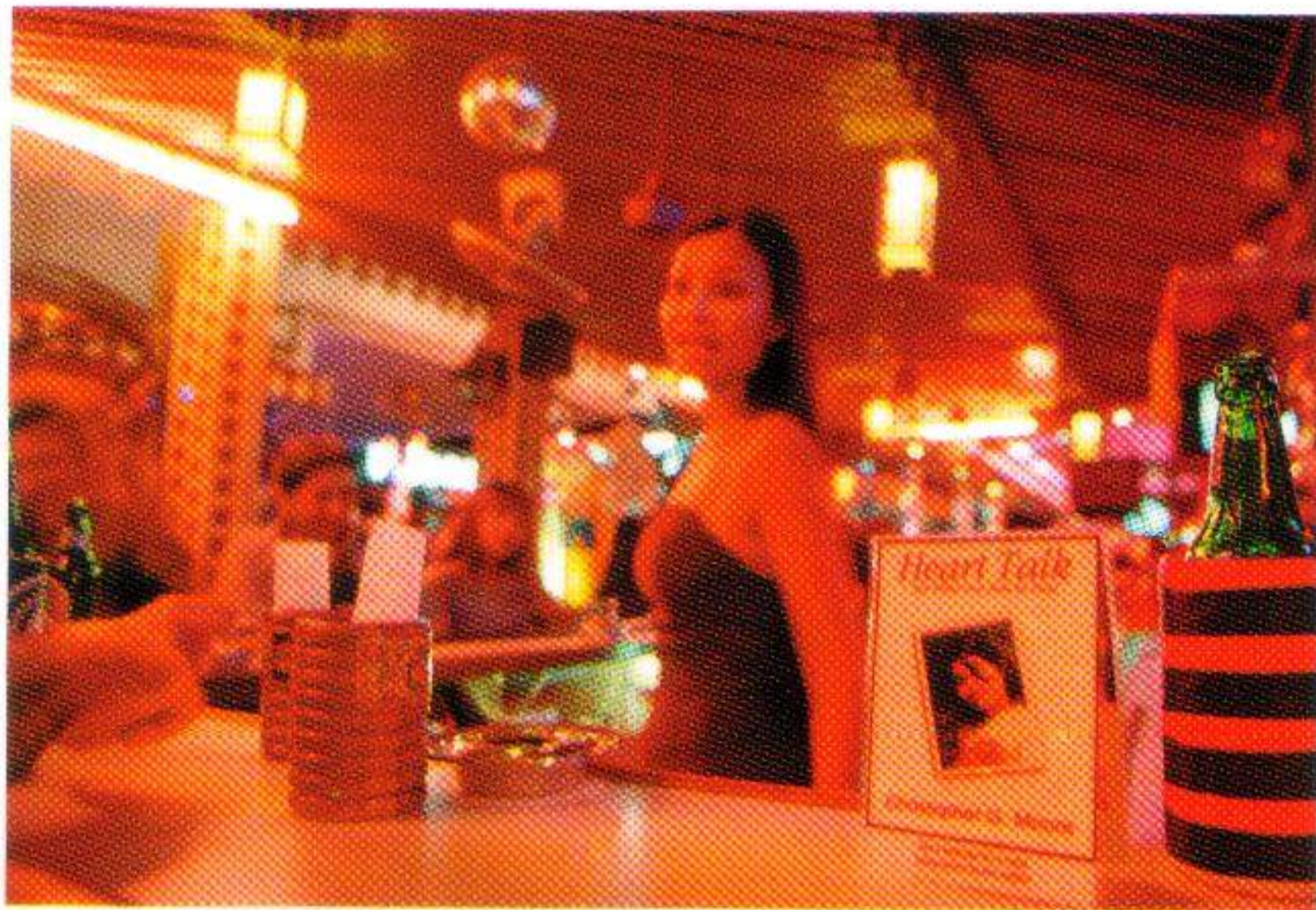




Red-Light Realm of Bangkok



It's the weekend at the Nana Plaza, Bangkok's notorious fleshpot where girls can be picked up for the price of a bottle of Johny Walker Black. This three story mezzanine complex starts to fill up with barflies from around the world. Inside the bars - with names like Voodoo and Rainbow - the dancers are putting on their make-up and bikinis oblivious to the cat-calls of punters sitting on stools, some with paunches that have downed more beers than the local Shingha brewery.

