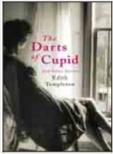


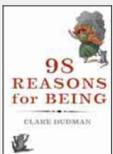
## paperbacks

## FICTION

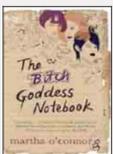
Compiled by Charmaine Chan

**The Darts of Cupid and Other Stories**By Edith Templeton  
Penguin, \$120  
★★★★☆

Stories involving Cupid are rarely as sophisticated and shrewd as those in Edith Templeton's collection. Distanced somewhat from the heartbeat of passion, her narratives often deal more with love's psychology than with its physical nature. The title tale, set around a wartime office, is of an era. Despite feeling bathed in sepia, however, it's a captivating observation of yearning that transcends time. Slow in pace, like other offerings in the book, it creates a lingering mood and leaves its imprint subtly. The same effect is achieved in *A Coffeehouse Acquaintance*. Set in Prague, where Templeton was born in 1916, it's evocative, if unsettling. A married Londoner has an affair with a worldly but mysterious man she meets in curious circumstances in a cafe. It's only when she returns three years later that she grasps the extent to which he is truly a stranger. In one of many sharp insights, Templeton writes: "The man is always different in the beginning from anyone else one has ever known. By the time one has sorted him out as belonging to a certain type, the end is in sight." After reading all seven of her stories, you'll probably be inclined to agree.

**98 Reasons for Being**by Clare Dudman  
Sceptre \$120  
★★★★☆

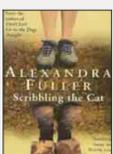
Clare Dudman worked hard on this novel – and it shows. Her bibliography, for starters, is proof of the hours spent studying Germany, the Jews and "mental maladies" (the title of one of the texts). Her two main characters are the fictional Hannah Meyer, a 23-year-old Jew from the Frankfurt ghetto, and the real Heinrich Hoffman, a mid-19th century psychiatrist, remembered mainly for his scary disciplinary book for children, *Struwwelpeter*. Blending research with imagination, Dudman reveals the doctor's kind disposition. Hannah is admitted to Hoffman's asylum after she's diagnosed with nymphomania. When ice baths and electric-shock treatment fail to shake her out of her "miseries", Hoffman tries the unconventional tack of talking to her, and slowly this coaxes her out of her shell. Despite being scorned for apparent licentiousness, it turns out she's only ever loved one man – a gentle. *98 Reasons for Being* (the number of asylum inmates) is a driven novel. Real case notes and the like sometimes disrupt the flow, but the story is worth the effort.

**The Bitch Goddess Notebook**by Martha O'Connor  
Orion \$165  
★★★★☆

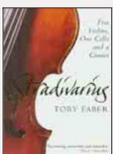
Imagine Charlie's Angels gone bad and you have the Bitch Posse, three tough chicks who "find trouble before it finds you". Rennie, Amy and Cherry are seniors at Holland High School in 1988, a year that forever changes their lives and shatters their pact to be "best friends forever". Rennie, the smart, sexy one, loses her virginity to Mr Schafer, the married drama teacher. The affair inevitably sours when she falls pregnant, although the ultimate consequence of their liaison is darker. The destructive behaviour of the girls – self-mutilation, drugs, violent sex – follows them into adulthood. Fifteen years later, Rennie is an aspiring writer and cocaine-snorting sex addict who seduces her students, Cherry is in a psychiatric hospital and Amy is in a dissolving marriage, and pregnant. O'Connor flips back and forth in time, naming each chapter after one of the three main characters and inserting the year and location for easy navigation. Punchy, and packed with profanity, her writing will find an appreciative audience in readers who can't quite get off on chick lit. *The Bitch Goddess Notebook* is something to feast on, finish and then forget.

## NON-FICTION

Compiled by Tim Cribb

**Scribbling the Cat**by Alexandra Fuller  
Picador \$120  
★★★★☆

From the author of the word-of-mouth best-seller *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, this is a journey into Zimbabwe in the company of K, a white Rhodesian who fought Ian Smith's brutal war against Robert Mugabe's independence movement. Alexandra Fuller, a fine writer of whom much can be expected, leaves her Wyoming home to explore the African bush, measuring her childhood complicity in so much murder, but also taking personal stock of how much Africa defines who she is. "I knew, without really being told out loud, what happened in the war and I knew it was as brutal and indefensible as what I had just heard from K. I just hadn't wanted to know." Through Fuller's observations of K, we learn a little about what happens when a man is given a gun and sent "to a war in a world he thought was his to defend". This is a book largely about reconciling with the past, when colour was a factor. It doesn't pretend to offer any clues for the future, perhaps because Mugabe's Zimbabwe has none, and colour has nothing to do with it.

