

# The Hemingway of Ba

Christopher G. Moore is big in Japan. And Germany, and Thailand. Only now, **ALEXANDRA GILL** writes, is the Canadian thriller writer getting his due at home

VANCOUVER

Imagine you are in Burma, at the Rangoon airport, checking in for a return flight to Bangkok. You slide your passport toward the attendant, when it suddenly falls down a slim crack between two rammed-together countertops.

When the counters are pulled apart, the dark crevice reveals a dusty rat's nest of lost spoils: sunglasses, key chains, tickets, coins, wallets and small plastic bags. Your wallet has landed at the top of the heap, right above a very expensive-looking camera case. You reach down and grab both. The airport authorities are too busy kicking up cobwebs and fighting over the booty to notice that you've scored a Nikon.

Would you: a) Immediately hand the camera over to the Lost and Found — as many good Canadian travellers might.

b) Slip the camera into your coat pocket, smuggle it through Customs and develop the film inside — as most relatively curious people would.

c) Slip the camera into your coat pocket, smuggle it through Customs and never develop the film.

Instead, you seize this serendipitous opportunity to develop the plot of your next crime novel.

Christopher G. Moore chose c).

Since you probably haven't heard of Moore, we don't mean to suggest he isn't a good Canadian. *Au contraire*. The former Oxford-trained law professor was indeed born and bred in Vancouver. Having lived in Bangkok for the past 15 years, where he's written a novel each year, Moore is more than just prolific — he appears to possess enough curiosity to kill nine cats.

So now you're probably asking, like any curious Canadian should: Why haven't I heard of Moore before? His novels (which include the nine-part Vinny Calvino detective series) are bestsellers in Germany. They've been translated into Japanese, and more recently Chinese. In Bangkok, where Moore is a cult hero to the city's huge English-speaking expatriate community, his books are so popular you can buy them at nightclubs and massage parlours. His private-eye series has been optioned for U.S. television. Another title, *God of Darkness*, has been optioned for film. And he has also written a highly praised dictionary, *Heart Talk*, about the many



Author Christopher Moore looks at a

phrases used to describe emotions in the Thai language.

But oddly enough, with the exception of his first novel (*His Lordship's Arsenal*, was written in Vancouver and published in New York), our man in Bangkok has never been published or distributed in North America before. Until now, that is.

*Waiting for the Lady*, now available in Canada through Subway Books, is Moore's latest dispatch from the Land of Smiles. The Lady is Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning, democratically elected leader of Burma who's never been allowed to hold power. Sloan Walcott is a washed-up U.S. photographer and part-time smuggler with several nasty habits, but a heart of gold. In 2002, just in time for the Lady's qualified release from house arrest, Walcott finds himself a camera at the Rangoon airport.

So this strange camera incident in the Rangoon airport really did occur?

"Yes, it actually did," says Moore, sipping a cup of coffee at the Bacchus Lounge in Vancouver, where he has arrived for his very first hometown reading tonight at the Vancouver International Writers Festival.

"My passport fell down this crack and I found a camera. It was chilling," he explains, in a calm, measured voice that hints at his judicial

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# angkok is a Canuck



JEFF VINNICK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

a reflection of himself in a ceiling mirror in the lobby of the Wedgewood hotel in Vancouver.

background.

"The date stopped in 1996, the same year that Aung San had been attacked in a car on the streets of Rangoon. What's the possibility that this camera was lost, disposed of by a journalist who was there on the scene and being followed? What if that whole film recorded that attack?"

Moore didn't bother developing the film to find out. He resisted the temptation — only Buddha knows how. Instead, he let his creative imagination run wild and sent Walcott on a mission — which takes the rogue hero gallivanting through the Burmese countryside and all the way back to the secret Japanese brothels of the Second World War — to return the photographs to the Lady in person.

The story entranced George Fetherling. "Reading it, I was reminded of Graham Greene in that wonderful middle period, when he was using adventure, or whatever you call it, to write about moral problems in a literary work," explains the Canadian author, Vancouver Sun columnist and publisher of Subway Books.

Fetherling first discovered Moore's books through his Web site ([www.cgmoore.com](http://www.cgmoore.com)), struck up a correspondence and eventually a deal, to bring the author's books to his native land. Although Moore had received several offers from

various small New York publishers before, "they weren't the right ones," he explains.

"I've had a freedom that most writers can only dream of," says Moore, who does approximately \$2,000 in sales through his Web site each month. "Unless the deal is right, a publisher can destroy you as a writer. I was looking for someone who was committed to a large print run. Subway is giving me that chance. They're putting a lot into this book here."

Despite Fetherling's glowing analogies, there are obvious differences between Moore and Greene. Moore, who has also been described as "The Hemingway of Bangkok," was never an intelligence officer, as far as we know. His sense of morality is shaped more by Buddhism than Catholicism. And his writing is, well, not quite as poetic.

But in the great literary tradition that hasn't really touched down in Asia since Somerset Maugham, Moore revels in the role of writer-in-exile.

"It's the Year of Living Dangerously — every year," says Moore. Although based in that city, where he lives with his wife of 10 years (a Thai-born, U.S.-educated United Nations officer), his research has taken him to all of Asia's hot spots, including Vietnam before the Americans lifted the embargo and

Cambodia during the United Nations Transitional Authority election.

"Going into those places that are still in flux has allowed me to be witness to a period of huge transition," says Moore. "In these times, you see the best and the worst of the human condition. You're seeing people pushed to their limits — emotionally, morally, socially, economically. And you meet all sorts of fascinating people along the way. People you would not normally meet day-to-day, in a normal kind of life. It's about the best material you could hope for as a novelist."

Although he's thrilled about finally being published here in Canada, Moore has absolutely no regrets about leaving his hometown and stable law career behind.

"I wanted to live in a wider world. And to try it properly, you really have to take the net away from underneath the tightrope. If you're going to write about people who take the risk and take the adventure, you've got to go along for the ride — otherwise you're a tourist."

*Christopher G. Moore discusses mystery and malfeasance with fellow crime authors Ridley Pearson and Anna Porter, at the Vancouver International Writers Festival, today at 2 p.m., Arts Club Revue Theatre. For more information, call 604-681-6330.*

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