
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Tamara Sheward does her best in her book *Bad Karma* to convince us that she’s crazy, inept, unattractive and insensitive, but in the end I couldn’t help liking her and, in a bemused way, admiring her as a writer.

Tamara and her friend Elissa are backpackers who can’t stand backpackers. *Bad Karma* relates their three-week journey through mainland Southeast Asia. They storm their way through Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, leaving a trail of cigarette smoke and obscenities. They reserve their worst invective for the other western tourists they meet: this is the scene at a backpackers’ hostel in northern Thailand:

A German woman with hairy armpits and a turban was extolling the virtues of nude pottery to a group of serious-looking twenty-something girls in belly-dance pants and sarongs, while two bearded guys … hunched over their guitars, belting out a Garcia-esque version of ‘Hello Mary Lou.’ A tall black guy in orange African robes and matching pill-box cap read poetry from a notebook to a tiny Japanese girl, who covertly dragged on a joint and nodded sagely .. etcetera.

Tamara and El are in the same age group as these would-be enlightened ones, but have no patience with new-age pieties, dreadlocks and tai chi, though they’re not averse to a bit of chemically-induced euphoria. Their favourite occupation is drinking too much, followed by eating like pigs (known as schnarffing), and lying around doing nothing. They’re definitely not into travel for the sightseeing. Tamara’s philosophy of travel is ‘if I could see it in a book,
then I didn’t have to see it in real life. … I simply wasn’t interested in things like ancient citadels and royal tombs. Nup. I was more interested in scruffing around local markets, retching at what passed as food in these far-flung places and pesterling the natives in out-of-the-way bars.’

Sheward writes with Rabelaisian gusto. She and El tower over the inhabitants of Southeast Asia, just like Gargantua and Pantagruel. They encounter the most disgusting food, the filthiest toilets, the most bug-infested hostels, the most unroadworthy buses and the most excruciatingly embarrassing situations imaginable. But, although literal filth abounds, the girls remain determinedly chaste throughout their adventures.

They never laugh at anyone more than they laugh at themselves. They ridicule the irritantly-bearded, guitar-toting types mercilessly, but they give generously to beggars, and while protesting vigorously at being ripped off by bureaucratic minor officials, would never dream of cheating or doing down any of the people they do genuine business with. Tamara is a warm-hearted soul. She and Elissa are often severely tried by cruelty to animals, and by poverty and suffering, and it shows through all the hyperbole and flippancy of her truly amazing prose style. No holds are barred – no simile is too outrageous, no digression too wayward, no joke too tasteless, no slang too crude.

But then, when it comes to describing the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – the former Security Prison under Pol Pot in Cambodia – all the baroque extravagance of the language drops away and she writes movingly and powerfully. This is where it struck me most forcibly that this book is more than the ravings of an eccentric with an exaggerated relish for colourful expressions. It is a clever, wry, expressive and engaging work which, almost despite itself,
shows a perceptive and sympathetic grasp of all kinds of people and places, plus an attractive and healthy measure of self-mockery and self-knowledge.