

# The SAVAGE DETECTIVE

THE NEW CRIME NOVEL BY ANGELA SAVAGE REVEALS THE DEADLY SIDE OF AN EVER-POPULAR HOLIDAY DESTINATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

"I STILL FEEL sheepish putting a dead body in such a gorgeous landscape," laughs Angela Savage. She is referring to her latest novel, *The Dying Beach*, which sets murder and mayhem among the sparkling shores of southern Thailand. This cheeky apology is echoed in the book's acknowledgements section, alongside an impressive list of Thai reference material. Her deep and breathless interest in Southeast Asia is just as evident in person.

The Melbourne-born writer's fascination began with a stopover in Bangkok in the mid-1980s. "It really did blow my mind," she says. "It was very beautiful then, the *khlongs* [canals] still flowed and people lived on the rivers." But it was the surge of adrenaline from being an outsider that really attracted her to the kingdom. "The complete inability to blend in was alluring to me."

Back in Australia, Savage focused on a PhD in medical anthropology, but her mind kept wandering back to Southeast Asia. Moved by its sad, secretive past, she immersed herself in the history of Indochina, grabbing any opportunity to visit. Savage combined her two interests in 1992, when she received a student scholarship through the Australian Government. This landed her in Laos, where she secured work through the United Nations Development Program and, later, the Red Cross.

At the time, Savage was the only Australian working on HIV/AIDS programs in Laos. The experience, she says, fortified her. "I was 24 years old...dealing with a disease which had a lot of sensitivities associated with it...and most of the other workers were older men. I was also working in a very proud country, with an independent history, and I had to learn very quickly to be respectful. I had to learn I wasn't an expert."

Savage has certainly made herself an expert, witnessing enormous economic and social change over the past two decades. She remembers Vang Vieng in Laos, these days a thriving tourist town synonymous with river tubing, as nothing more than "one guest house, one restaurant and two hours of electricity a night".

Savage isn't one for rose-coloured views of a pre-tourist Asia. Rather, she sees the relaxation of borders as a positive step towards improved transport, sanitation and health. She's also pleased that many of the preventative health programs she helped establish in Laos and its neighbouring countries are now run by locals.

Savage's only worry is that a sense of equality among the locals is rapidly disappearing: "In the early 1990s, everyone lived simply, but now there are profound class distinctions, by way of extreme wealth and extreme poverty." It is the steady



sale of natural resources and assets to ever-hungry developers, she believes, that has led to this disparity.

This idea is explored in *The Dying Beach*, the third book in her Jayne Keeney detective series.

While holidaying in Krabi, Thailand, Jayne's romantic seaside getaway turns sour when she's drawn into the murder investigation of a local tour guide, revealed to have links with environmental activists and shady developers.

*The Dying Beach* owes much to Savage's husband and "partner in crime" Andrew Nette, whose 2012 novel, *Ghost Money*, was set in the backstreets of the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. Having previously volunteered with the fearlessly-sounding TERRA (Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance), Nette was privy to cases investigating ecological destruction in the region – invaluable material for Savage. With *The Dying Beach*, Savage wanted to examine the effects of tourism on Thailand, as well as "the lesser-known environmental impacts that we may inadvertently contribute to in the West".

Savage is equally keen to challenge certain stereotypes dogging the country. "I love Thailand and I don't want to always portray it in an unflattering light. In the first [Keeney] novel, you see both the beautiful and the seedy side of Chiang Mai. In the second, I take the reader to Kanchanaburi, a wild, beautiful part of the country. With the third book, I was rising to the challenge of writing a novel set in Thailand that does not have a single sex worker or bar girl in it," she jokes. "And while my books are shot through with politics and ideas, they're often funnier than I intended them to be."

So why write crime? "The crime genre is the perfect vehicle for the ideas I want to write about," she explains. "Working cross-culturally is like being a detective. You're often trying to sort out the big picture from a small set of clues, sorting out who's a reliable source from who's trying to take you for a ride. You're often searching for meanings lost in translation."

It was her desire to write that ultimately brought Savage back to Australia, and the move paid off: she won the 2004 Victorian Premier's Unpublished Manuscript Award. The resulting book, *Behind the Night Bazaar*, was released by Text Publishing in 2006.

For the time being, Savage calls Melbourne home. "I have a very divided heart," she says. "The longer I spend in [Asia] the more I realise I'm never going to be an expert on its culture. It's always going to remain a mystery. That's why I love it."

by Emily Laidlaw

» *The Dying Beach is out now.*

ABOVE AUTHOR ANGELA SAVAGE PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN GORDON-BROWN