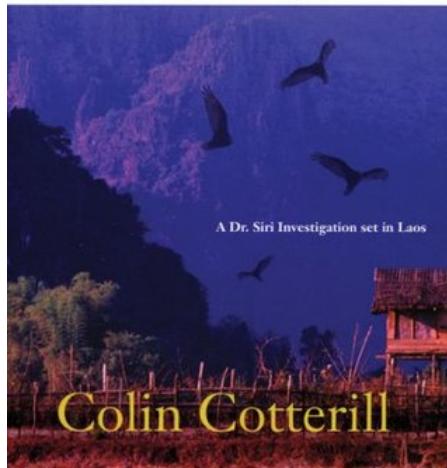




## Curse of the Pogo Stick



A Dr. Siri Investigation set in Laos

Colin Cotterill

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*Colin Cotterill*

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# Curse of the Pogo Stick

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## Curse of the Pogo Stick Colin Cotterill

In Vientiane, a booby-trapped corpse, intended for Dr. Siri, the national coroner of Laos, has been delivered to the morgue. In his absence, only Nurse Dtui's intervention saves the lives of the morgue attendants, visiting doctors, and Madame Daeng, Dr. Siri's fiance. On his way back from a communist party meeting in the north, Dr. Siri is kidnapped by seven female Hmong villagers under the direction of the village elder so that he will-in the guise of Yeh Ming, the thousand-year-old shaman with whom he shares his body-exorcise the headman's daughter whose soul is possessed by a demon, and lift the curse of the pogo stick. Colin Cotterill is the author of *The Coroner's Lunch*, *Thirty-Three Teeth*, *Disco for the Departed*, and *Anarchy and Old Dogs*, featuring seventy-three-year-old Dr. Siri Paiboun, national coroner of Laos. He and his wife live in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he teaches at the university.

## Curse of the Pogo Stick Details

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## From Reader Review Curse of the Pogo Stick for online ebook

### Karen says

Anybody who hasn't indulged in the Dr Siri series by Colin Cotterill could be forgiven for wondering what on earth is going on with CURSE OF THE POGO STICK. Booby-trapped corpses and reluctant coroners might be reasonably expected in crime fiction, but Hmong villagers needing exorcism by a thousand-year-old shaman who shares the aforementioned coroner's body? Understandably a "What the" moment.

Whilst the spiritual (supernatural) component of CURSE OF THE POGO STICK is considerably stronger than the earlier books, the series has been building the unlikely scenario of Dr Siri and his intrepid band of assistants - Nurse Dtui, Mr Geung and now Madame Daeng, for a number of books now. Of course, the unlikely scenario probably relates mostly to western readers, as there's something intrinsically Laotian about these books. Not only are all the characters set within an environment which is beautifully drawn, the Laotian way of life and thinking is demonstrated in a way that makes it feel very real.

Laos is almost as much a character in these books as the people mind you. Whilst CURSE OF THE POGO STICK is set partially in Vientiane, Dr Siri spends more of his time held in a village in the mountains, deep in the countryside, in threatened Hmong territory. Whilst this book does have Nurse Dtui and Madame Daeng involved in why somebody would send a booby-trapped corpse to the mortuary, a lot of time is spent with the Hmong and with Dr Siri.

Perhaps it is this aspect that could make this book less attractive to fans of the series or as an introduction point for newcomers, as there is, alongside a considerably stronger spiritual component, a hefty dose of social commentary - with the Hmong being one of the most threatened groups of people within Laotian society. Having said that, this reader has been a fan of the first book of this series, and CURSE OF THE POGO STICK appealed just as much as the other books. Whilst not normally a fan of the supernatural, with Dr Siri, I have developed a considerably higher tolerance factor. Possibly because the author delivers these components of all the books as less of the supernatural, and more a long-held cultural belief system that is fundamental to these people's lives. Social commentary, on the other hand, is one of my very favourite things, and learning some of the hazards and problems that the Hmong experience made time spent with Dr Siri both educational and entertaining.

Perhaps if you are new to this series, it may be better to start a little earlier. Get to know Dr Siri and his band of supporters from the beginning, and you will be able to follow their story as the author relaxes into what seems to this reader, at least, to be a very Laotian way of telling a story.

Previous books in the series are:

- \* The Coroner's Lunch
- \* Thirty-Three Teeth
- \* Disco for the Departed
- \* Anarchy and Old Dogs

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## **Calzean says**

A continuation of a fun series with great characters. Every book sees Dr Siri increasing the people who live with him. More spirits - some are more real than others. Laos and a failed Communist state is seen with compassion and humour. This time we are introduced to the Hmong, another example of a minority culture treated poorly by those interested in progress. And a couple of loose threads from the previous book are tidied up in the murder/mystery which is becoming a secondary part of each book with the culture and characters increasingly being featured.

