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Écrire Bangkok: La ville dans la nouvelle contemporaine en Thaïlande, Louise Pichard-Bertaux

Paris: Éditions Connaissances et Savoirs, 2010, 380 p.

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Livres / *Books*

Écrire Bangkok: La ville dans la nouvelle contemporaine en Thaïlande,
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By Ward Keeler *

In Verdi's mid-19th century opera, "*La Traviata*," Violetta refers to "*questo popoloso deserto che appellano Parigi*." The 20th century caused fiction writers throughout Southeast Asia to echo her sentiments, as government and commerce, or just bright lights and brighter dreams, drew huge numbers of people to such rapidly growing cities as Jakarta, Rangoon, and Bangkok. Louise Pichard-Bertaux has decided to address two immense and somewhat intractable topics—the city of Bangkok, and the endlessly proliferating genre of the Thai short story—by binding the two together. This turns out to be quite a smart move. It gives each topic, in itself too vast to cover coherently, let alone thoroughly, some manageable form, and encountering Bangkok through the ways Thai short story writers describe the lives of people who live there makes for a varied, and often vivid, read. Reading stories that are very diverse in tone and form but all of which describe urban life with its many enticements and frequent travails provides a reassuring consistency of subject matter to what might otherwise seem an inchoate mass of material.

Pichard-Bertaux organizes the book in two parts. The second part is given over to ten short stories translated in full: this

makes available a treasure trove of recent short Thai fiction. The first part of Pichard-Bertaux's book provides readers with a historical and literary context for those stories. In her first substantive chapter, Pichard-Bertaux lays out a history of Thai literature, concentrating on the period starting with the introduction of printing in the 19th century and especially since the Second World War. All five of the authors whose work she translates were born between 1947 and 1956, so this is the period that most pertains to their work. But Thai literary history makes sense only in light of Thai political history, which has been tumultuous over the past sixty years, so Pichard-Bertaux sketches out the major points in that history, as well. She then outlines the history of the city of Bangkok, a history of relentless growth that has overwhelmed all efforts to bring order to the process. The end result has been pollution and traffic congestion of epic proportions, as well as the sense of social disorganization that urbanization has brought—along with an apparently addictive excitement—the world over. In her third chapter, Pichard-Bertaux explains what criteria she used to select the stories she would analyze: rather than simply rely on her own aesthetic preferences, she decided to choose among pieces written by five Thai winners of the Southeast Asia Write awards. Selecting fourteen of their works as the corpus to analyze, including some too long to include here in full in translation, she provides biographical sketches of each author and a

précis of the works. Finally, she isolates a number of consistent elements in how the writers represent the city of Bangkok and their characters' experiences of it.

Unsurprisingly, Pichard-Bertaux's generalizations about the look of the city, and about its residents' habits, seem sensible and somewhat obvious. True, the city's past, as a place once based on water transport that has now sold its soul to the automobile, does give Bangkok a particular topography, as does the distinction between dead-end side streets (*soi*) and main thoroughfares. But the despair of poor villagers whose hopes to escape rural poverty have led them to urban desperation, and the frustrations of middle-class professionals whose busy lives generate both wealth and anomie, sound sadly familiar. Only once we read the stories do these well-known features of urban life take on the shading and drama that enables fiction to accomplish what analysis cannot: make vivid to us the experiences of people whose lives differ greatly from our own.

In this respect, the stories Pichard-Bertaux translates are, indeed, winners. Every reader will have idiosyncratic preferences. But while there are stories that fall back on melodrama, as many short stories in Southeast Asia tend to do, they avoid clichéd celebration of rural life, which these fiction writers subject to just as clear-eyed scrutiny as urban life. Several stories are remarkably inventive: middle class life seems to elicit particularly ironic and clever portrayals. One piece manages the admirable feat of recounting a middle-class man's day, and by extension his family life and other stress-generating facets of his existence, entirely in the form of a wordlist plus definitions. Another depicts a couple's domestic life—meals, entertainment, sex—as lived on the road, that is, stuck in Bangkok's endless traffic jams. Yet another uses the device of a cab driver's series of nighttime passengers' conversations to describe the many kinds of damage that urban life

causes in people's relationships. Whether biting satirical or affectingly empathic, all the stories make excellent use of the short story's strengths: an economy of means put in service of maximal communicative effects, a few clear strokes sufficing to map an array of personal experiences and dilemmas.

Scholars have begun to lament the degree to which attention to Thailand has actually meant attention to Bangkok in most accounts of Thai history and politics over the past century. Yet for an enormous number of Thais, including of course its literary intelligentsia, life in the capital defines so much of what it means to live in Thailand that choosing as Pichard-Bertaux has to make the links between their fiction and this locus classicus of primate cities the connecting thread in her account of contemporary Thai fiction eminently sensible. Her book provides a fascinating look at Bangkok, and at some of the lives that take place within its immensely populous, if often emotionally desertous, spaces.

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Reading Bangkok,

Ross King, Singapour: NUS Press, 2011, 272 p., glossaire, bibliographie, index, plans, photographies

*Par Jean Baffie **

Cet ouvrage est un essai de compréhension globale de la capitale thaïlandaise. À ce titre, il doit être salué car il a peu d'équivalent. L'ouvrage que l'anthropologue australien Marc Askew a publié en 2002 sur Bangkok – probablement le plus abouti sur cette ville – était, lui, davantage une réunion de monographies (Askew 2002, Baffie 2007).

Néanmoins, il faut bien avouer que ce livre déçoit alors qu'il est loin d'être franchement raté et apporte même des idées intéressantes. Mais comment ne pas trop