

Reckoning with Democracy

Novel Takes on Student Protests

By Linnea Due

Kensington author Sunisa Manning's first novel, *A Good True Thai*, explores the student democracy movement in early '70s Thailand, a subject not well known in the US. Manning, who grew up in Bangkok, did not plan to write an historical novel—or even about that period. “I didn’t set out to write this book,” she says. “I wanted to write about the contemporary political movement, which has parallels to the '70s. But I couldn’t figure out how to do that safely.”

Manning decided to write a book that takes place in the past but has parallels to today: “There is a large protest movement there now, asking for freedom of speech, elections, a new constitution. It’s the biggest protest since the events that I describe in my book.”

Manning’s language is beautiful, spare, gorgeously written. Three young voices tell the story: Lek, a Chinese woman whose family immigrated to Thailand; Chang, a bright firebrand from a working-class family, and his friend Det, a descendent of royals. The trio navigates its own struggles of class and assumption, dipping into affection to weather hurt and frustration. When wealthy Det delves into union politics, he listens to a factory worker’s story and wants to “adopt” the woman and her daughter. Yet even he realizes that such generosity solves nothing.

Students take to the street in protests (at one, the king and queen emerge to serve drinks to the protestors) and are met with increasing force. These scenes of chaos are frightening and dark. Manning says that social media influences present protests. “Today’s young people are looking at their future, and they don’t like what they see,” she says. “It’s more hopeful now because we have social media. There were a lot of campaigns where activists ‘disappeared.’ Now we have a level of accountability that wasn’t available in the ‘70s.”

The novel took Manning six years to write. “It was too ambitious,” she muses. “I wish that I had chosen something a little different. Three different points of view... and it takes place before I was born. Writings about that period are banned in Thailand, so it was really hard to research. I tracked down some activists and talked to them. Encountering that material was shocking to me. I compare it to leaving a religion. I had to grieve and explain to my family that I now saw things differently. Writing this novel really changed me.”

Manning’s mother is Thai and her father American, so she has dual citizenship. “I went to an American school, so I was always schooled in English,” she says. “I used to go back all the time. Now, with the virus...”

“My husband and I lived in Berkeley, in the flats,” she says, describing her own journey to Kensington. “Then we moved to the Mission, but it didn’t suit us. We found the perfect house in Kensington. I like the quiet, I like the green. I grew up in a mega city. This is so different, and that worried me, but I love it.” Manning has a two-year-old son who is attending the Good Earth School at the Unitarian Church. She teaches at Head Royce School.

A Good True Thai will not be released in the States—“My agent has tried to sell it, but we’re told that there would be little interest in a book set in Thailand with no American characters,” a sad commentary on US publishing. “However, it will be at East Bay Booksellers starting October 1.” (East Bay Booksellers is more familiar to many as Diesel Books on College Avenue.)

“This is shaping up to a year when Americans are fighting for their rights too,” Manning says. “We are going through a reckoning and interrogating ourselves. Sometimes it’s hard to see ourselves. My book turns out to be eerily relevant. When you’re writing a novel, you can’t plan for that.”

