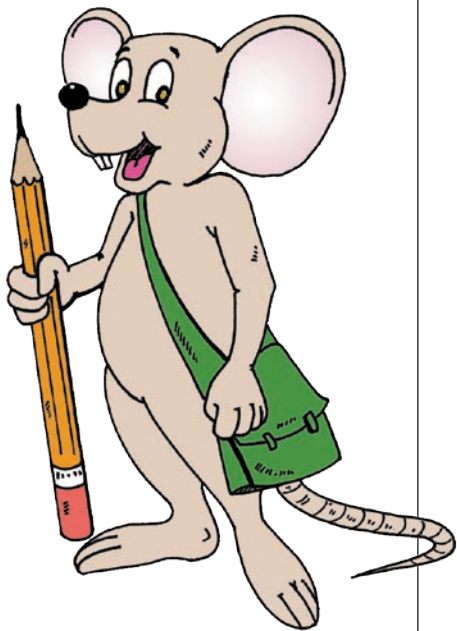


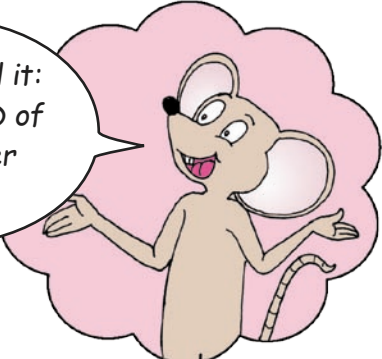


The story of  
**Big Brother  
Mouse**




Books that make literacy *fun!*

Luang Prabang, Laos PDR



Could we call it:  
The **LEGEND** of  
Big Brother  
Mouse?



We could. But you  
have to be dead to  
be a legend.

### **The story of Big Brother Mouse**

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Well then... we are  
happy to present:



The **STORY** of

# Big Brother Mouse

Books that make literacy *fun!*

**If you're reading this in a PDF:** In some programs you can click View... Page Layout... Facing Pages, to see pages together as they are in a printed book.

# Our story begins...

This is the story of how we are changing Laos from a country where “people don’t read” into a country that loves books.

It begins in 1983, when a boy named Khamla was born in the village of Khone Kham, about 50 km. from Luang Prabang. He started school when he was eight, and was the first in his family to learn to read.

When he was 12, Khamla’s family decided he was so bright and studied so hard that he should move to Luang Prabang. There, as a novice monk, he could get a better education at the temple school. He made the journey by boat; there was no road at the time. It was a six-hour trip, and he didn’t see his family again for nine months.

“At first I was very unhappy and homesick, and sometimes I cried,” he recalls, but soon he grew to enjoy novice life, and he enjoys very happy memories of that period. This picture was taken by a tourist who gave him a copy.

Occasionally he saw tourists in Luang Prabang. Many of them read books when they had spare time. “Why would they do that when they’re on vacation?” wondered Khamla, whose only experience with reading had been a few dull, tattered textbooks in school. But he had no access to other books in his language, and wouldn’t learn the answer to his question for many more years.





## **“Lao people don’t read.”**

As Khamla took his long boat trip to Luang Prabang, Sasha was selling the publishing company in the United States that he had run for 15 years. In 2003 he visited Laos.

As a former publisher, he looked to see what Lao people were reading. The answer was: Nothing. “On that first trip, I never saw a book in the Lao language,” he says. “I wondered: Could I help young people learn publishing skills, while producing books that would improve education?”

As he proposed the idea to various people, he kept hearing the same four-word response: “Lao people don’t read.”



## Siphone

While exploring that possibility, Sasha met Siphone, a student at the Teacher Training College with a strong drive to succeed.

Sasha brought three used computers from Thailand, which Siphone installed in a small room that he rented, then made them available at very low cost to other students who wanted to learn computer skills.

Siphone's first employee was Khamla. They had been novice monks together, and were close friends.

Many students used language programs on the computers to learn English. Sasha often dropped by to help students practice language skills, and to talk with Siphone and Khamla about his publishing ideas.

