



Jerry Hopkins

author

Jerry Hopkins is the author of 36 books, including best-selling biographies of Jim Morrison of The Doors and Elvis Presley. He has lived in Thailand since the early 1990s and divides his time between Bangkok and a farming community in Surin.

By Roy Hamric

How would you describe your early upbringing?

I was raised as a Quaker in New Jersey by a father who was an invalid and a mother who ran a small dry cleaning shop. The best thing they gave me was the freedom to be whatever I wanted to be. It was the 1940s and 1950s and we had no TV so I read, which is essential if you're going to become a writer.

What were your most important early influences?

My parents, of course, otherwise Ernie Pyle, the Second World War correspondent whose dispatches I read when I was nine. After that, Thomas Wolfe and Hemingway, not so much for their writing as for their lust for life.

What books would you recommend to get a better understanding of Thailand?

I've just read Bangkok Found by Alex Kerr, who is very insightful on Thailand's arts and social structure. Very Thai by Phil Cornwel-Smith is a definitive examination of what Westerners think is odd about the popular culture. Jungle Book, a collection of Chang Noi's columns from The Nation, is essential for understanding politics and, if I may be immodest, I like my Thailand Confidential.

You've written 36 books. Do you have favourites?

I was the first writer to think Elvis Presley and Jim Morrison were worthy subjects for a book, and Elvis and No One Gets Out Alive

have together sold more than 6m copies. I also wrote The Hula, a history of Hawaiian dance, and, more recently, Extreme Cuisine, which is an exhaustive look at what most westerners call strange food and here in Asia we call "lunch".

How did you work your way into writing?

You do what you have to do to get any chance at getting good, and that's write a lot. I've kept a daily journal since I moved to Thailand and I'm now well past the 5.5m-word mark. It's a good discipline as well as a way to preserve memories.

The early Rolling Stone magazine days were important in your career.

The so-called hippie lifestyle we shared seemed like a redefinition of normal that made sense. I still think that although we may have been naïve, we were right about almost everything we stood for.

Tell us something about Hunter Thompson that nobody would guess.

I met him once. He was bald, clean-shaven, wore Bermuda shorts, a polo shirt, white sneakers and athletic socks and had a voice like Fred MacMurray. My God, I thought, no wonder straights like Nixon talk to him. It was, of course, just camouflage.

What's your attraction to the lower end of the food chain?

It's the food of the future. Meat is environmentally threatening and economically unsupportable and eventually we all will be eating bug-burgers, if the melting ice doesn't get us first.

What would you never want to taste again?

Balut (the soft-boiled duck embryo popular in Vietnam and the Philippines), Marmite and pla ra (fermented fish popular in Thailand). Many people think the strangest thing I ate was my son's/wife's placenta, which I made into a paté and served to people who came to see the baby. It tasted like liver . . .

If Morrison were alive today and settled in Southeast Asia, where would he live and hang out?

Jim took me to my first topless bar, in LA in 1969 near The Doors office. If he were in Bangkok today at the age of 67, we'd be drinking in a go-go bar in Soi Cowboy or Nana Plaza.

Morrison and Elvis, were there similarities in their personalities or music?

In both instances. When I was doing my research, people I approached for interviews asked: "What do you want to write about him for?" Elvis and Jim led us down musical and cultural paths previously untravellered, and challenged what had gone before.

Your book on Asian aphrodisiacs uncovered some secrets unknown by the food and drug administration. What tip would you give to the uninitiated?

The best combination – in Asia anyway – seems to be Viagra (or one of the Indian generics) plus money. ■

Photo: Robert McLeod