of each book is an image of Dr. Porntip or *Ajarn* Benjawan, respectively. Each author is smiling gently with light in her eyes.