**Stradivarius: One Cello, Five Violins and a Genius**by Toby Faber  
Pan Books \$120  
★★★★☆

Amateur musicologist and violinist Toby Faber, former boss of the family publishing house Faber & Faber, explores the mystique of Antonio Stradivari by telling the story of six of his most famous surviving instruments. Born in 1644, Stradivari lived to the age of 93, fathered 11 children and built more than 1,000 stringed instruments, mostly violins, of which about 600 remain. Few verifiable facts survive as to what inspired his genius, and no portrait of him has been found. Faber, however, gathers what there is, discusses what can be surmised, and examines Stradivari in the context of his instruments, and the musicians who played them. There's the Paganini, the oldest, dating from about 1680. The Khevenhüller is from his golden period, made in 1733 and valued at US\$4 million. The Messiah was found after Stradivari's death and has rarely been played. The cello is the Davidov, now with Yo-Yo Ma, to whom it was lent by Daniel Barenboim. Faber, in telling the story, explains along the way the luthier's craft and what makes each instrument unique, and engages in speculation about Stradivari's lost technique, and much else besides.

**Abramovich: The Billionaire from Nowhere**by Dominic Midgley and Chris Hutchins  
HarperCollins \$120  
★★★★☆

Last April, *Forbes Russia* ranked 38-year-old Roman Abramovich as Russia's richest person, estimated to be worth US\$14.7 billion. His business empire, mostly built on his stake in oil company Sibneft, stretches from the cosy clubs of London to Siberia's frozen expanse. That empire includes the Chelsea Football Club, which he acquired in 2003 for £140 million (about \$2 billion), then spent a further £110 million buying players to win the hearts of Chelsea fans with their first Premiership in 50 years. Abramovich is one of Russia's shadowy oligarchs who emerged under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. Who is this man? Despite impressive research, journalists Dominic Midgley and Chris Hutchins can report only the facts, written at risk of writ. The duo is cautious about conclusions, hedging and qualifying whenever the story ventures into the murky world of Russian business. *Abramovich* has been fully revised for this paperback edition, and includes Chelsea declaring the biggest ever financial loss for a Premiership team. But £88 million is loose change for the richest man in all the Russias.

Dismissed by many critics as sex-pat literature, the Bangkok novel is nevertheless a flourishing genre with a growing band of loyal readers, writes **Emma Larkin**

## Lust in translation



Illustration: Harry Harrison

## asia specific

**WALK INTO ANY** English-language bookshop in Bangkok and you'll see a section dedicated to fiction that springs from the Thai capital. These thrillers and crime novels often use Bangkok's seedier side as their setting and are written almost exclusively by western men who've lived in the city. Although they're labelled by some as "sex-pat literature", the books and authors have multiplied throughout the 1990s. It would take only a minor stretch to sweep them together in a genre all their own.

Take Dean Barrett's *Skytrain to Murder*, which follows the trail of ex-CIA agent Scott Sterling as he explores "Bangkok's little known world of upper-class gentlemen's clubs, houses of domination and kinky expatriate orgies".

Joy is "young, stunningly pretty, and one of the Zombie Bar's top-earning pole dancers". You can meet her in Stephen Leather's *Private Dancer* for a "roller-coaster ride of sex, drugs and deception". *Spirit House* by Christopher G. Moore has private dick Vincent ("Vinee") Calvino erupting from the city's underbelly, "a world closed to outsiders; a place where the gods of envy and sex dance across a bridge connecting the East and West".

*Losing the Plot* is by one "Chuckwow" (Thai slang for masturbation). *The Don Juan of Bangkok* is a memoir of one

**"I find the current run of expat novels terribly uninspiring. The writing, the lack of proofreading – I just don't have the patience"** David Young Thailand-based expat author

man's journey through the canals of the capital and beyond by "Alfie". The cover features a young Thai girl with hands held delicately between her splayed legs.

As the cover of Jake Needham's *The Big Mango* states: "California's so nineties ... Get ready for BANGKOK!"

It's a controversial school of writing. Book stores at Bangkok airport show enough confidence in the sales potential of such titles to display them at the front of the shop. But one local reviewer sums up the response from critics and publishers as a "stack of tripe".

