

Hellnotes Book Review by Bev Vincent

SMOKING POPPY

Graham Joyce
(Pocket Books, 271 pp, hardcover,
\$23.00, ISBN #0-671-03939-3)

Graham Joyce's American publisher proclaims *Smoking Poppy* his 'most mainstream novel yet.' In spite of such assertions, like all of Joyce's novels *Poppy* has one foot firmly rooted in our reality and the other dangling at the edge of some other, more fantastic, place. Readers are invited to interpret when – or if – the story steps over this edge. Joyce does not demand belief that anything otherworldly takes place. Plausible alternate explanations are always available: delusions, drugs or dreams.

An electrician recently separated from his wife, Danny Innes is also suffering the loss of his two grown children. Phil has “contracted Christian Fundamentalism” and his

daughter, Charlie, is in prison in Thailand, accused of smuggling opium. She faces life in prison or the death sentence. Danny decides to rescue her, accompanied by two uninvited guests: his snooker partner, Mick, who professes to be his best friend, and Phil, Bible in hand.

Thailand is several worlds away from Leicester. Joyce paints a land where, in the debilitating heat, things move at a frustrating pace. Danny and Mick argue constantly. Phil snarls pointed Biblical quotes at his father. Finally allowed to visit the prison, Danny discovers a frightened woman who reportedly stole Charlie's passport in some remote northern village.

The mismatched trio ventures north into lawless wilderness where the poppy harvest rules. Their guides abandon them in the jungle. Eventually they end up in a

village run by an English-educated Thai drug lord named Jack who is alternately cooperative and terrifyingly violent. The locals think spirits walk among them. Charlie, hooked on opium, believes she is imprisoned by a curse.

Smoking Poppy is a novel of self-rediscovery. Joyce has created a flawed, complex and deep character who must solve the puzzle his children have become and find the path back – back to his former life, to his children and, ultimately, to civilization and reality. He narrates in a decidedly regional accent, adding color and veracity to this workingman who frequently and loudly blames Oxford University for leading his children astray. Danny's adventure through time and space leads to his escape from a self-absorbed cloud of smoke thicker than that produced by any opium pipe.