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## **HBalikov says**

I may have to stop saying this, but Curse of the Pogo Stick is the best of the Dr. Siri books I have read so far. Thanks to Carol for reminding me that I need to put down the next book and write a review of this one.

For those, as yet not engaged in this series--- Set in the 1970s, Laotians have overthrown their monarchy and established a Communist government. Dr. Siri Paiboun is now 74 years old and he is one of the last real medical doctors within Laos. The socialist/communist government (after the Pathet Lao takeover) has not been a welcoming place for those with such skills. When the previous one passed on, they came to Siri and he had little choice. He has been in this job for the three years documented in these novels. And part of what he brings to the job is described thus: "Deceit and trickery didn't sit well on his conscience. He had to do more than that. Earlier, while he'd sat on a boulder waiting for his supper, the sun slowly easing its way over the mountains, he'd engaged himself in a little lateral thinking like his literary hero Inspector Maigret."

In a moment of introspection, Siri admits: "My biggest problem as a practicing cynic, however, is that I'm aligned, against my will and better judgment, to another world. I'm connected to a world of spirits and souls and gods and no matter how hard I try to disprove this world, I know it exists. I don't know how it's possible, but, damn it, it's there. So I resort to the rules of the supernatural. I begin by seeing whether the incredible can be explained through their rules. And when that world tells me something is off-kilter and implausible, I know I have to think as a human. I have to use logic. My visit to the Otherworld told me I had to look for earthly solutions to this mystery."

The timing of this book is not long after the events of Anarchy and Old Dogs. This book has two story lines with Siri off in the Laotian hinterlands and his team back in Vientiane, the capital.

Cotterill notes: "In 1975, the so-called thirty-year Hmong who had sided with the Pathet Lao were somehow forgotten when the communists took control of the country. There were token positions and ranks allocated, but the majority were either sent back to grow opium, or, worse still, relocated to the plains, where they succumbed to diseases unknown in the mountains."

The interweaving of the Hmong into the plot is one of the delights of this book. The other is the increased role for Dtui and for most of the "regulars." There are plenty of strange and/or humorous characters including Auntie Bpoo, the transvestite fortune-teller. In the resolution of all the loose threads, Siri is forced to conclude: "Now he had no choice but to formally add one more branch of sorcery to his list of irrational beliefs. Fortune-telling had become a science. Soon there'd be nothing but politics left to dismiss as bunkum."

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### **Brenda says**

Cotterill's series are one of my three favorites, and I read many mysteries. The place (Laos), the time (1970's) the many cultures that made up the populace (featuring the Hmong in this book) combine to produce funny but wrenching tales of post-Vietnam War life in newly Communist Laos. The author clearly knows his history and uses it to educate as he entertains.

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### **William says**

ebook and audiobook

How does Siri vocalize into Silly?

Too much "other world" and not enough about the Laotian Hmongs

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### **Caroline says**

The Hmong, whether they chose to side with the Japanese, the French or the Americans, are people who have never been fairly treated by the ruling parties at the end of each war in which their help was sought. In Laos, the plight of the nomadic Hmong is observed at first hand by Dr Siri when he is abducted during a road trip with Judge Haeng to Luang Prabang, by Elder Long to help free his young daughter from a demon. Dr Siri, whose earthly body hosts Yeh Ming, a powerful shaman, is well known among the Hmong. The history and culture of the Hmong is covered in detail through the observations of Dr Siri.

In the meantime, over in Vientiane, Nurse Dtui discovers a booby-trapped corpse in the morgue and it's her keen observations that manage to keep a young arrogant doctor, Gaeng, the hospital director and Dtui herself from being blown up. With the help of Phosy and Civilai, they uncover a Royalists plot spearheaded by an adversary from a previous book in the series.

With comic relief provided by Judge Heang whether he's spouting bigoted political propaganda or mistakenly eating pig swill, the adventures of Dr Siri and his team continue to entertain and educate.

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### **Laurie says**

Something of the flavor of McCall Smith's Mma Ramotswe stories, but with substance. Set in Laos in the 70s, his aging coroner is a reluctant detective and more reluctant host for spirits.

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### **Heather Shaw says**

I don't think there's any single genre that submits more books for review than that of the mystery. Literally (hah) dozens of them pile into the office every week. What that means is that at night, I pile a few on my

nightstand and begin to read. If I'm not happily carried away within the first few pages, the book goes on the floor for the next day's recycling.