"Check that one out with the Pamela Anderson knockers," says one red eyed middle aged man in an East Ender accent to a guy sipping an espresso next to him.

"She's a katoey (ladyboy)," says Christopher G Moore, demurely taking another sip from his espresso.

The forty something Bangkok-based novelist's soberly takes in the scene with nonchalance of a silent voyeur as goggle-eyed Caucasians leer at the writhing flesh around chrome poles on a stage surrounded by mirrors.

This scenario isn't surprising; the Canadian expatriate has explored the seedy underbelly of southeast Asia in 12 novels. His earthy prose narrates the dark side of Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam through the eyes of private eye Calvino.

These books consist of The Land of Smiles series (4 novels) and the Calvino private-eye series (6 novels) which chronicle Southeast Asia over an entire decade, narrating the dark side of expatriate life in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Moore left a successful career writing scripts for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation when he moved to Bangkok over 15 years ago. He received critical acclaim for his script 'Sticks and Pucks' about hockey from Toronto but is reticent to go into his past as if the years in voluntary exile have eroded away his

Canadian identity.

Moore has established himself as one of the most prolific expatriate writers of the Far East even though the "mythological North American reader" still eludes him after literary icon Barney Rosset who published the beatniks like Henry Miller and William Burroughs failed to secure a deal to publish his books in the States. Still, the demand for his novels in other countries has not abated.

Moore reasons that he "doesn't try to tone down or come up with a homogenized vocabulary of Thailand for the mythological North American reader.

"What's interesting is that it's been easier [to sell] in Japan and Germany than in North America," says the novelist who meditates every morning before he writes.

Zurich publisher Unionsverlag bought the rights to all of Moore's books last year and plan to release Spirit House, a book on the Thai supernatural, in German this March. A Japanese version of Spirit House is due out in June. Following the well-received translation of Cut Out in Thailand, a Thai version of Spirit House is currently being translated.

His background in law at the University of British Columbia was an important influence for his first two books written outside of Asia, says Moore. His Lordship's Arsenal, re-released last year, was his first book written almost autobiographically in style about a judge's psychological probe into identity, not unlike Moore who gave up a career as a law professor to become a full time writer in the Far East.

Moore's second book Saint Anne, is a deftly woven tale that examines the microcosms of individual

lives, while simultaneously addressing the larger social, political concerns of the world like immigration. The book focuses on Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to North America. Both these books were set in

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Vancouver, and the geographical elements of sea and mountains seep into both of them.

His only non-fiction book is Heart Talk, a English compendium of Thai "jai" (heart-love) terms first published in 1992 by White Lotus, a German-run publishing house in Bangkok, and re-released by Heaven Lake Press last year, with the addition of 250 more 'heart terms' expressions. Moore said this book was conceived "as a labor of love"

Moore has a penchant for marketing with inventive gimmicks. On the toilet walls of go-go bars owned by the King's Group, a large Thai company that runs many of the bars in the Nana complex, are posters advertising Moore's books. Punters can buy a signed copy of his books over the counter with a round of beers. For last Valentine's Day he wrapped up a thousand copies of Heart Talk in a red ribbon with a plastic heart attached to it saying 'Happy Valentine's Day' Like his other books, autographed copies of Heart Talk are on sale at the bars of Nana. And for Christmas and New Year he



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was flogging off 'Calvino' coffee mugs' for his fans.

