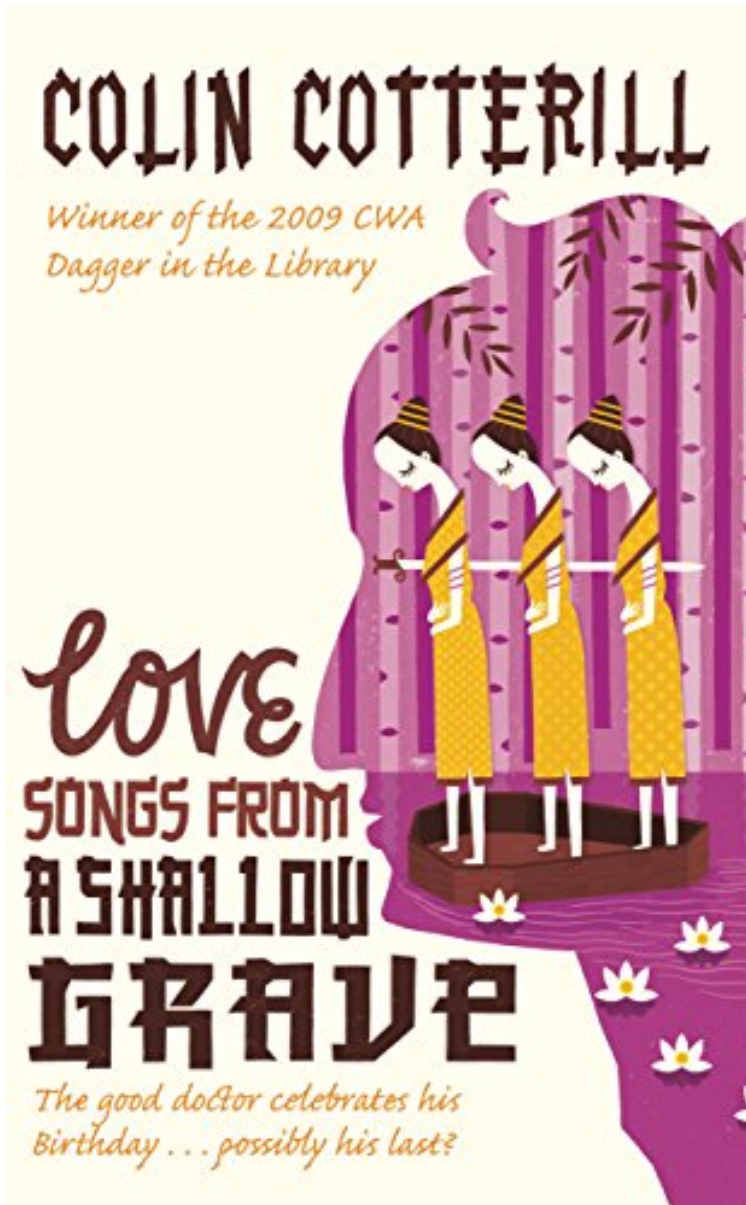


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# Love Songs from a Shallow Grave: A Dr Siri Murder Mystery



Par Colin Cotterill  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAs usual, all is abnormal in Dr Siri Paiboun's morgue. The good doctor and his team are investigating the case of the Three Epes: three women skewered by a sword through the heart. A culprit has been apprehended, tried and sentenced to death. But Siri isn't sure they have the right man.Unfortunately, the number one (and only) coroner of Laos isn't in a position to help anyone - not even himself. As his birthday dawns, Siri finds himself incarcerated and staring starvation and torture in the face.

As usual, his curiosity is to blame for his predicament, but this time it looks as though his inquisitiveness could be the end of him. Extrait HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DR. SIRI celebrate the dawn of my seventy-fourth birthday handcuffed to a lead pipe. I had something more traditional in mind: a few drinks with my new wife, some gay molummusic on the record player, shellfish plucked fresh from the Mekhong. But here I am in Hades and not a balloon insight. My ex-roommate, a gray-faced youth in his early twenties, is chained by the ankle to the far end of the same pipe. They dragged the boy in during the night and we struggled to communicate. We scratched for words to share. But as soon as he understood that we were different animals in the same abattoir, tears of despair carved uneven grooves down his bloody cheeks. I could do nothing but sit back against the flaking plaster and watch the life drain from him. He didn't live to greet the new day.

