Bangkok Haunts

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John Burdett’s *Bangkok Haunts*

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


One of the more interesting impacts of the Internet is the manner in which it appears in fiction. This month both of the books we are reviewing have plots which deal to a considerable extent with the Internet as a vehicle for "pornography". [1] M. J. Rose's work, *The Venus Fix*, takes a nuanced but highly negative view. (See the review on pg. 184) John Burdett's *Bangkok Haunts* is both nuanced and ultimately equivocal.

Burdett is a well-known author in what may be a relatively minor niche: novels set in Thailand. His three works [2] feature the Buddhist police detective, Sonchai Jitpleecheep, product of a liaison between an American soldier and a Thai prostitute during the Vietnam War. Sonchai moves uneasily in, what is to Westerners, the vice-ridden depths of Bangkok.

To many Thais and to Burdett, a long-term resident of Thailand, this demimonde is simply a very human and necessary accommodation to living in the phenomenal world of the Red Dust, where Buddhist saints, local Thais warped by their karmic passages through their lives, various spirits, and blundering, barely aware Westerners careen between comedy and tragedy.

Sonchai is a deeply moral Buddhist, until, as is frequently the case, things just get too much for him, then he smokes *yaabaa*—meth—or shacks up with one or more of the girls who work in his mother's brothel. His mother became very wealthy by opening the market for the first Viagra-fueled Thai bordello exclusively for geriatric Vietnam era vets recruited from American senior citizen's groups via the Internet. As Sonchai's mom's enterprise shows, Burdett, like his protagonist, has a
deeply mordant sense of humor which will bring most readers to rueful laughter at many points in his works.

Sonchai's boss, the chief of a Bangkok police subdivision, is one of the largest crime lords in the city. A recurrent character is his deceased partner who advises Sonchai from time to time on how to best advance his personal karma amidst the violent confusion of modern Bangkok.

One of the recurrent tropes of Sonchai's inner musings (and Burdett's outer ones [3]) is the Thais' broad acceptance of every possible human sexual permutation; "polymorphous perversity" is, in Burdett's Bangkok, simply the human condition. [4] This is broadly and often humorously contrasted with the Western perspective, which consists of private pursuit of pleasures for which most of us feel obliged to publicly disapprove.

In this particular work, we meet Damrong, Sonchai's former lover who is "...every Farang's (Westerner) idea of the perfect Oriental lover." "...a world-class triple-A **** in other words." (p. 289) This woman is both perpetrator and victim, and we can say very little more about the plot without giving away key points. Here we simply say that this work raises a great many issues dealing with the impact of the Internet on pornography.

Burdett drives home the gap between Thai and Western values RE sexuality and pornography with something rarely found in crime procedurals, whether set in Bangkok or not: an appendix containing a long piece by Timothy Egan in *The New York Times* from 2000, "Erotica Inc.—a Special Report: Technology Sent Wall Street into Market for Pornography" [5] This report, as discussed in detail in our editorial in this issue (http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/08/04/edit.php) discussed the manner in which community standards, under the impact of the much wider distribution of digital adult materials by increasingly more powerful corporate interests, have been eroded.
While Burdett plays in his novel with the question of corporate involvement, he raises an even larger issue: What, if anything, is always and in every case definable as pornographic? In *Bangkok Haunts*, what we might regard as "straight pornography," that is, graphic depictions of sexual acts between consenting adults of whatever gender (and in Mr. Burdett's works, gender often veers into "whatever" terrain) is not only not legal but also unobjectionable.

There are, however, some things that even Thais find pornographic, however much that definition may have been forced upon them by globally held values. These include child pornography, and protecting children from pornography, a problem made much more salient by the impact of the Internet. This latter issue continues to be a problem even for the American legal system, [6] as practiced and experienced as it is in adjudicating matters pornographic.