The front cover of his latest novel *Cold Hit* released in November has a photograph of the Thermae coffee shop, an institutional expatriate bar on Bangkok's main drag, Sukhumvit. Known as 'headquarters' in Moore's novels, this meat market for expatriates has provided the inspiration behind the creation of many of his characters. He once called Thermae the "cross roads", where he met diplomats, business executives, English-language teachers, adventurers, drunks and con-artists and those living on the margins of Bangkok's nightlife who converged there for late night drinking sessions.

Another inspirational den of iniquity is the notorious Nana Plaza red-light complex on Sukhumvit soi 4, "a two car-wide esophagus leading into a U-shaped gut that had swallowed more than it could... three stories of esoteric possibilities" writes Moore in *Cold Hit*.

This go-go bars features in the six novels of the Calvino private-eye series, of which *Cold Hit* is the latest. The protagonist is a half-Jewish, half-Italian Mekong whisky-swigging detective from the Big Apple, who untangles hard-boiled cases in the tradition of Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe.

The tales are told with the absurd and caustic humor of Jim Thompson who integrated dark humor in the detective genre.

Moore has been compared by many critics to Raymond Chandler. In this respect, the genre and cities link the two authors as kindred spirits. Los Angeles and Bangkok both mean the city of angels. And both cities are flat, urban sprawls built on pay-offs, says Moore.

"Chandler lived in Los Angeles in the 30s and 40s when there were all kinds of bogus land schemes and some fraudulent oil deals and corruption in the police department. So he was able to draw upon those elements and come up with various Phillip Marlowe books. I'm trying to do something similar with the Vincent Calvino books. My Calvino series are of a hard-boiled private eye who is living in a chaotic place where there's corruption and social dysfunction around. And Bangkok makes a very creative environment for a writer because there are lots of very interesting things happening."

Moore's characters are often unsavory stereotypical types who represent the antipathies of PC values in the West. He sees fiction as the last refuge for truth and prefers characters that are non-political, gritty and real.

Crosby, for example, is the salesman in *A Haunting Smile* who comes up with T-shirt slogans like the "Y-Not Bar", which Moore says represents the fear of foreigners "copulating with old meat." Or another cynical old timer called Snow, a reporter covering the May 1992 street massacre in Bangkok - the theme of *A Haunting Smile*, and an event some journalists claim may have outranked Tiananmen Square as the bloodiest massacre in Asia in recent years. Snow says that having sex with a white woman is "a step away from