When the sun finally sneered through the wire mesh of the window, it cast a shadow like a fisherman's net across the body. The corpse lay trapped, expired from the effort of unangling itself from all this unnecessary misery. But his soul was free. I envied him that. I am Dr. Siri Paiboun, the national and only coroner of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos, a medical man, a humanitarian, but I'm still unable to summon an appropriate emotion. I listened through the night to the sobs and screams of my unseen neighbors. I didn't understand the words they cried but I knew people were being killed all around me. I scented their essence and saw their fleeing spirits. I am well aware that I will soon be joining them. Yet the overriding thought in my mind is that I didn't have the foresight to say goodbye or thank you to the people I love. That sounds corny, I know, but what's wrong with corny? It has its place. I wonder whether they might know instinctively. Really. I wonder whether they've been able to see through this crusty, annoyingly stubborn exterior to the warm and fluffy Siri that nestles barely visible inside me. If only I could squeeze the hand of Madame Daeng one final time, ruffle the newly permed hair of Mr. Geung, sniff the cheeks of Nurse Dtui and her milk-scented baby, and slap Inspector Phosy on the back. If only I could raise one last glass with my best friend, Civilai. But those opportunities will never come. The amulet that protected me from the malevolent spirits was ripped from my neck, stolen by one of the teenaged guards. I am exposed. Once the ghosts are aware their enemy is unprotected, they will circle me like hungry jungle dogs and close in for the kill. All things considered, at this almost final analysis, I am stuffed.\*\*\*

The woman read from the carbon copy in front of her. The sheet was of such proportions as to defy filing and of such poor quality that it was almost inevitable the words would be sucked back into the fibers like invisible ink returning whence it had emerged. The clerk had a pleasant voice, soothing like honey balm, and the two old men opposite stared at her luscious lips as she spoke. Of course, it isn't finalized, she smiled. But it will certainly read something like this. She coughed. The Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos would have it known that Dr. Siri Paiboun, national coroner, hero of the Revolution and lifetime member of the Communist Party, passed away on the second of May 1978. Dr. Siri had fought tirelessly and fearlessly for the Revolution and was fearlessly first, one of the men interrupted. I'm sorry? It would be better to have fearlessly before tirelessly, then nobody would be in doubt as to whether he'd been tired out by the lack of fearing. Absolutely, the second man agreed. What? Hmm. I'm not sure I understand that. But the girl conceded the point and made a note on the pad beside her. I'll mention it to Comrade Sisavee. It is only the first draft but, to tell the truth, we called you in to check on the factual, rather than the syntactical elements of the eulogy. We have people to deal with all the technicalities in later versions. I'll read on if I may. And was struck down dead has a more heroic ring to it, the second old man said. That's factual. Struck down? Rather than passed away, he added. Passed away makes it sound like bodily wind, a collection of stomach gases on their way out. Do you know what I mean?

Were talking about heroism here. Heroes don't just pass like flatulence in a strong breeze. With or without scent, added the first man most seriously. The clerk glared from one old gentleman to the next, then back to the first. Are you playing with me? she asked sternly. Certainly not, sweet young lady, said the skinnier of the two men. He was bald as a bowling ball with a long camel-like throat sporting an Adams apple so large it might well have been Adams original. This is a most serious affair. No laughing matter, agreed the first. Still uncertain of her ground, the young lady pressed on. The nation will never forget the contribution Dr. Siri made to the development of this great nation, nor can that be two nations, said the bald man. Oh, do let her finish, said the other. Didn't she tell you they have a department that handles syntax? Probably an entire ministry. The Ministry of Getting Words Right? Or it could be a branch of the Ministry of Making Things Up and Bamboozling People. The clerk was miffed. She slapped the paper onto the wooden table top and drummed her fingers on it noisily. She seemed to be wrestling down a darker inner person. Her voluptuous mouth had become mysteriously unattractive. I don't think either of you appreciate what a great honor this is, she said at last. Her eyes watered. Anybody else would be proud. Dr. Siri, I'm particularly disappointed that

