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book reviews

Bernard Trink

Our man in Bangkok

Chairs

by Christopher G. Moore.

281 pp. 2000 Heaven Lake Press
paperback.Available at Asia Books and leading book
stores, 475 baht.

Comprehending the Realm is more than speaking the language, reading its history and literature, travelling around it, living with and/or marrying its people. As only little is what it appears to be (sea and air pollution are just that), it is necessary to be sharp to see through the conjurers' attempts to spellbind us.

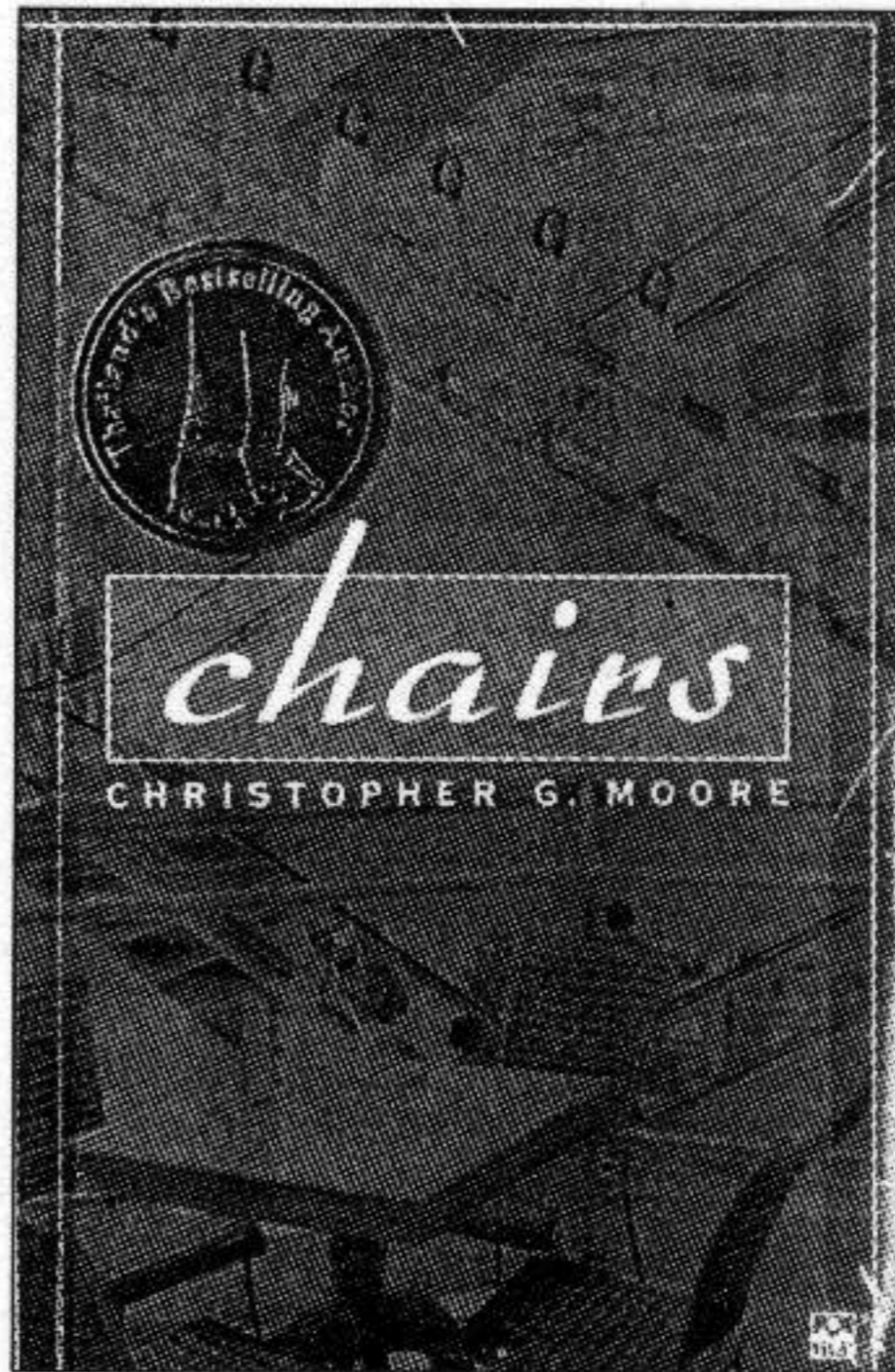
To his credit, Christopher G. Moore has the sharpest eyes and most discerning mind on these shores, his being an expat notwithstanding. Indeed, a good many locals are unaware of the levels and degrees of subterfuge enmeshing them. They have some idea from personal experience and the vernacular press, but that's only the tip of the iceberg.

Perusing Moore's books takes the reader through the castes, corruption, calumnies, covetousness, cant, conceit that is the nation's infrastructure. This reviewer allows that some expat authors are easier reads, but that's because their Thailand-based novels are primarily aimed at entertaining us, offering little insight. With Moore, it's the other way around.

The 16 original stories in *Chairs* are based on years of actual Saturday morning get-togethers of freelance journalists in Amarin Plaza (Ploenchit Road). I assume it's based on the weekly meetings of journalists at the Big Apple's Algonquin Hotel during the 1920s and '30s, though it might have its roots in French and English soirees centuries earlier.

Moore is himself, but gives the other participants fictitious names. The passing away of Sam Kohl, one of the regulars, has them recollecting incidents in his life they witnessed. They also talk about people they interviewed, leading the listeners (and readers) to doubt their veracity. Did Paul Thornton interview Bu Lu ("Luther"), one of the pre-teenage brothers that founded God's Army in Burma? It's left up in the air.

The stories are as varied as motor-



cyclists wearing helmets with swastikas, the state executioner doing his duty, the owner of a private English school who sets her cap for a *farang* she hired to teach, a writer trying to persuade Tina Turner to knock his book in order to increase its sales, an accountant refusing to have an affair with a doctor thus bringing him closer to his wife, how rivalry between Hawaiian shirt collectors is resolved.

Their usual table is near the escalators and conversation ceases whenever nubile damsels, virtually all respectable, glide up or down. All are lovely and smiling, the journalists agreeing that this combination isn't to be found in their homelands, so there's no inducement to return to them. They tell why they first came to Thailand.

Footnotes are informative and amusing; I wish there were more of them. "The Uncover Diplomat" is my favourite story, about an oil rigger who buys a secondhand car with diplomatic licence plates, breaking every traffic law on the books before the authorities outsmart him. By contrast "Ever Yours", about a Thai woman kleptomaniac, doesn't work.

To paraphrase Graham Greene in another context, Moore is our man in Bangkok.