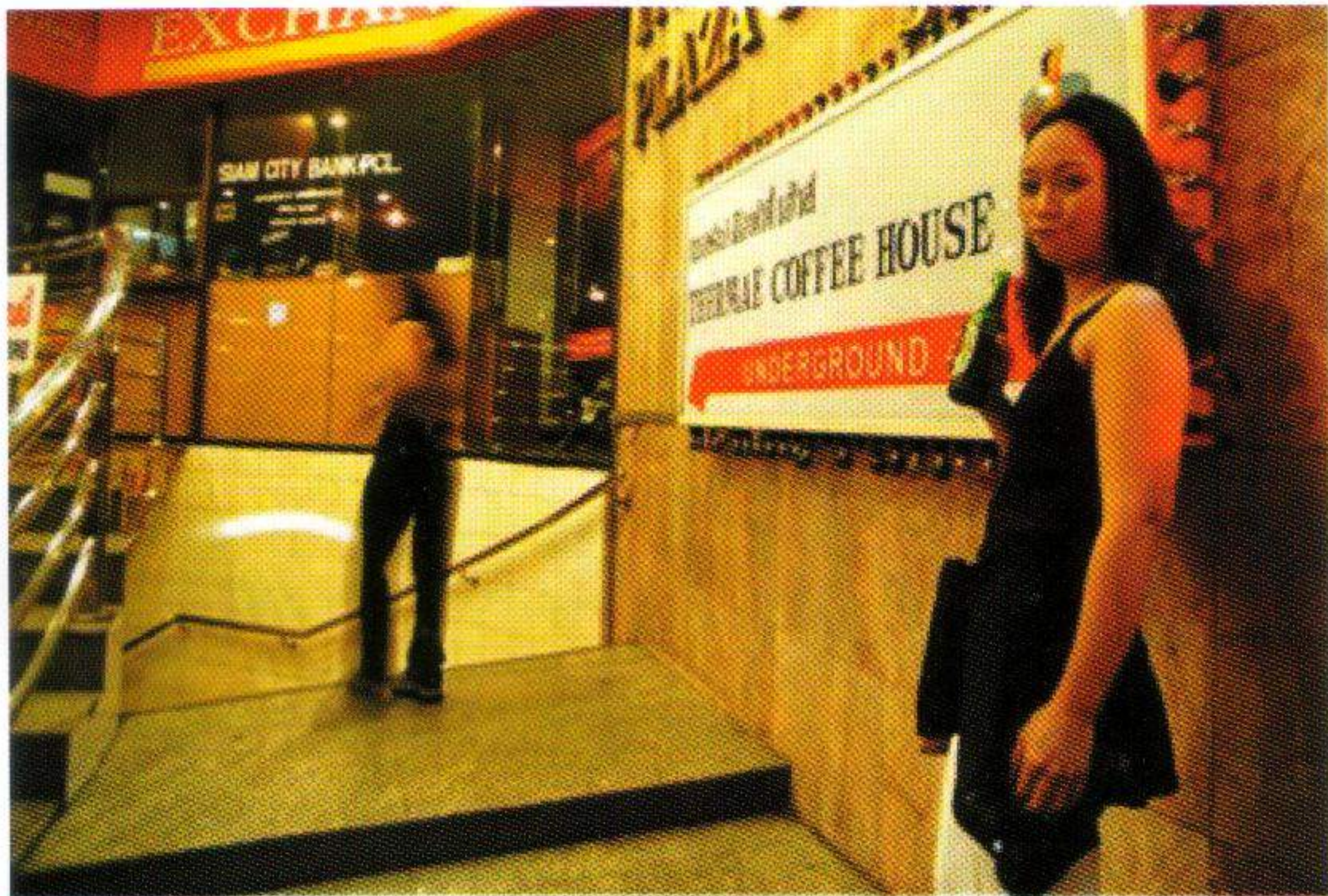
homosexuality."

In defence of his out-there stance, Moore says "there aren't editors who say, 'Oh, you can't have a character saying that, even if people say that in real life.' Why not allow people say in books what they say in the street and inside bars? Non-fiction is truly distorted by all kinds of constraints such that most of the time you know what you are reading is a swindle."

Much of what he is writing is based on reality he says. "The precise circumstances where events are played out are made up, but the core of the experiences are real. One reason why the books have been a success is the characters are a mirror that allows others to recognize aspects of their own life." Or maybe his own?

And his catch phrases recount the classic features of the surreal expat life in Bangkok: "short-time hotels" (hotels where sexual transactions take place), 'the sickness' (men addicted to the-sex-on-tap lifestyle), and 'the packaged falange' (foreigners working in Bangkok for multi-nationals on high salaries).

Local writer Berand Trink who writes about the Realm in the Bangkok Post says that Moore has fully explored the detective genre with the exotic sleazy East



as a backdrops for his novels. He deals insightfully with the foreign Diaspora that came to Thailand because they had trouble getting laid back home.

And at times it seems the author is more concerned exposing the moral vacuum of Bangkok, than private-eye Calvino is in solving cases for a financial pittance. Rather than a deep revelation on the psyche of mainstream Thais, Moore focuses largely on the microcosm of the red-light realm.

It is little wonder that Moore's largest following, almost verging on cult worship - the patrons of Bangkok's red light district- are the whore-mongers he writes about living on the fringes of Bangkok.

Moore's fan clubs is growing at his web site cgmoore.com. One letter from a Canadian gentleman in his 70's who divorced his wife and moved to Thailand to live with prostitute half his age wrote: "The reason why I'm writing to you is simply to say thank you for writing these kinds of books."