you would take all this so lightly. Given your record, it's a wonder your name is on the list at all. Siri raised the thickets of coarse white hair he called eyebrows and scratched at his missing left earlobe. To be fair, you're not giving me much time, he said. How can I take life seriously when I'm forced to squeeze all those remaining pleasures into a mere twelve days? And look at this. You're passing me away on my birthday of all occasions. The happiest day of the year. That's odd, Doctor, she said through clenched teeth. I thought I had explained myself very clearly. Tell him again, said ex-politburo member Civilai. He's elderly. As I said, she began slowly, the actual date of your death will be filled in later. In the event of it? Siri said. Exactly. So you aren't actually expecting me to . . . No! The transparent northeastern skin of her neck revealed an atlas of purple roads heading north in the direction of her cheeks. The men admired her composure as she took a deep breath and continued. You will pass away naturally, or otherwise, as your destiny dictates. At that stage we will delete your date of birth and substitute it with your date of death. When that happens we will issue the announcement. Is that clear now? And I will become a hero, Siri smiled. It probably won't be instantaneous . . . in your case. The Department of Hero Creation, the DHC, was housed in a small annex of the propaganda section of the Ministry of Information. Based loosely on a Vietnamese initiative already in place, the DHC was responsible for identifying role models, exaggerating their revolutionary qualities, and creating a fairy story around their lives. A week earlier, Dr. Siri and Comrade Civilai had received their invitations to attend this preliminary meeting. They'd heard of the DHC, of course, and seen evidence of its devious work. Everyone over seventy who'd done the Party the great service of staying alive was under consideration. If selected, school textbooks would mention their bravery. Histories would be written detailing their supernatural ability to surmount the insurmountable and carry the red flag to victory. Siri and Civilai could hardly pass up a chance to scuttle such an infamous scheme. What is my case? Siri asked. What? You said, In your case, suggesting I have some flaw. Don't hold back, Civilai urged the clerk. It's really not my place to . . . Go ahead, Civilai prodded. We won't tell anyone. She seemed pleased to do so. We are aware of the doctor's . . . problems with authority, the clerk said. She was now ignoring Siri and talking directly with Civilai. But history has a short memory. It has a way of smudging over personality flaws no matter how serious they might be. Voltaire said that history is just the portrayal of crimes and misfortunes, Siri said. And why should I care what a wealthy eighteenth-century snob aristocrat has to say about anything? she snapped. Don't you have thoughts of your own, Doctor? Siri smiled at Civilai, who raised his eyebrows in return. The old friends were constantly on the lookout for fire, intelligence, and passion within the system and, when found, it brought out their untapped paternal instincts. Most cadres wouldn't have known Voltaire from a bag of beans. Their early-evening visit to the Ministry of Information had not been a waste of time after all. Following a politburo decree, the words Minister and Ministry had been liberated from the dungeon of antisocialist political rhetoric and new ministries had mushroomed. There was infighting within each ministry as each department and section vied for its own ministerial status. Everyone wanted to be a minister. The secretarial pool at the new Ministry of Justice had put in an application to become the Ministry of Typing and head clerk Manivone had put her name down to become the minister of Changing Ink Ribbons. Dr. Siri had helped her with the paperwork and it had taken several bottles of rice whisky to get it right. Of course, they hadn't submitted the form. The system didn't have a sense of humor. There was nothing inherently funny about the Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos in the 1970s. The socialists had taken over the country three years earlier but the fun of having a whole country to play with had soon drained away. Euphoria had been replaced by paranoia, and anyone who didn't take the Republic seriously was considered a threat. Dissidents were still being sent to seminars in the northeast to join the ranks of officials from the old regime who were learning to grit their teeth and say, Yes, Comrade. But Siri and Civilai, forty-year veterans of the struggle, were tolerated. They posed no threat to the status quo and their rants against the system could be dismissed with sarcastic laughter as senile gibberish. But there was nothing senile or gibberitic about these two old Comrades. Their minds sparkled like a March night sky. Given a chance, they could outstrategize any man or woman on the Central Committee. To find a young crocodile with a good mind among that flock of flamingos was a rare delight. You're quite right, of course. Siri bowed his head to the clerk. Forgive me. I'm prone, like many men my age, to presuppose that young people have no minds. I assume they all will be impressed with my bourgeois philosophy. You are obviously a cut above the rest. And you aren't going to win me over with your flattery either, she added. Or with pink mimosa or sugared dates, no doubt, Siri added. He thought he noticed a germ of a smile on her lips. You really have to see the funny side of all this, you know? And why is that? she asked. You really want me to tell you? Yes. Well, I'm tempted to suggest you fabricate people's experiences here. I noticed, for example, that your DHC has Comrade Bounmee Laoly charging into battle armed with