# The first books

Meanwhile, Sasha was talking with government officials, teachers, and students about his goal of publishing “Books that make literacy fun.” Many people had only seen textbooks. They didn’t understand how a book could be fun.

So, while working together at the shop, we (Siphone, Khamla and Sasha) wrote our first five books. We printed single copies from a computer so we could show people what we had in mind.



Siphone set down on paper the traditional stories his grandmother had told him in the evenings. *The Cat That Meditated* remains one of our most widely read books, and he’s written three other highly popular story collections since then.





Khamla wrote an alphabet book that uses humorous rhymes and cartoons to introduce each letter of the Lao alphabet. *Frog*, *Alligator*, *Buffalo* is so widely used, that many children can recite parts of it by heart.



Sasha wrote *Bangkok Bob*, about a monkey that is both delighted and overwhelmed by a first trip to the big city -- just the same as a Lao child would be.





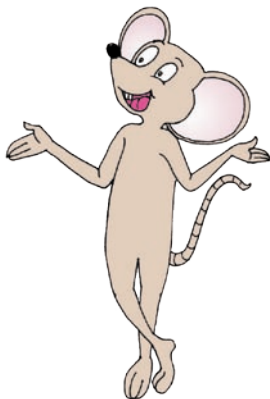
## Our first office

We couldn't publish those books yet.

Publishing in Laos requires a special license, and each book must receive government approval before it is printed. We didn't have all of that in place, but as we worked on it, we also kept working on new books.

Ounla (left), an art student in Vientiane, illustrated many of them. Thongkham (center) translated several. Here they work with Khamla in our first "office", a guesthouse room in Vientiane, on our first non-fiction book: *Animals of Africa*.

*That was a  
great office.  
It even had a  
bathroom!*





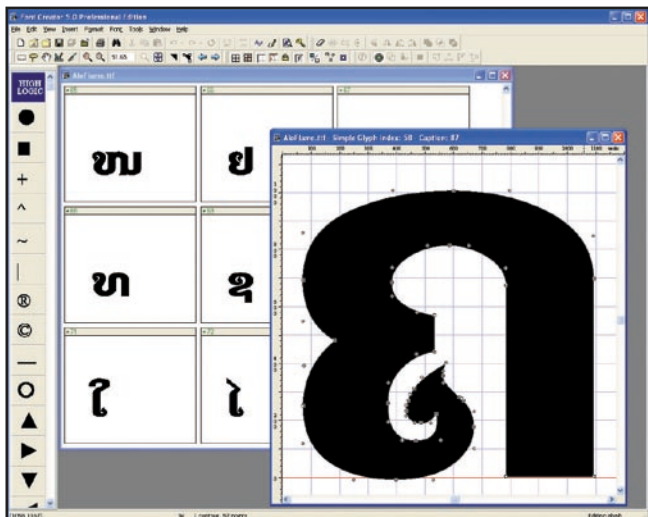
## Laying the groundwork

We also spent that time getting other things in place for a publishing project.

We needed more artists. So we held art contests at the Children's Cultural Center. Taa Thao, age 16, won one. He illustrated Siphone's book, *The Cat That Meditated*.



Sengsong was a student at the Orphanage School when he won a Lao Proverbs contest. His work appears in that book, then he and another student there, Kongsy, illustrated *Fun With Fruit*.



## Lao fonts

In a country with so little publishing activity, there was yet more to do.

The Lao language has a unique alphabet. Vowels can go above, or below a consonant. Tone marks may go above the vowel. There were ways to type Lao on a computer, but they didn't work well on desktop publishing systems.

We designed our own fonts, and a system for using them. (The fonts, system and instructions are all available on our website, under "Special Projects.")



## New talent

Chittakone was 14 when he won one of the art contests. He illustrated *New, Improved Buffalo*, about a boy who thinks his buffalo needs a few things fixed. Then, developing different styles each time, he took on *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* and others.