The latest one to capture my attention is the fifth in a series by Colin Cotterill. This one takes place in Laos, and for all I know they all take place in Laos as the characters are natives. There are two women and two men, two old and two young -- a nurse, a doctor, a policeman, a cook -- two are engaged and two are married, to each other.

The time is post Vietnam War with the communists trying to establish order and control with their special mix of tedium and big guns. Dr. Siri is incorrigibly irreverent. At one point, when an official dies during an excruciating conference, Siri leaps up and shouts: "This conference has suffered its first fatality. There will undoubtedly be more." Siri's punishment for his disruption ("And what would you have me do?... [whisper] for the people in his row to pass the body down to the end?") is another show of government "confidence", far far away and on the other side of the enemy controlled area. ("Where have you been, Siri?... There is no enemy.")

You can guess where Siri and his minder end up. (No you can't.) Meanwhile, the other three have troubles of their own -- like booby-trapped corpses and poisonous old ladies. Someone is trying to kill, well, someone.

Great story, superb characters, the history of the Hmong. This one's called "Curse of the Pogo Stick." If you've read any of the others, send a note.

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### **Keri says**

How does Dr. Siri end up being kidnapped by a bevy of Hmong females? It was that darn Ye Ming. See what happens when you are physical body of a 1000 year old Laotian deity...everybody thinks you are up for grabs. This was another bumpy fun right for Dr. Siri and crew as the work to solve a murder of a body that has some extra explosive parts. Also can Dr. Siri stop a demon from claiming a young, Hmong female before it is too late? What about those two babies and a marriage for Dr. Siri, is that going to come to pass? Did the cross dressing gold lame'ed madame get it wrong? A rollicking, good read. Start with the first one if this isn't a series you have read before, just for the character development.

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### **Genine Franklin-Clark says**

The first book in this series was perfect, and each succeeding book is as well. I can't say they get better; how can perfection be improved upon? But the standard never falters or falls. Remarkable.

Laos, newly Communist, a charming 73 year old coroner (by assignment, not training, because he was a doctor), mystery, romance, humor, wit, the supernatural . . . and in this book, a little of the plight of the Hmong, which led me to purchase a book which will help me learn a little about these much-abused people.

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### **carol. says**

Fifth book in the Siri adventures proves delightful. In this installment we are introduced to Hmong culture,

opening with an interpretation of how the Hmong lost their history and written language. The first shaman gifts his people with the geng pipes, so they would be able to guide the dead to the Otherworld, giving them "a musical language that communicated directly from one soul to another." The piping transports us to the world of the morgue, where two auditors investigating Siri are complaining about a Hmong beggar's playing. It's a haunting transition, showing the difference between the richness of a culture, and the realities of economic oppression, and is quickly balanced with a moment of humor: "Dtui has known straightaway that the task was impossible... her boss had handwriting so horrible he could hardly read it himself. Dipping a cockroach in ink and having it scamper around the page would have left traces more legible to the average reader." It is a sublime transition typical of Cotterill's writing, the moments of beauty or humor interspersed with hard-edged reality, and it is one of the reasons I'm inordinately fond of the Dr. Siri series.

The first plot revolves around a possible attempt on Siri's life, initially foiled by Dtui. Shortly after, she and Madame Daeng lure Civilai out of retirement to join them in their investigation. Meanwhile, Siri is forced into attending the quarterly Party Planning and Progress Conference and discovers a dead man in the audience. He causes a small scene, and as his punishment, Judge Haeng has him accompany him through the countryside in a Party demonstration. Unfortunately, Siri is kidnapped and the second mystery begins.

Narrative was more streamlined, told in more linear fashion with fewer character jumps, much to the benefit of the story. The spiritual element was integrated well, although apparently the spirits present a problem of description: "Tenses were annoyingly unhelpful when it came to the afterlife." Scenes of the countryside are described beautifully, conveying the love Siri (and the author) has for the country. The touches of humor are still present, more delightfully than ever: "It was a Lao-Mexican standoff. Haeng couldn't fire Siri and they both knew it."

I love Dr. Siri. I love learning vicariously and however fictionally about communist Laos. I find that Cotterill usually achieves a good story, and I usually enjoy his use of language. Four stars instead of five for a few reasons. One is that I had fears of Dtui and Daeng turning into Lulu and Grandma from the Stephanie Plum mysteries, a crisis narrowly averted at this time. Second, although I am no historian, I rather feel quite a lot of modernisms are creeping into the story. In one instance, Siri tells the Judge, "I was waiting for the movie version," which feels suspiciously modern for 1970s Laos. Third, the ending was a little forced, done reunion "summing up" style at a dinner house. Fourth, my proximity alarm for Western imperialism is beeping, although I'm still running diagnostics to discover the source.

