

Hardcover: UK

# Clueless in Calcutta

Paul Theroux returns to familiar themes in 'A Dead Hand,' his latest book to paint India in an unflattering light

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Paul Theroux has published 47 books in 42 years, and inevitably some of them are less good than others. I'm an enormous fan of his work, and few modern publications have given me as much pleasure, despite their not infrequent bad temper and mockery, as *My Other Life*, *Milroy the Magician*, *Hotel Honolulu*, *The Elephanta Suite*, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, *The Pillars of Hercules*, *The Happy Isles of Oceania*, *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, *Dark Star Safari* and, most recently, *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*. But this new novel is by and large a disappointment, everywhere slightly unsatisfactory and, by the time you reach the end, unfulfilling in a wider sense.

*A Dead Hand* tells the story of a middle-aged American writer of magazine articles marooned in Calcutta and unable, through an unspecified malaise, to put pen to paper. Out of the blue he receives a letter asking him to investigate a crime — the dead body of a young boy planted in a cheap hotel room, rolled up (he later learns) in a carpet. The hotel guest, a young Indian, has fled in terror. Could he help clear him of suspicion, or at least throw some light on the crime?

The novel's main character is the writer of the letter, a Mrs Unger, an American who runs a home for desperately poor Indian children, and who refuses all publicity with a saint-like modesty. The narrator becomes devoted to her and her cause, addicted to her Tantric massages, and even makes some progress in his investigations.

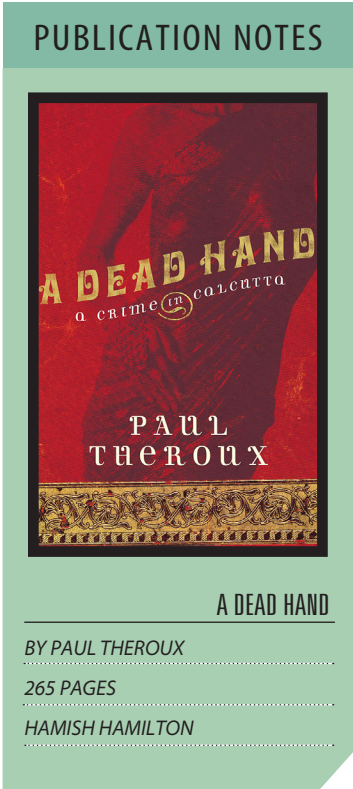
It's hard to demonstrate the novel's unsatisfactory nature without revealing the ending. Suffice it to say that the fact that Mrs Unger is other than she seems will be obvious to every reader from the first few pages. And yet Theroux piles on details of the narrator's innocent obsession as if in an attempt to drive the reader crazy with frustration. "Surely the fool can see she's not what she appears," we groan. "Why does he persist in being to naive?"

And yet the conclusion, when it arrives, is unsurprising and only mildly interesting. Writers of detective thrillers such as P.D. James would never have been satisfied with so unstartling a denouement. It's almost as if Theroux is unable to abandon a book once he's embarked on one. And the plot material of *A Dead Hand* would be more suited to a long short story than to a full-length novel.

Indeed, the Theroux book this new one should be compared with is *The Elephanta Suite* [reviewed in *Taipei Times*, July 20, 2008]. This set of three concise and incisive novellas set in India has everything *A Dead Hand* lacks, as well as containing the gist of Theroux's savage criticism of modern India, to which this new book has little substantial to add (perhaps fortunately). Those three brilliant stories had pace, drive, drama and tension. *A Dead Hand*, sadly, lacks all these things.

It's as if Theroux, having already delivered three brutal kicks to India, not to mention additional mockery last year in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, sensed there might still be life in the victim, and so resolved on one final assault to finish the place off once and for all.

This is not to say that abuse of India is at the heart of the novel. Pity also has its place. There's nothing Indian about the mysterious Mrs Unger either, although you sometimes feel that she



might have been made an Indian in some earlier draft — a "confession" made on a long train journey, with no obvious plot-related point, tends to support this hypothesis.

All in all, there's something structurally awry here. Was the novel initially plotted rather differently, then completed with the undigested material insufficiently changed? Probably not, considering Theroux's general professionalism. But haste does seem to be a part of the problem, together with a determination to push ahead with unmalleanable material come what may.

Many of the utterances of the narrator, and of his friend at the US consulate, appear to incorporate Theroux's own caustic views on India with little adjustment. As if this wasn't enough, the real-life Paul Theroux himself appears as a character. "Paul Theroux wants to see you," says the consulate friend. "He's in Calcutta."

This is a smart move on Theroux's part, possibly the only one in the novel. Of course there's only one way the famous writer can be presented, and that's hostilely. He could hardly be shown as a great man uttering witticisms and beaming bonhomie. So he's mocked. He's considered by the narrator to be a "smirking, intrusive, ungenerous and insincere man," with "the heartless and unblinking gaze of a hunter lining up a prey animal through a gun sight." He's seen as smug, someone on the make, competitive and inquisitive. The narrator is enormously relieved when he leaves town.

