

# Angela Savage: *The Half-Child*

When Angela Savage headed up a Red Cross sub-regional program in Laos, she ran a riotous night for staff with an 'International Worst Practice Award'. Volunteers had to 'fess up' to their greatest cross-cultural blunder in the previous twelve months and prizes were awarded. 'Although some of the mistakes were serious, the aim was to help staff understand that mistakes are inevitable, and how best to deal with that mistake,' she says. 'You'd always spot the ones that wouldn't last in the job, because they would never take responsibility.'

Being patronising and assuming an intimacy that isn't there, and pressuring local people to do things with you, were common blunders, she says. '(The locals) may have a whole set of family responsibilities they don't reveal, because they don't want to upset you,' she explains.

Cultural misunderstandings are a rich vein for drama, which Savage exploits in her most recent book, *The Half-Child* (Text Publishing, 2010, 9781921656545 \$32.95pb) the second in the Jayne Keeney detective series. This time we follow Jayne from Bangkok to Pattaya, a seedy coastal township where she is investigating the death of a young Australian woman. In Pattaya, Jayne works undercover at an orphanage, rubs shoulders with the 'ladyboys' and bargirls, and discovers some unpalatable truths about Western greed and corrupt adoption practices. Jayne's love interest, Rajiv, proves to be a veritable Watson to her Sherlock and adds a romantic subplot to the intrigue. It's a heady mix and a real page-turner, and it ought to appeal to travellers and young adults considering a gap year.

Savage, forty-four, has a great affection for young overseas travellers; she remembers her first eye-opening trip to Bangkok at nineteen. But asked her view of what young volunteers bring to developing communities, she is blunt: 'I think if you go understanding that you are going to learn a hell of a lot more than you can teach, you can have a really rich and fulfilling experience.'

Savage is well placed to comment. In 1992, she travelled to Laos on a six-month study scholarship and ended up staying six years. She worked in AIDS-related research and later ran a regional HIV/AIDS program, covering Laos, Burma, Vietnam and southern China. She has an endearing ability to laugh at her younger, greener self, and recounts with gusto the time she was in Samoa attending a meeting with senior health bureaucrats. She introduced herself as Angela and an official responded with a greeting that she assumed was his name. Afterwards, a Samoan colleague informed her that she had spent the entire meeting calling the official 'hello'. The thought of it still makes her feel embarrassed. 'You learn to appreciate the patience with which the local people treat you and the great margins of tolerance they extend.'

Despite her exotic work experiences, is it difficult for a Melbourne girl to write about such a different culture? 'To write convincingly of characters across cultures can be very shaky ground, but I think with enough imagination and empathy it is possible,' she says.

Much of this book was written in 2008 during a twelve-month stint living in Phnom Penh with partner journalist Andrew Nette and their daughter Natasha, then two. She drew on past conversations with tuk-tuk drivers, touts and bargirls to create credible and appealing characters. That she speaks conversational Lao encouraged many locals to share their life stories with her when she worked in Laos. This helped her to flesh out characters such as Mayuree, a big-hearted bargirl, who struggles to balance work with the care of her young baby.

Savage aims to give her characters depth and humanity so readers can identify with them. 'The depiction of the Thai sex worker is often of a helpless victim of circumstance. Those women exist, but they are as complex as women anywhere,' she says.

One reader's report criticised an early draft of the book for not having enough of the sights, smells and sounds of Thailand. 'Even though I knew I wanted to write novels when I left Thailand, I hadn't been in the culture like a writer would. I hadn't been taking notes,' she says. To counter this, Savage spent a weekend in Pattaya in 2008. She sat in a bar for two hours in the tourist sex strip, and took notes about all the little quirks, things she'd forgotten, which makes it so unusual and different. Her time was well spent.

'He almost tripped over a Thai woman in a bikini top and miniskirt standing on the path holding a sign "Henhouse a go-go: Many New Chicks to Choose this Week". Jostling for attention next to her was a man in a three-piece suit and tie; his sign read "Live Sex Show Upstairs - Lady and Man - Lady and Lady - Lady and Snake".'

A side trip to Kanchanaburi, and the famed Bridge on the River Kwai (part of the infamous Death Railway built by Allied POWs and Asian labourers in 1943) helped her to produce this scene at the Tiger Cave Temple. The vision that greeted her was a lustrous gold Buddha large enough to cradle a ten-year-old child in the palm of his outstretched hand. His crossed legs rested on a platform of concrete lotus petals, and at his feet was a giant alms bowl fed either side by a conveyor belt.'

Negotiating the differences in a different culture, Savage says, fuels her creativity. She recalls waiting for a friend in an Indian café doorway, surrounded by street kids. 'Rather than just sit there and feel uncomfortable with the disparity in wealth and the begging, I started drawing pictures. Not that I'm a great drawer,' she adds. What could have been a stressed out half-hour became a great opportunity for connection. 'It might sound trite, but it's about carving out a space where you don't settle for the inability to communicate.'

Her next book, to be set mainly in Bangkok, is in the pipeline. She gleaned inspiration from an exotic fertility shrine, covered in small penises and tucked in behind the Bangkok Hilton. She shines with enthusiasm. 'It will be like a love letter to the city.'

Clare Kennedy is a Melbourne reviewer with a special interest in children's books