Some authors are able to pull back-cover endorsements from the likes of Gore Vidal. Others make do with blurbs from the *Pattaya Mail* or Bernard Trink, a writer notorious in Thailand for his now-discontinued guide to the local bar scene in the *Bangkok Post* newspaper.

Even the authors themselves disparage the books. "Bangkok fiction has evolved into a genre – though not a very good one," says David Young, an American author based in Thailand. "I find the current run of expat novels terribly uninspiring. The writing, the lack of proofreading – I just don't have the patience. Unfortunately, a few bad books will turn readers off the whole genre."

Few authors are keen to claim their place within the literary pantheon of Bangkok scribes. "What's this obsession

received enthusiastic reviews in the west. A sequel, *Bangkok Tattoo*, was released this month.

Burdett, a former Hong Kong lawyer who's spent large parts of the past 20 years in Bangkok, says crime novelists may be drawn by the city's notoriety for sex and drugs. But if those writers believe the exotic setting alone will sell books, they're sadly mistaken, he says.

"Many of these books are really old-style detective thrillers which happen against a backdrop of Bangkok," he says. "Not a lot of attempt has been made to get into the local culture, which is a pity because that's what the genre needs. [Raymond] Chandler's Los Angeles is a convincing character in his novels because he took the trouble to get to know it well."

Moore is the most prolific Bangkok author, with 18 novels under his belt. He claims to have sold more than 100,000 books. *Zero Hour in Phnom Penh*, also known as *Cut Out*, won last year's German Critics' Award for Crime Fiction.

American writer Barrett takes solace in writing a much more varied oeuvre. In addition to plays and non-fiction, he's written mystery novels set in Bangkok, China and New York, a fairy tale set in a Chinese fishing village, a collection of short stories (*Murder at the Horny Toad Bar*) and a book of poems (*The Go Go Dancer Who Stole My Viagra*).

"I plough whatever income I get from one book into preparing and publicising the next book," says Barrett, unperturbed by his financial losses. "Writing is what I do, what I am, so whatever the income or lack of income I'll keep writing."

If there's little literary kudos and not much financial reward, what is it about the city that continues to inspire foreign writers? "No other city in the world is like Bangkok," says Leather. "On the same length of street you can see a modern high-rise office block, a pavement noodle-seller, a top-of-the-range Mercedes, a motorcycle with a husband, wife and two children on it, and a full-grown elephant."

Needham sees a certain inevitability in the exotic and erotic pull of Bangkok. "In the 1980s, it seemed like every Brit solicitor who spent more than a weekend in Hong Kong churned out some kind of Suzie Wong novel to memorialise his personal metamorphosis as a result of time

spent in Asia," he says. "In the 90s, Hong Kong expats found more important things to do and the Bangkok expats, most of whom didn't have anything more important to do, took over the industry."

For Lois Ann Dort of the Bangkok Women's Writing Group, the attractions of the city can be easily explained. "Bangkok is a cheap place to live, a cheap place to self-publish, and of course the centre of the Thai sex trade. There are so many men that live in these darkened dens of prostitution night after night that it's not surprising some of them would like to qualify it as research." She dismisses the books as "prostitute fiction" saying, "I think it's a genre that revolves around the allure of Thai women's sexuality and the fantasies white men have about them."

There's no getting around the fact that the authors focus on a limited slice of Bangkok life. The same characters resurface throughout their pages in a seemingly endless roll-call of expatriate down-and-outs and Thai prostitutes, mamasans, drug dealers and corrupt cops.

Rattawat Lapcharoensap, the Thai author of a highly acclaimed collection of short stories called *Sightseeing* published earlier this year by Grove/Atlantic in New York, said in a recent interview with the *Bangkok Post* that he wrote his stories partly out of a sense of frustration at the way contemporary expatriate writers portray Thai people. "[The Thai characters] tend to speak in aphorisms, like a Zen master," he said. "Or they can only engage in drugs and police corruption and sexual mishap."

This doesn't seem to bother the readers. According to David Johnson at Asia Books, Thailand's main English-language publisher and bookstore chain, the books sell predominantly to expatriates, tourists and business travellers at airports. Thailand is attracting more tourists than ever and news events, such as Sars and the tsunami tragedy, have kept the country in the headlines. All this, says Johnson, translates into a demand for books.

Fans can rest assured that the indomitable Bangkok authors will rise to meet the demand.

Emma Larkin is the author of *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop* (John Murray)

## Keeping You Posted!



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