One of *Bangkok Haunts's* plot points centers around another element of pornography universally defined as objectionable: "snuff films," in this case, films of murder as a sexual act. [7] But like everything else in Sonchai's complicated multidimensional world, even snuff films cannot simply be considered in isolation, like the question of "pornography" itself.

In the third world, including some parts of rural Thailand, many people continue to be so poor and miserable that a life as the object of pornographic productions, even including snuff films, can seem preferable to the alternatives of slow starvation or living in subhuman conditions. Mr. Burdett takes us into this world, and introduces us to carefully drawn characters who may seem to us to inhabit some dreadful alternative reality. But to Mr. Burdett they, like us, are merely living their lives according to the reality which they inhabit and understand.

Among the several questions that the novel implicitly raises is "Where, after all, does pornography rank on the hierarchy of possible crimes?" Here Mr. Burdett's response to a question from Adam Dunn in their interview is pertinent. [8]
(Dunn question): Pornography itself is hardly new; what is the catalyst for the burgeoning piped-in porn market in hotel chains? (Is it just the fluidity of digital media transmission, or simply "a growing American market that wants pornography in the home"? [302] Increased business travel? Fear of AIDS? Surely it cannot be something so mundane as a renewed interest in fidelity.)

Burdett: I think if we read the article from the NYT, appended to the book, the answer is clear: porn is a massive growth industry because digital media permits it to be viewed in secret. Porn was negligible when it came in the form of postcards and bulky "men's" magazines, started to take off with video shops, then when total anonymity was available in the form of downloads from the Net the shame factor was eliminated and porn exploded — and is continuing to do so. I admire your unquenchable optimism when you ask if porn is a consequence of "a renewed interest infidelity". Once again, don't you think you are being slightly too literal? It's like asking if the media's ascination with violence is a "consequence of renewed interest in security". How faithful would you feel if your mind was on the girl in the porn video while you made love to your betrothed? (How faithful would you feel your partner was being if her mind was on the jock in the porn clip?) [9] I think to Sonchais porn is simply part of the "functional barbarism" of our times — an abuse of applied science which allows us to cop out emotionally, and even erotically. That's why he prefers prostitution.

Burdett's Bangkok Haunts takes us into a very unfamiliar world, one where virtually all crimes are relative to a wide variety of possible outcomes, and where all things are enmeshed in the endless and timeless Buddhist world of Karmic cause and effect, including the Internet, murder, and pornography.

[1] We put the term in quotations to indicate our awareness that its meaning is much contested. We could have used erotica, or perhaps adult material, each of which might have been more or less acceptable to various groups of our readers. In general in these
reviews, we understand the term *pornography* to be largely a matter of legal definition.

[2] His first was *Bangkok Tattoo*, the second *Bangkok 8; Bangkok Haunts* is his most recent.


[4] While it is always possible that Burdett's viewpoints is no more than his personal opinion, his depiction of the Bangkok morality corresponds to widely accepted views firmly set in the Western consciousness from at least the Vietnam war era forward.


[6] On July 23, 2008, as I was researching for this review, "...the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a 2007 lower-court decision that the Child Online Protection Act violated the First Amendment since it was not the most effective way to keep children from visiting adult websites." This report, by *Library and Information Science News* at: http://www.lisnews.org/child_online_protection_act_overturned has appended to it a substantial list of comments indicating the range of public opinions on this issue.

[7] The 1976 Japanese film *Realm of the Senses* directed by Nagisa Oshima raised some of the same issues as *Bangkok Haunts*. It was immediately banned in Japan and only recently has the uncut version been available to Japanese audiences. The events behind the story in the film lay in an erotic murder-suicide from the 1930's in Japan. See the excellent if pedantically postmodern analysis by Freda Freiberg "The unkindest cut of all? Some reflections on the recent cinematic
release of the uncut version of Nagisa Oshima's *Ai no corrida* (1976)
found at: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/senses.html


[9] These questions speak to an important issue raised by M.J. Rose in the other work under review here, *The Venus Fix*.
http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/08/04/rose.php