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Book Review

Made in Elgin: *I Am Phoothaphone*

by Tracy Altheide

His vision was simple — become as strong as his childhood superheroes and prove everyone wrong along the way.

With consistent 100-day workout plans, he acquired a level of physical strength that few people will ever know and a status that even fewer bodybuilders achieve after years of effort: professional bodybuilder in 2014.

In September, the autobiography of Ko Chandetka was released titled, *I Am Phoothaphone: Lessons Learned Through My Journey of Self-Discovery and Triumph Over Adversity as a Bodybuilding Champion* by Ko Chandetka and Jeffrey Greenwell.

In it, Ko pulls together the pieces in his life that cascaded him into body building, depression, addiction, victory, and finally self-acceptance.

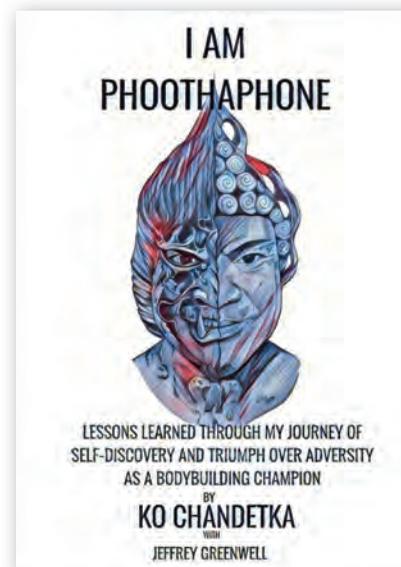
In May 2019, a short documentary around his career, *Fallen Star, Rising Sun* was screened at the 2019 DC Asian Pacific American Film Festival, the 2019 Indy Shorts International Film Festival, and won Best Documentary in the 2019 9FilmFest in Thailand. The book goes in depth into what the documentary could only skim.

Ko was born Phoothaphone Chanthadouangsy, and later with his family immigrated from Laos as refugees to the U.S. and grew up in Elgin, IL. His first name meant “Buddhist monk’s wish” and his full name was shortened to Ko Chandetka after his family obtained citizenship.

As a child with few Laotian families in his neighborhood at the time, Ko struggled with acceptance at school and making

friends, but developed an interest in superheroes.

“These superheroes [Spiderman, Batman, and Incredible Hulk] would provide my escape. They helped me forget about my tormentors temporarily.”



His list of accomplishments is impressive: 1991 NPC Continental USA Overall Teen, 1995 NPC Dean Caputo’s Powerhouse Classic, 2014 NPC Master’s Nationals Overall and 7th in the 2016 Mr. Olympia Classic Physique Division. Not to mention wins in weight divisions in 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2012, and 2013.

During preparations for a competition, Ko found himself with a painful injury and was recommended a painkiller, but the side effects would quickly spiral out of control in his next few years.

“Maybe that sounds like common sense, but my focus on getting rid of the pain dragged me into a destructive cycle. I didn’t understand the addiction process.”

In late 2010 he began discovering the true strength in self-love and acceptance. Throughout the book, Ko covers very real and painful experiences, and peppers in the bittersweet advice he received from close family and friends.

From his father, a high-ranking veteran and Colonel in the Royal Lao Army, Ko learned to think critically and question what he heard.

“Growing up, I’d always ask him to teach me different things. He would reply, ‘You need to be able to teach yourself.’ He believed in the value of self-directed learning. My father’s parents died when he was young, so he had no one to teach him.”

Ko closes his book with personal lessons learned and insights so the reader can harness the true inner strength that anyone can achieve.



I Am Phoothaphone is available on amazon.com in paperback or Kindle e-book format.

Tracy Altheide is an Elgin area writer who publishes articles, blogs and reviews online with an emphasis on discovery and self improvement.

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