



The Hot Countries (A Poke Rafferty Novel)

By Timothy Hallinan

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Back when Poke Rafferty first arrived in Bangkok to write a travel guide, some of the old-timers in the Expat Bar on Patpong Road helped him make sense of the city. Now these men—many of whom have been living in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War—have grown old and, in some cases, frail. When a talkative stranger named Arthur Varney turns up at the Expat Bar, they accept him without suspicion, failing to see that he's actually using them to get to Poke.

Varney wants two things: money Poke doesn't have and a person Poke is unwilling to hand over. It quickly becomes apparent that there's nothing Varney won't do to secure his goals. As his actions threaten the foundation of Poke's life in Thailand, the aging men of the Expat Bar discover that they might still be a force to reckon with.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Hot Countries*

A Library Journal Best Book of 2015

A Strand Magazine Best Book of 2015

Macavity Award Finalist

"Fans of the series won't want to miss [*The Hot Countries*] violent conclusion."

—***The Strand Magazine***

"Hallinan's latest in the brilliantly conceived Poke Rafferty series starts with menace and never lets up."

—***The Arizona Republic***

"A beautifully written, fully imagined realm with its hidden violence, ever-present sexual gambits, humid rains and fully developed characters."

—***The Providence Journal***

"If there was any doubt that Timothy Hallinan is one of our best in the constellation of thriller authors, then *The Hot Countries* should resolve that issue in his favor."

—***Bookreporter.com***

"This is a first-rate suspense story, written to keep the reader on tenterhooks. As usual, the odors and sights of Bangkok are clearly described so that one can see and smell them as realistically as feeling the continually falling rain—and, especially, the poignant interactions of all the characters. Highly recommended!"

—***Kings River Life***

"Poke is a charming protagonist who loves his family and friends fiercely and will do anything to protect them. Highly entertaining."

—***Library Journal, Starred Review***

"A fantastic thriller that will please the most plot-hungry of this acclaimed series' fans. Ultimately, though, readers will be enthralled by the insightful, full-sensory exploration of Patpong and of modern expat culture, complete with flashbacks to the old-timers' arrival after the Vietnam War."

—***Booklist***

"The characters in *The Hot Countries* are finely detailed along with their vulnerabilities, tragic flaws, and mutual dependence. Hallinan takes us inside their dreams, nightmares, fears, and hopes, making them larger than fiction. They are characters that will stay with you."

—**Christopher G. Moore, author of the Vincent Calvino series set in Thailand**

"Deftly adds touching personal details about the lives of his characters amid chill-inducing action sequences."

—***Kittling Books***

Praise for the Poke Rafferty thrillers

“You could drown in the waves of corruption that surge through Timothy Hallinan’s Bangkok mysteries.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“One of the best series in the biz right now.”

—**Craig Johnson**

“Hallinan not only writes a relentless-as-the-rain paced thriller, sprinkled with an offbeat, cynical humor, but the poignant emotional sides of the characters and the intelligent and beautiful plot and storytelling soak the reader’s heart to the skin.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Truly remarkable . . . In Hallinan’s Bangkok, the ugly truths of poverty, homelessness, corruption, caste and crime are shaded with tremendous compassion.”

—*The Arizona Republic*

“A heart-rending, unforgettable thriller.”

—*Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*

“Stellar.”

—*Library Journal, Starred Review*

About the Author

Timothy Hallinan has been nominated for the Edgar, Nero, Shamus, and Macavity awards. He is the author of eighteen widely praised books, including *The Fear Artist*, *For the Dead*, *Crashed*, *Little Elvises*, *The Fame Thief*, *King Maybe*, *Fields Where They Lay*, and *Herbie’s Game*, which won the Lefty Award for Best Humorous Mystery. After years of working in the television and music industries, he now writes full-time. He divides his time between California and Thailand.

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It’s been a couple of minutes since Varney checked his watch—one of the thick, heavy steel ones that would probably still be ticking after the asteroid hit—and left, at about the same time he seems to leave every night, around ten. Rafferty checks his own watch, and from her station in front of the bourbon the barmaid, Toots, who has been pouring these men’s drinks since the late 1960s, says, “Why you not home? Kwan have baby, yes?”

Kwan is Rose’s Thai name, which, like Toots’s, has receded so far into the mists of time that it takes Poke a second to understand the question. “Not yet,” he says. “Six months more.”

With the air of someone forced to state the obvious, Toots curves her arms a few inches from her stomach and says, “Have in here.”

“Yes, right. We’re at the throwing-up stage.”

“Three month,” Toots says. She pokes the inside of her right cheek with her tongue, searching for something, and sucks at a tooth. “Should stop now.”

“She’ll throw up as long as she can,” Rafferty says. “She’s hanging on to every phase. This may be the world’s first two-year pregnancy.”

Toots shakes her head, and her hair, graying, permed into thick, Brillo-stiff curls—black when Rafferty met her—wobbles a tiny bit, like molded Jell-O. “So why you come here? Should be at your house. Taking care.”

