

MURDER MOST FOUL

IN SOME BOOKS, THERE'S A MURDER BEFORE THE FIRST CHAPTER ENDS. SOME AUTHORS SHOULD BE SHOT BEFORE THEY EVER PUT PEN TO PAPER. JOANNA HUGHES EXPLAINS

The Devil's Paintbrush by Jake Arnott

I picked this one up in the airport bookstore, taken in by the retro cover and its main real-life characters: Major-General Sir Hector MacDonald, who topped himself in a Paris hotel room after allegations of homosexual conduct were made public, and Aleister Crowley, magician and self-styled "Beast". The two actually met in Paris in 1903, shortly before MacDonald's death, and the novel purports to account for his last days.

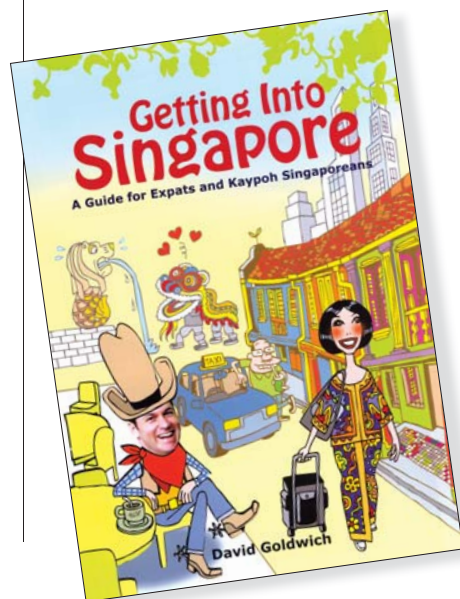
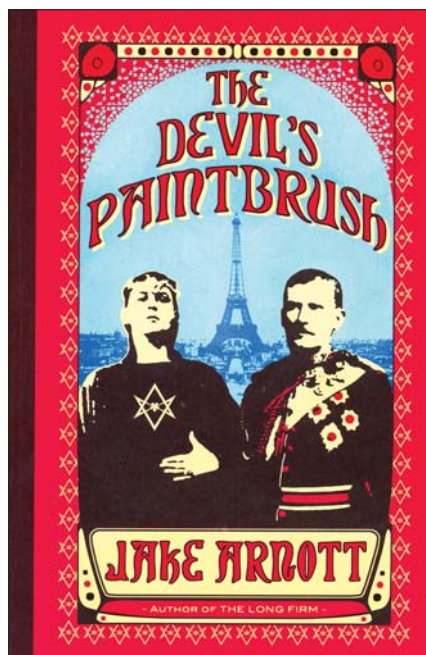
How anyone could screw up a potential plot like this one beggars the imagination. And if MacDonald's last days were as described in the book, it's a wonder he didn't shoot himself earlier and save us all the bother.

What could have been a ripping yarn turns out, in the heavy hands of Arnott, to be a candidate for the Oprah Book Club, and there are few things I can think of more damning than that. The novel is a series of mawkish flashbacks, with Crowley urging MacDonald to accept his homosexuality; even the Black Mass is punctuated with MacDonald's moans and whinges and assorted New Age nostrums. Imagine, if you will, a man who in his Highlands home of Boleskine, raised the Devil and if Kenneth Anger is to be believed, never properly put Him away again, doling out psycho-babble along the lines of the following: "Crowley laughed. 'You really cannot imagine a life outside the service, can you?' he asked. 'I, I,' the General stammered. 'I simply would not exist, man.' 'You would simply become somebody else. Yourself perhaps.'"

I mean, really. There should be some legal recourse to stop publishers from killing trees for this sort of nonsense. Unfortunately, Arnott isn't the only one out there turning out such bosh; I recently came across a synopsis of one novel where the haemophiliac heir to the Russian throne is saved from execution when he is sent forward in time to the 21st century where he converses with Rasputin.

This particular book insults the memories of both MacDonald and Crowley, maligns the Devil and insults the intelligence of its readers. The book's editor could do with a good shaking too, with many glaring inconsistencies (MacDonald at one point exclaims, "oh boy!") but then again, he or she probably was facing a superhuman task.

You want Black Masses in Paris? Diabolical rituals? Then get a copy of Huysman's *La-bas* (Dover Press), turn down the lights and prepare to be afraid, very afraid.



Getting Into Singapore: A Guide for Expats and Kaypoh Singaporeans, by David Goldwich

Bless him. David Goldwich, who has lived in Singapore for 10 years and is married to a Singaporean Chinese, hits all the highs – and lows – of living in our Little Red Dot. He is no Neil Humphreys (thank God), who has made a living out of being the "Good Ang Moh", the one who lives in a HDB flat, queues up for National Day Parade tickets and then buggers off to somewhere else.