Still, the story is done well enough that I feel such quibbles can be overcome. A delightful read; without doubt I'll be continuing with the series.

Favorite throw away line: "Mrs. Fah's kids were running around like headless chicks, shaking off the cobwebs they'd gathered at school."

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### **Joanray04 says**

I love this series, which starts with The Coroner's Lunch, Thirty-Three Teeth, Disco for the Departed, and then Anarchy and Old Dogs. Curse of the Pogo Stick is the fifth and I have the sixth waiting, The Merry Misogynist. The main character is Dr. Siri, a coroner in Laos in the late 1970s, who mixes science and the Buddhist religion well, and is helped along by a ghost and a little magic. He is in his 70s, has a wry sense of humor and great compassion for his country and the wonderful characters who help him, his nurse Dtui,

former resistance fighter Madame Daeng, and Mr. Geung, who, despite being mentally handicapped, makes surprising contributions along the way. These do remind me of Alexander McCall Smith's lovely novels in the No. 1 Ladies's Detective Agency series in their development of very appealing characters and involvement in mysteries that are more about their culture than a simple who-done-it. The books present a complex, intelligent man who looks at life through a lens of great humor.

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### **Scilla says**

This is the fifth book of the Dr. Siri series. It is set in Laos in the late 1970's after the communists have taken over. Dr. Siri, now in his seventies, fought with the communists in the jungle. He is named national coroner in the new regime. His two assistants are Nurse Dtui, who would like to be a doctor and Mr. Geung, who has Down's syndrome. Although a longtime communist, Dr. Siri is not happy with the government, and does not always do as his boss wishes. He is the reincarnation of Yeh Ming, a thousand year old shaman, and senses things from the spirits. Although I don't know how realistic it is, the culture is well presented (the author has lived in Laos). The three main characters are well developed, and the books are very amusing. In this book, a booby-trapped corpse is delivered to the morgue, and Dr. Siri is kidnapped by the Hmong to exorcize a young woman in the tribe. I would suggest beginning the series with the first book, *The Coroner's Lunch*, which introduces you to the characters and their history.

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### **Cheryl Sinclair says**

Great books, very funny and enlightening learning about Laos. I am enjoying them very much.

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### **Richard Derus says**

Rating: 4\* of five

**The Publisher Says:** In Vientiane, a booby-trapped corpse, intended for Dr. Siri, the national coroner of Laos, has been delivered to the morgue. In his absence, only Nurse Dtui's intervention saves the lives of the morgue attendants, visiting doctors, and Madame Daeng, Dr. Siri's fiancée.

On his way back from a communist party meeting in the north, Dr. Siri is kidnapped by seven female Hmong villagers under the direction of the village elder so that he will—in the guise of Yeh Ming, the thousand-year-old shaman with whom he shares his body—exorcise the headman's daughter whose soul is possessed by a demon, and lift the curse of the pogo stick.

**My Review:** Dr. Siri Paiboun is my role model for growing older. I want to be as cantankerous and unafraid as he is, and as forgiving and tolerant as he is, and marry someone I'm in love with like he does.

Who am I kidding? I'd like any of those things NOW, except the marriage thing, which no thank you, I remember that too well.

So this is the fifth book in the series, and the action takes place late in 1977 into 1978. Siri's seventy-three.

The reason I'm reviewing a book so late in the series is simple: I want to tell everyone that, contrary to established custom, the series isn't sagging, and the sleuthing isn't drooping. Siri's believability is quite as firm as it was, meaning if you didn't buy in from the get-go, you won't be in now either. I love our secondary characters quite a lot, and am invested in the world of Dtui and Phosy and Geung as much as Siri and Daeng and Civilai. It's just too much fun to perch on the back of the lilac police Vespa, pull my scarf over my nose and mouth, and whip along the trafficless roads around Vientiane to chase malefactors!

Now that's one helluva mental picture, isn't it? But in this book, in this series, your fat old stiff-jointed American correspondent here can do exactly that. AND solve a crime. (Sort of, there really isn't a mystery-novel crime to solve in this book...so what, though?) I get to travel to the Hmong Otherworld! I am invited to an illegal Buddhist wedding! And through it all, my green-eyed hobbit-sized impish cicerone, Dr. Siri, sees how true and marvelous the world is, how little in it matters except being present and available and kind.

Rightness. Completing one's journey and, thereby, completing the journeys of others. I hope all of us are able to say, looking at our last dawn, that we did that very thing, at least once.

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