“I’m hiding from the television,” Rafferty says. “She and Miaow have bought bootlegs of every DVD the BBC ever made about English people who live in big houses and hate each other. *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Pride and Prejudice*, practically the complete works of Anthony Trollope. Just one well-bred snub after another.”

“Yes?” Leon Hofstedler says, his eyebrows tied in a knot of puzzlement. “For what purpose? This is not what Thai girls watch. Thai girls, they want to see that . . . that doll with the knife—”

“Chucky.” Campeau accompanies the information with an apparently involuntary glance at the door, as though he’s afraid Arthur Varney will barge in from the street to contradict him.

“Not *my* Thai girls,” Rafferty says. “What they like is *servants* and people with *titles* and huge dinners with eight courses and gowns and big, clunky jewelry and feathered hats. And Colin Firth, can’t forget Colin Firth.”

“Be a great setting for the next Chucky,” the man who might be named Ron says. “*Chucky Abbey*.” He runs his fingers self-appreciatively through the silver waves of his hair, something he does often. The hair, Hofstedler said once to Poke, is all the man has left.

“Anything would be an improvement,” Rafferty says. “The people in these shows are asleep when they’re awake. They sneer at their own reflections. Rose is developing a British accent.”

“But yes,” Hofstedler says, nodding as he catches up to the conversation. “This is true. Rose is with child, and Miaow is in school. What year she is in now?”

“Eighth,” Rafferty says.

There’s a silence while these men, who have been on the edges of Rafferty’s life for more than seven years, consider the implications. Rafferty uses the time to look, without much nostalgia, around the room. It’s shaped like an ambitious bowling lane, no more than fourteen feet across and about fifty deep, its shape dictated by the fact that it was wedged by a voracious developer into what had been a sliver of space between two go-go bars, My Big Honey and Yellow Bellies, both long gone. One of them is still offering go-go, now under the name Miles of Smiles, while the other sells plastic leather goods to the easily fooled. The room is so narrow there’s barely room for the stained, battered bar with Toots behind it, plus the usual mirrored display of mislabeled whiskeys, the beer and soft-drink taps, a small sink, and a blender that’s used almost exclusively for the Growing Younger Man’s complicated smoothies, mostly uneasy mixes of alcohol and health-preserving algae. The place smells of old beer, neglected dentistry, and, thanks to the rain, wet wool.

Eight stools crowd the bar. Shoved against the opposite wall are four tiny tables that have been turned into booths by the addition of high-backed, plastic-covered, pumpkin-colored banquette seats of conspicuous cheapness. When Rafferty arrived in Bangkok, one of the booths was essentially reserved for a guy named Mac, the only openly gay member of the Expat Bar regulars, but Mac has been dead for three years now. Just as Rafferty thinks of Mac, whom he had liked, Bob Campeau puts into words the thought that was triggered in many of them by the information that Miaow is an eighth-grader.

Campeau says, “Goddamn, I’m old.” He carefully pats his baroque comb-over as Ron, if that’s his name, rakes his gleaming silver locks again and Hofstedler picks up a giant brandy snifter with a loose scattering of paper money in it and slides it down the bar with a grunt. He’s been putting on weight again, which, for someone with his medical history, is dangerous.

“Five hundred baht,” Hofstedler says. “Two-fifty for the swearword and two-fifty for talking about age.”

Campeau says, and it’s close to a snarl, “You were thinking the same thing I was. And ‘goddamn’ isn’t fucking swearing. There, now I said something you can fucking fine me for.” He pulls out some paper money and drops it into the snifter. It looks short even from where Rafferty’s sitting, but nobody calls Campeau on it. These men, who once considered themselves the kings of Bangkok, are running out of money.

“Eighth grade,” the Growing Younger Man says. He takes a drink of something that’s way too green for everyone else’s comfort. “Hard to believe.”

Rafferty hoists his own glass and drains the warm beer it contains, gone flat now. “I know. I still think of her as four feet tall with a part in her hair, and there she is, sitting at home watching *Debrett’s Peerage on Ice* and planning to be an actress.”

“That’s a rough life for a kid, acting,” the guy with the hair says, and the solemnity of his tone suggests that the thought has never before been put into words. “There’s a lot of rejection.”

“Yeah, well, we give her a lot of acceptance. In fact, she’s got a play coming up.”

“When?” This is Hofstedler, who actually sounds interested.

“I don’t know. What day is this?”

“Thursday?” the man who might be named Ron suggests.

No one disagrees, so Rafferty says, “A week from tomorrow. At her school. It plays Friday through Sunday.”

“This play is named what?” Hofstedler asks.

“It’s an old one. Small Town.”

“But I know this play,” Hofstedler says. “The girl dies at the end, yes? So sad.”

“Well, that’s who Miaow’s playing,” Rafferty says. “The girl who dies. Julie.”

“I seen it, too,” Campeau says. “A million years ago.”

“We should go,” Hofstedler says. “Show our support for Miaow.

An *actress*, she is. You must be very proud.”

