

Welcome

A Novel

and

Women's Rights and Prostitution in Thailand

An Exegesis

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
in Creative Writing

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September 2013

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Statement of Originality

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Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr Phillip Edmonds, for his support and guidance throughout the course of this PhD.

I am grateful for the financial assistance I received from the University of Adelaide in the form of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Divisional Scholarship.

I am thankful to my friends and family who read the novel and provided feedback and encouragement, in particular my mother, Wendy Lee, my nanna, Joni Lee, and my dear friend Supreeya Jindaphan.

I am indebted to the women in Thailand who shared their stories with me.

Abstract

The Novel

Welcome is the story of four young women whose different life trajectories intersect in the bars and brothels of Thailand. Salisa is a Thai prostitute who grows up in a small village outside of Chiang Mai, in the north west of Thailand. When she is sixteen, Salisa's parents ask her to take a job as a waitress in a restaurant in Bangkok that is owned by a woman from their village. In fact, the job is as a prostitute in a bar in Patpong, Bangkok's notorious red light district, where she is expected to earn enough money to support her family. There she meets Mali, (Thai for 'little flower'), a shy, quirky young woman who becomes her best friend and partner in life.

Salisa and Mali work together, at first to avoid and later to come to terms with the occupation to which their respective economic situations have led them. Salisa finds strength in her determination that through her work and the money she sends home, her younger sister Khwan will be protected from the same fate.

The novel follows Salisa and Mali from Bangkok to Phuket to Koh Samui as they attempt to improve their circumstances within the world of prostitution, and as they ultimately attempt to retire and enter the world of 'legitimate' work. Along the way, Mali attempts to retire by marrying an old Australian businessman, but finds herself just as trapped by marriage to a Westerner as she was trapped by her job. Salisa falls in love with a customer despite her best efforts and is slowly drawn into a web of financial and emotional exploitation.

The first-person narrator of the book is Lara, an Australian academic who has travelled to Thailand to research women's rights and prostitution. Lara retells Salisa and Mali's story as she hears it, all the while becoming closer to the women and further drawn into their lives, much to the distress of her supportive husband, Aidan. In the first half of the book, Salisa and Mali's story alternates with images of Lara in the present, her views of the two women, and her insights into contemporary Thailand—and its culture of 'sex tourism'—as seen through Western eyes. In the

second half, Salisa's sister Khwan is kidnapped by criminals who run a closed brothel, drawing Lara, Salisa and Mali back to Bangkok to find her.

Welcome is a realist novel that provides an honest picture of the harsh realities and subtle beauty of the lives of those Thai women who work as prostitutes serving the tourist market.

The Exegesis

Throughout Southeast Asia, every year, millions of girls and women are sold or forced into prostitution and sex slavery. There are two distinct but interconnected markets for prostitution in the region: local men and foreigners. Thailand is well known for its sex trade targeted at western men (known as *farang*), who holiday in Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket in great numbers every year for the purpose of hiring prostitutes. The novel and exegesis aim to examine the issues of women's rights and gender roles in Thailand through an examination of prostitution and its effect on Thai women, using fiction as the medium to tell the story of these women to an Australian audience. The exegesis supports the purpose of the novel by providing the historical, cultural and sociological context of the industry in which these women work.