

Alex Kerr

Author

American writer Alex Kerr splits his time between Bangkok and Kyoto, Japan. The 58-year-old moved to Japan in 1977 and has written three books on the country and one book on Thailand, *Bangkok Found: Reflections on the City*



"A book should be like an iceberg: the 10% that shows is creative writing, the rest is research"

By Roy Hamric

What were your most important early influences, in terms of people and reading?

My Tahitian aunt Moana was tall and beautiful. She had long black hair, smoked cigars and wore huge topaz rings. She gave me a taste for "the exotic tempered by reality." As a child, I used to read old science fiction magazines, Greek myths and historical novels. In college, I was drawn to the eccentric 9th century Chinese poet Li He who wrote, "Blue racoons are weeping blood as shivering foxes die." Later I discovered Proust, whose works I have read and re-read.

What's been the most challenging aspect of your life and career?

My big challenge for a long time has been balancing the demands of being a writer and a businessman. In Japan and Thailand, I run Origin, a course in traditional Asian arts. It's from Origin that I've learned much that later appeared in my books.

Who are the Thai writers you most admire?

I was greatly moved by Tew Bunnag's short volume *Fragile Days*, a compassionate, romantic view of everyday Thailand.

What are you working on now?

I'm working now on books about old Kyoto and on Lanna and the Mekong region. It is my belief that a book should be like an iceberg: the 10% that shows is creative writing. Below that is research and academic analysis, which remains invisible.

Would you agree that the classical Japanese Noh musical drama and the Thai Khon, a Thai dance, share an affinity?

Noh and Khon are similar in that both are painfully slow and rely on a limited repertoire of movements. Their shared aim is to produce a mood of otherworldly beauty.

Can you name one interesting but neglected element of Thai art?

Bai sri flower arrangements are alive and well in temples and ceremonies, but few foreigners would ever have thought to put these on the same artistic level as, say, *Ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, which is a shame.

Thailand is rich in annual cultural festivals and hill tribe rituals. What are your favourites?

At the *Phi Ta Khon* festival in Loei (June), thousands of people wear shroud-like costumes surmounted by tall ghost masks painted with fangs and flaming eyes. At a northern Thai *Fon Phii* (ritual of Satan), shamans dance all day while an orchestra plays *pleng mon*, an old and hypnotic music. It's pretty but also spooky, because the *phii* are there. ■

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