only a machete at the age of sixty. A lot of people are still very active at sixty. I know that, but I also happen to know from personal experience he was already blind as a bat when he turned fifty. He couldn't find a machete, let alone brandish one. She blushed, I . . . All we ask, Civilai took over, is, should this great honor of herohood befall us hopefully not posthumously that we earn it from merit, not with the aid of major reconstructive surgery from Information. We'd like people to remember and respect us for what we are, Siri said. Warts and all, Civilai added. Siri and Civilai sloshed and slithered hand in hand through the rain to the ministry car park. A cream Citroen with a missing taillight and a sturdy Triumph motorcycle were the only two vehicles there. They were parked in muddy waterlike boats. Drowning grass poked here and there through the brown gravy. Smart lady, Siri said. She certainly put us in our places. Nice lips. Exceptional. They did remain clenched when you asked about your warts, though. They did. Civilai opened the unlocked door of his old car and sat behind the steering wheel. Siri climbed into the passenger seat. They sat for a moment staring at the unpainted sidewall of the building. As the concrete absorbed the endless rains, Siri fancied he saw the outline of New Zealand stained there, or it could have been the silhouette of a twisted balloon poodle. Following a disastrous year of drought, the farmers had smiled to see the early arrival of the 1978 rains. It was as if the gods had awakened late and, realizing their negligence, had hastily attempted to make up for the previous year. The rain fell heavily and ceaselessly three times the national average for April. The Lao New Year water festival celebrations a time to call down the first rains of the year were rained out. The earthen embankments of the new rice paddies were washed flat; the bougainvillea had been rinsed colorless. The earth seemed to cry, All right. Enough. But still it rained. It was nature's little joke. Like the Eskimos with their four million words for snow, the Lao vocabulary was expanding with new language to describe rain. Today the water hung in the air like torn strips of gray paper. What is that? Civilai asked. What's that? That noise you're making. It's not a noise. It's a song. I have no idea where I heard it. I can't get it out of my head. Well try. It's annoying. Siri swallowed his song. What do you think they've got on me? he asked. I mean, the DHC. Huh, Civilai laughed. I knew it. You do want to be a national hero. I do not. I'm just . . . curious. About your warts? Yes. Oh, where do I start? How about your abrasive personality? Personalities change. And history has a way of smudging my character, don't forget. So I heard. All right. . . . Civilai beeped his horn for no apparent reason. There's the spirit thing. How could they possibly know about that? They probably don't know the specifics. Not that you actually chat with ghosties. I doubt they know that.

But they must have heard the rumors. This is a small country. People like Judge Haeng must have accumulated a good deal of circumstantial evidence of your supernatural connections. But no proof. By its very nature he can't have accumulated evidence. No. Then they don't have anything. All right. Well, they probably don't like your Hmong campaign either. It's hardly a campaign. You walked up and down in front of the Khaosan Pathet Lao News Agency office with a placard saying we need answers on the plight of our Hmong brothers. People have been shot for less. You seem to think that the government has a policy to intimidate minorities. It does. Well then. With that attitude I can see the Central Committee making little pencil crosses beside your name, can't you? Things have to be sorted out before it's too late. You're right. If I were the Minister of Pinning Things onto Chests I'd make you a Knight of the Great Order of Valor right away. Sadly, I'm just a retired has-been. They sat silently for another moment, watching the moss grow. Thirsty? Civilai asked. Siri twisted around on his seat. The leather squeaked under his bottom. Perhaps just the one. *Revue de presse Praise for Love Songs from a Shallow Grave* A New York Times Notable Crime Novel You get a real feeling for what Laos was like in the 70s. The humor is wonderful, too very subtle, very British. *New York Post* This is the seventh and most sardonic of Mr. Cotterill's Dr. Siri series, and it is not easy to cope with the combination of misery and merry melancholy that he employs. His writing, as always, is skillful and smooth and his plot is artfully strung together. The book fascinates as it chills. *The Washington Times* Colorful. *The Seattle Times* I love this elegantly written series, set in Laos with clever, septuagenarian coroner Dr. Siri. This one, the seventh, is the best, but all of them are terrific . . . A delightful mix of history and politics, and an excellent mystery. *The Globe and Mail* *Shallow Grave* carries on in the wry, unpredictable manner of previous Cotterill books. Unlike the earlier novels, this one contains sections of first-person narrative by Siri. His voice is as marvelous as everything else about him. *Sacramento News and It's* a rare treat to say that a book placed so far into a series is the best one. Authors more often than not run out of steam by the seventh book. Not Colin Cotterill. *Oregon Live (The Oregonian)* Cotterill, a resident of Thailand, has a gift for creating memorably eccentric characters, while spinning a fascinating array of Southeast Asian history and folklore into his narratives. *Japan Times* Cotterill's superb seventh mystery . . . has it all a heroic protagonist, a challenging puzzle, and an exotic

setting. Publishers Weekly, Starred In his seventh installment (after *The Merry Misogynist*) Cotterill vividly depicts a Southeast Asia still traumatized by the Vietnam War the horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, the shocking poverty, the rampant corruption, and the steadfast spirit of the people, And Dr. Siri is a one-of-a-kind protagonist rivaled only by Eliot Pattison's Shan Tao Yung. Highly recommended for series fans and readers who enjoy international mysteries. Library Journal, Starred Dr. Siri, his friends and colleagues are charming, and the puzzle is intriguing. The Free Lance-Star