His masterpiece was a story he wrote and illustrated over a period of two years, beginning at age 16: *A Fantastic and Frightening Place*. Inspired by Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, it tells about a boy who misbehaves, gets sent to his room, and soon finds himself in a fantasy world.





## A Mouse is born

*Finally we  
get to the  
good part!*



June, 2006 was a big month. Khamla graduated from Teacher Training College. He got a business license. (Big Brother Mouse is set up as a Lao-owned, not-for-profit business.) Then he applied for a publishing license.

The last step took extra time. Luang Prabang officials had never before issued a publishing license. We still have the only such license in Laos outside of the capital.

That same month we opened our shop, complete with a freshly-painted mouse. We had published 6 titles, and we put them on display. Khamla hung up a sign: “Book-shop.” We did, after all, have more Lao-language books for sale than any other shop in northern Laos.





After we opened the new shop we had popular story hours for neighborhood children.

We gave each child a book, and made a "Swap Box" so they could trade it for a new book, after they read it.



The book swap was popular, and it got children excited about books and reading. We filled it with our books, and whatever else we could find in Vientiane.

But after two weeks activity slowed down, because they had read everything - twice.



## Getting books to children

By the end of 2006, we had published 15 books. Next job: Getting them to children.

Unaware that he was making publishing history in Laos, Sonesoulilat arranged a book party at Nonsaath Village, outside of Luang Prabang.

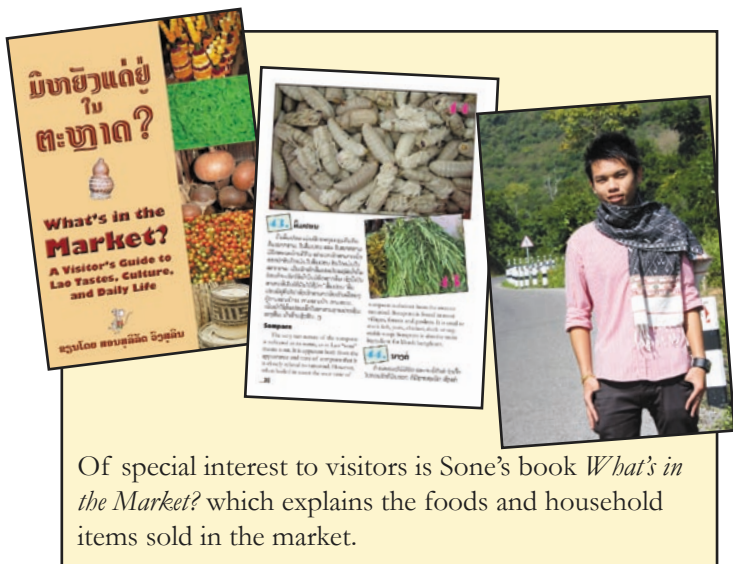
The next month, he organized another one. Then another. In 2007, he organized 31 book parties.

In 2012, he organized 903 of them.

# Sone

Sonesoulilat (nicknamed “Sone”) was 16 when he set up that first book party. As Big Brother Mouse has grown, so has he. Now he manages 5 teams, of 5 people each, who travel to schools, getting kids enthused about reading, then leaving books for them to read.

He’s also written songs about books and reading that children enthusiastically learn at book parties. And at last count, he had written five books himself.



# We're having a Book Party!



Book parties quickly became our number 1 method of getting books to readers. They still are, but with one important change, which we'll explain later.



First, we have to get there. Sometimes we go by road or boat. For some remote villages, Boom-Boom gives us a lift.

We talk about books and read a story aloud. Reading aloud to others is a new concept here.



Outdoor games provide a fun break. There's time to play several of the 20 different games our staff knows.



We sing a song about books. We talk about how to care for your new book: Don't leave it out in the rain!

Then, everybody gets to choose a book of their own, nearly always their very first book.



## We kept publishing more books, of many types:



From *Animals of Laos...* to easy Seuss-style stories.



From traditional Lao proverbs... to *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

We continued holding more book parties and publishing more books.

