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## Book Review: Letters From Thailand

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### LETTERS FROM THAILAND

By BOTAN

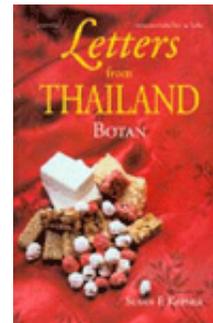
*Translated from the Thai by Susan Fulop Kepner. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002. 412 pages, \$17.50 (paperback)*

reviewed by **Andrea Kempf**

*Letters from Thailand* is not a new novel. It was published in 1969 to great critical acclaim and won the SEATO Prize for Thai literature when Botan, a pseudonym for Supa Sirising, was only twenty-one years old. Eight years later, Susan Fulop Kepner's English translation was published in Thailand, but the book was never formally published in the West. Later, Kepner discovered that her English translation, rather than the Thai original, had become the basis for translations of the novel into other languages. In this new edition, Kepner, working closely with the author, has extensively revised her original translation. Since 1969, Botan has continued to publish novels, none of which is available in English. In 1999, she was recognized as a National Artist of her country.

The novel unfolds over a twenty-year period in a series of ninety-six letters from Tan Suang U, a Chinese immigrant to Thailand, to his beloved mother, who remains in South China. He writes the first letter in 1945, aboard the ship that is taking this ambitious teenage runaway from his impoverished life in China to what he hopes will be economic success in Thailand. Suang U is befriended by the ship's freight manager, who later helps him find a position as a bookkeeper in Bangkok. By the fifth letter, Suang U has become infatuated with Mui Eng, his employer's older daughter, to whom he is married within four months of his arrival in Thailand. By the last letter, his children grown and married, Tan Suang U reassesses his life with a very different set of values than those he brought with him from China.

The letters chronicle Tan Suang U's hard work and diligence, his growing family, his disappointments, his economic successes, his veneration of his mother. And while Suang U seems blissfully untroubled by the political changes around him, particularly those in his homeland, his story is more than a picture of one man's single-minded pursuit of wealth. These letters paint the portrait of an archetype: the immigrant who finds success in his adopted country yet regrets the assimilation of his family members into the foreign culture in which they live. The protagonist is a very traditional man. He views his wife's failure to bear more than one son as a personal failing.



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He discounts the value of his three daughters. His comments about the laziness of the Thais vis-à-vis Chinese immigrants will resonate with Indians, Jews, Armenians, Italians, Irish, Koreans—members of any ethnic group who, having fled poverty and repression in their homeland to seek economic advantages elsewhere, have succeeded through a combination of hard work and perseverance. The comments from the Thais concerning the rapacious attitudes of their Chinese neighbors will sound familiar as well.

Archetypes and stereotypes aside, Botan has created a real human being. Tan Suang U voices prejudice against his Thai neighbors, but is always willing to see the other side. He may describe his daughters as valueless, but it is clear that he loves them and supports them, even when they make choices contrary to his traditional beliefs. He fights the introduction of modern conveniences into his home, but is no autocrat. When his children and wife oppose his wishes and go behind his back to buy an automobile or get modern hairstyles, he eventually accepts what has occurred. Even more important, he makes extraordinary efforts to be fair and keep peace not only within his own family but also within his circle of friends and associates. Two examples demonstrate this ethical stance. After he quarrels with a close friend on board the ship that takes them to Thailand, he spends years trying to repair their friendship, eventually with great success. When his only son takes up with a Thai prostitute, to avoid losing the boy Tan Suang U brings the young couple into his home and attempts to integrate his son's inamorata into the family.

*Letters from Thailand* is a page-turner. Botan has created such an authentic family saga, no doubt based on her own Chinese immigrant family, that readers will rush from letter to letter wanting to know how Suang U resolves his next problem. No wonder, once literary critics realized that hers was an even-handed and authentic portrait of the immigrant experience, fair to both Chinese and Thais, the novel became required reading for Thai students. The Silkworm Books edition, readily available to English-speaking readers, should win the author new admirers. It is hoped that more of her fiction will appear in the West.

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Book Review of Spring 2003

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