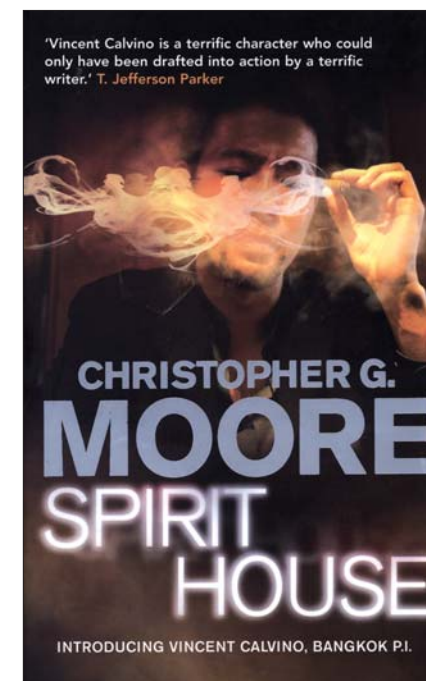
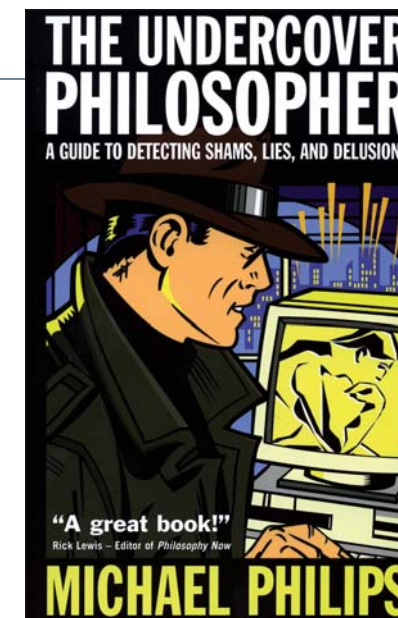
David has wit and a good conversational tone, but somewhere around page 51, I began to wonder who he was writing for. Bitching about life in Singapore is best done over something alcoholic with friends; telling friends and family about life in Singapore is, as many of us have found out, about as high on the fascination scale as your appendectomy at age 15 or Uncle Leroy's golf handicap.

As for Singaporeans who wish to find out what expats really think – well... I remember a Singaporean who hijacked our table at an establishment selling alcohol and tried to weasel out from a pissed (and pissed off) friend what he did and didn't like about Singapore. I got the impression that the Singaporean was trying to convert my friend to Red Dot-ism, which led to much pounding of fists on tables. Perhaps reading David's book will lead to fewer instances of such behaviour.

The Undercover Philosopher: A Guide to Detecting Shams, Lies and Delusions, by Michael Philips

When I was teaching undergraduates at the University of Tennessee, I tried to introduce them to the tangled skeins of Post-Modernism. It was an unfortunate choice of subject. Teenagers today, deprived of the kinds of mind-altering drugs available to an earlier generation, simply cannot conceive of not-knowing, which Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have turned into a massive enterprise permeating every aspect of academic endeavour, with perhaps, the exception of home economics.

The long-awaited flashback has hit. Michael Philips has taught philosophy at American and Canadian universities for more than 30 years and has admirable credentials. What he has done in this book is to reassure us that we can indeed "know" things, that the 18th century Enlightenment should be recalled to service and that many of us are the victims of intellectual shadow games. And he does it in a way that won't leave you dozing on the sofa.



Spirit House, by Christopher G. Moore

The problem with many local colour works of fiction is that they often include too much of the world they are set in. For example, in most detective novels a PI simply goes to a police station or meets an informant in a bar. In the local colour genre, we often get a travelogue that includes the Starbucks on the corner, the internet café where they pick up their email, the restaurants they like, and so on.

The best avoid these pitfalls. We get enough detail to imagine our own Bangkoks if we have never been there, and not so much that those of us who have been there are bored. John Burdett is good at this; Christopher Moore comes close. I suppose I could do with a bit less of italicised Thai sprinkled throughout the text, but that's just me. A good mystery novel with enough seediness for a lazy weekend read.

Stone's Fall, by Iain Pears

Pears' *An Instance of the Fingerpost* was another airport buy; it came out at the same time as a massive Tom Clancy blockbuster which everyone – and I mean everyone – else on the 12-seater plane was reading, which led me to fear that we would drop like a stone from eight thousand feet. I was disappointed with the ending of that book (but I did hang on to the bitter end) and with his following novels, most of which concerned international art theft. With *Stone's Fall*, Pears goes back to what he's good at – a puzzle in time. John Stone is a captain of industry so powerful that he can manipulate governments and markets; when he dies falling from a window in his London home, an intricate unraveling begins that reaches back to even further mysteries and puzzles. ■