By the end of 2007 it took children a month to read everything in our shop, instead of two weeks.



## **English conversation practice**

We also began something new in our shop: English Practice.

Luang Prabang is full of young people eager to improve their English. And we get many visitors eager to help.

Every day in our shop (9 to 11 a.m., 5 to 7 p.m.) we provide a place for the two groups to meet for conversation practice.

No special training is needed. It's okay if you speak English with an accent; these young people need, and want, to learn to understand all the accents that come through. Young people who come for two or three years end up speaking English better than college graduates.





# New writers

Finding talented young artists was relatively easy. Finding writers was harder. In a country where few people have ever read a good book, how do you teach people to write a good book?

We needed some easy 8-page books for beginning readers. These books use repetition, easy language, one sentence per page, and a fun ending, to appeal to children just learning to read.

As it turns out, they're also good for people just learning to write. A young woman named Khamla had absolutely no writing experience when she began working in our office. But after several writing workshops that we conducted she wrote *The Hungry Frog*, about a frog that eats a grasshopper, a cricket, and a worm, but is always still hungry.

Finally it meets a hungry snake. We won't give away any more, except to say that everyone except the frog thinks it's a funny story.

# More writers, more books

As we've grown, so has the staff. Here are a few people we'd like you to meet:



James learned English at our free drop-in sessions, then worked with us part-time as he finished high school. You can read his story of growing up in a Hmong village; it's free on our website. (Click for Books, then Free Books to Download.)



Visone started working with us as a cook. She learned new skills, including English, and was promoted to work in the front shop. She also wrote three fun and easy books for beginning readers.



Link designs books. He's also written many, including several stories that preserve Buddhist traditions.



Nola helps keep the office running; she created an easy-reader about flowers, and is working on a book about traditional Lao foods.



Two members of the book party team, Duangdy (above) and Sone, wrote books for our easy-reader series.



Kongsy's beautiful photos of Lao people and culture have been in many of our books.

# Spreading a love of books

Our goals are to make high-quality books that people are eager to read; and to get them to readers, particularly rural children who have no other access to such books.

In the past, books were rare items in Laos. There are no good systems for getting them to children. We've developed many techniques to complement our book parties in rural schools:



**Book Ambassadors:** Kit came to our free workshop and learned how to read aloud with kids.

## **Village reading rooms:**

Vannaly ran a busy reading room in her village, then came to Big Brother Mouse to help others.





### **Village visits:**

In a rural village, Sone helps kids use our book *Traditional Toys* to get ideas for a project.

**Discovery Days** give children a rare opportunity for hands-on learning. Many activities relate to specific books.



**Training:** Lao teachers grew up without books like ours. In 2013, we provided training for 500 teachers about how to use books in class.

# Is it working?

When we return to a village, we see more children reading. Others have noticed the changes, too.



Big Brother Mouse received special recognition from Bill Clinton in 2008, at the Clinton Global Initiative in Hong Kong.

After a book party, children can go home. Usually, there's something else they'd rather do...





**Bounthieng**, a teacher, Houeyvaen School: Books from Big Brother Mouse help children enjoy learning. They don't worry about their family problems. Students are absent from school less than before.

**Janta** (photo), age 9: "Now I like to read in my free time, and with my friends. Every week I trade my book with the teacher, and then read a new book to my little brother."

**Bounmy**, a student: "Now I want to read more books. It's fun! I never had my own book before. Now I have already finished reading *New Improved Buffalo*, *Grasshopper War* and *The Cat that Meditated*."





## One-word thrillers

**How do you make reading fun for children who can only read individual words?** We're working on it.

Even second-graders often cannot read a full sentence. They've learned the letters, but they get so little reading practice that by the time they reach the last word of a sentence, they've forgotten the first word.

We've invented ways to make reading fun for these children. Only a bit tongue-in-cheek, we call these books "One-word thrillers".

Bounyang wrote *Let's Eat*. With eye-catching photos it's enjoyable whether you can read just one word, or a short sentence. Older siblings learning English read it with younger children.