“I’d go,” the Growing Younger Man says. The guy with the hair who might be named Ron emits a syllable of enthusiasm, and Campeau mutters something.

Hauling the denizens of the Expat Bar to Miaow’s play is not on Rafferty’s bucket list. He says, “We’ll talk about it next week, see who still wants to go,” and raps his knuckles on the bar. “Can I have a check, Toots? It’s about time for me to be allowed into the living room again.”

“Raining,” Campeau says without looking out the window.

Rafferty gets up, pulling baht out of his jeans. “I’ve been wet before, and I’m still here.”

The door opens, announced by a bell on a string, and Pinky Holland tentatively looks in, most of him remaining outside in case a retreat is in order. “Is he gone? Did I miss him?”

“Gone,” Hofstedler says, lifting his personal stein. “Toots, please? Another, yes?”

“What was the topic tonight?” Pinky says, coming the rest of the way in. He’s a small, narrow-shouldered, professionally tan man of seventy or so with deeply creased laugh lines and a smooth bald head that Rafferty suspects he polishes. “No, lemme guess. Was it voting out every American politician and electing—who were they?—hair dressers and street mimes? Or the great Tulip Mania? Or was it—”

“Something new,” Campeau said. “The equatorial trench, I think. Exploitation in the tropics.”

“Sounds like a pip,” Pinky says. “Has he said where he comes from yet?”

“One can only ask so many times,” Hofstedler says, watching Toots fill his stein. “Then it becomes rude, yes?”

“What’s *rude*,” Pinky says, mopping his shining head, “is not answering the question.”

“He’s got something to hide,” Campeau says grimly.

“Well, jeez,” Pinky says. “He’s in Bangkok.” To Rafferty he says, “So how do you like him?”

Poke says, “I’d like him better if he came with a remote. When he looked at that nine-pound watch, I saw something yellow, a tattoo, on his wrist. Anybody know what it is?”

“It’s that rattlesnake,” the Growing Younger Man says, “although I don’t know why it’s yellow. From the Gadsden flag?”

“Which flag?” Hofstedler asks. Hofstedler has an interest in flags that Rafferty privately classifies as Germanic.

“Gadsden. From just before the Revolutionary War. Bright yellow, the coiled rattler that said ‘Don’t tread on me.’”

“That’s making a comeback,” Rafferty says. “Lot of people on the American right are flashing it around, as though the liberals are coming after their country-club memberships and incandescent bulbs.”

“They are,” says Campeau, who hasn’t set foot in America in forty years.

Pinky Holland says over him, to Rafferty, “First time he was in here, he asked about you, you know.”

Rafferty regards Holland for a few seconds. “No,” he says. “In fact, I didn’t know.” He turns to Hofstedler, the Repository of All Knowledge in the Expat Bar.

“He didn’t,” Hofstedler says. “Pinky leaps to his conclusion yet again. About travel writers he was talking, asking who wrote best about Bangkok.”

“And who does?” Rafferty says.

Campeau says, “Christopher Moore.”

“Those aren’t travel books, they’re mysteries. Was that it? He asked, and that was the answer?”

“No,” the Growing Younger Man says. He pulls the straw from his drink and licks a formless clot of powdered bluegreen algae off its tip while everyone looks elsewhere. “We said, you know, about Chris Moore’s books, and then the guys named half a dozen other writers, and then someone thought of you.”

“No prophet is honored in his own land,” Rafferty says. “It didn’t occur to you, Leon—it didn’t occur to any of you—to mention this to me?”

“He has always been here when you were here, yes? So who could tell you about it?” Hofstedler pulls his Stein back across the bar and studies the level of the beer, probably comparing it to ten or twelve thousand others. “And he did not exactly leap to his feet when your name was finally mentioned.”

Pinky says, “Toots, I’m going to stay where I am and drip for a minute. Can I get a double?”

“Jack Daniel’s or Crown Royal?” Toots says.

“Oh, come on,” Pinky says. “Everybody knows they’re all really Mekong.”

“Jack, then,” Toots says. “More cheaper.”

“You know,” Rafferty says, “I don’t remember anyone calling me by name in here during the past few days.”

Hofstedler takes a sip, looking like he expects to find an insect floating in the suds, and says, “But why would we? We know who you are.”

“But tonight your Arthur Varney called me a travel writer, which means he knows what my name is,” Poke says, pushing his stool back into position against the bar. “I think that’s kind of interesting.” He pulls a baseball cap out of his pocket and slaps it open on his jeans. “Would you drip a little to your left, Pinky? I’m on my way out.”

“Gonna get wet,” Pinky says, sidestepping.

“We have explained this to him,” Hofstedler says. “But he is young and foolish.”

“Gee, thanks, Leon.” Rafferty says, pulling the hat on. “I haven’t been feeling very young lately.”

“In here,” Hofstedler says, “you are a child. *Ein Kind*. This is the Cave of the Ancients.” He holds up a hand, as though in benediction. “Miaow’s play. We all go, yes?”

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