In *What Am I Doing?* children select the best verb for each cartoon. They get practice reading, and thinking about word nuances. Parents enjoy looking at it with children.

These "One-word thrillers" are a key part of our early reading program.





**Let's make Laos known as**

## **A country that loves books**

In 2013 we made a big change in our program:

At the end of each book party, we leave 50 books in each classroom, so every student can read every day. And children each select a book of their own.

Teachers already reported better reading skills, higher attendance, and more engaged students after a book party. With daily reading time, the changes will be even more dramatic.

When Big Brother Mouse started in 2006, it was widely said that “Lao people don’t read.” And it was true – then.

In a few short years, Laos can be known as “a country that loves books.” That will improve education here; and Laos can be a model for other countries struggling to improve education.

Will you help?



## A book for every child

More than 150,000 Lao children have gotten their very first book because of people who support us.

Now we want to reach the rest. Will you help?

**\$350 starts a reading program** in a rural primary school. We hold a book party; every child selects a book of their own, and we start a daily reading program, with 50 books in each classroom. We'll send you a picture and a report after the book party.

**As little as \$1000 sponsors a book.** Pick a title you like, from our website.

**A gift with real meaning:** A sponsorship can be dedicated to someone important to you, perhaps someone who loves books, or who inspired your love of reading.

*And here's an easy way to help right now: If you got this booklet from a guesthouse or restaurant, please tell them you liked it.*



*I could go on  
if we had more  
pages. We  
don't, but...*



## **...our website does**

Please visit our site, where you can:

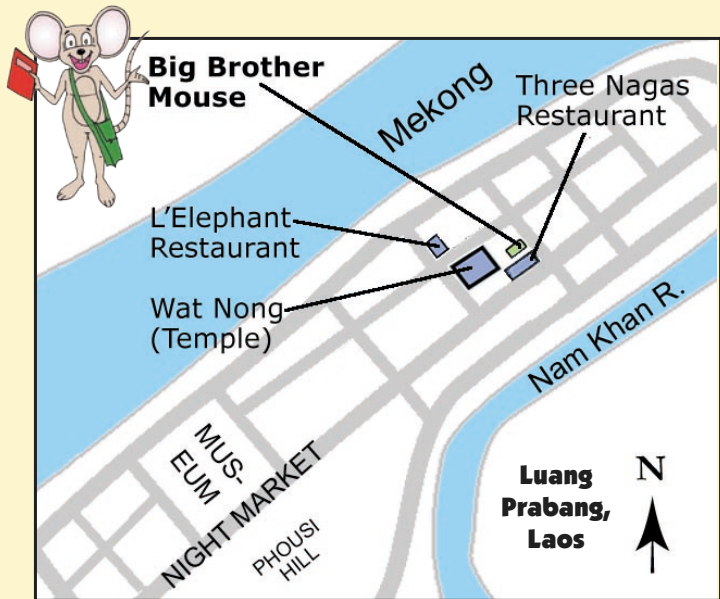
- See photos and a brief report from more than 1,000 book parties at rural Lao schools. (Photo Album)
- Learn more about sponsoring a book party and school reading program (link on Home page)
- Get details of any book we've published, and see a sample page (Books)
- Subscribe to our newsletter (Contact Us)
- See books that need a sponsor (Donate)
- Read what Lao teachers say (About Us)
- Make a donation, tax-deductible in the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. (Donate)
- Meet the interesting writers, artists, and staff who make up Big Brother Mouse. (About Us)
- Have a richer visit by learning about Lao culture (FAQS)

[www.BigBrotherMouse.com](http://www.BigBrotherMouse.com)

*Big Brother  
Mouse, I think  
you're becoming  
a legend!*



*Not yet! Let  
me finish my  
book first!*



## At Big Brother Mouse you can:

- Help eager Lao students practice their English;
- Enrich your visit with books such as *What's In The Market?*
- Help us get rural Lao children their very first book;
- Find books as gifts for Lao friends, and those in other countries.

Please come visit! Open every day, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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