What's Theroux up to here? Maybe he's exorcising the version of himself he sees in nightmares. There's little doubt that the narrator, too, is Theroux in all but name, so the "real" Paul Theroux who shows up, briefly but memorably, can only be the "other self" who the author wants to identify accurately in order to, in some sense, be rid of.

Of course there are enjoyable things in this book. Theroux may be cutting, but he's also deeply perceptive — a man who penned some of the best criticism of Salvador Dali in existence when visiting the surrealist's home in *The Pillars of Hercules* could hardly be otherwise. If this book were written by someone else it might deserve muted praise. It's only in comparison with Theroux's best work that it's more than a little disappointing.

BY GARETH MURFIN  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Android, Google's mobile operating system, is currently enjoying a global rollout — so much so that you have probably already seen an Android device whether you are aware of it or not. Motorola's new Droid is a fine example of things to come: fast, powerful, handheld PCs with a flexible Linux-based operating system.

Once you get your hands on an Android device, you will find an application called "Market," which allows you access to more than 10,000 applications written by Android developers. Here are a few of the best free applications available on the market today.



## IDENTIFY THE MUSIC YOU HEAR

Shazam is a free application that can end those arguments about what music is playing. Load it up, click "Tag Now" and the application will use the phone's microphone to analyze the music and then send the waveform data to an online server. Promptly returned is the name of the song, the authors, and the album it is from along with pictures of the cover. It then allows you to purchase the MP3 from Amazon.com or search for it on YouTube. Your history is stored so you can see which songs you have discovered using Shazam. Free, useful and fun, absolutely no reason not to have this one.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAZAM

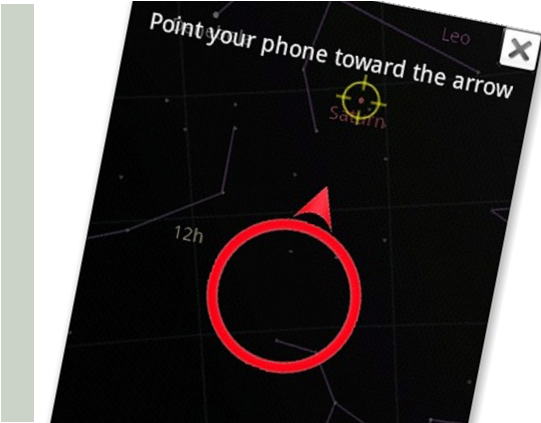


## YOUR OWN PERSONALIZED RADIO STATION

Last.FM is a huge community of users listening to music and sharing their musical preferences. It works on the principle that if you like one song, the chances are you might like another similar one by a different artist — Last.FM will keep recommending songs based on their vast collection of user preferences (which worked well for me). These songs are streamed directly to you on your phone using its Internet connection. The aLast.FM Player is a client for listening to these personalizable radio stations on your Android device, allowing you to walk around all day listening to your favorite tracks for absolutely free (after a month, a subscription of US\$3 is required, but it's well worth it). The application itself is robust and clean with a simple user interface requiring the operator to touch a heart icon indicating that they like that track.

If you really want to test your Android phone, play some tunes on aLast.FM Player and then load Shazam and see if it can identify them. I bet it can.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAST.FM



## EXPLORE THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Google's desire to map the planet has now spread to the Solar System. Using Google Sky Map you can hold your phone up to the sky and it will detect where you are and accurately map the portion of the sky you are pointing at. If you see a star and wonder what it is, you hold your phone up to it as if you were going to take a photo of it, and on the screen the sky will be mapped perfectly, allowing you to easily find that star or indeed planets and constellations and even more. You can also tour the solar system by dragging your finger or searching for something. No doubt extremely handy for some, and downright cool for the rest of us.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOOGLE



## BUY AND STREAM MUSIC WITH NEAR-ZERO BUFFERING DELAY

Spotify is a peer-to-peer music streaming service that allows you to purchase and listen to music on the move with virtually no buffering delay. Once you have purchased a track or album using Spotify it is yours to do what you want with it, move it to your iPod, PC, etc. Spotify uses the phone's Internet connection to stream your music from your online library. This means there is no need to store files locally on your phone, unless you wish to, if, for example, you are on the MRT and can't get a signal. Spotify is funded by advertisements, unless a subscription fee of around US\$15 is paid for the premium service, which has no adverts and higher-quality streaming. The Android Spotify application is available now and is very simple to use.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPOTIFY



## KILL SHAMBLING BEASTS WITH A NAIL GUN

The legendary *Quake* has been ported to Android. Anyone who has played this game will be excited to play it on their Android device, and anyone who hasn't is in for a treat. *Quake* is a 3D game that takes advantage of Android's 3D acceleration and delivers a dark and visceral gaming experience in the form of a first-person shooter. It can be played online with up to 16 other players.

A bit of expertise is required to install the *Quake* files into your phone's SD card, and the game is a bit sluggish on the Google G1, though smoother, more fluid game play is possible on the newer and faster Android devices that are coming out this year (such as the Motorola Droid). If you like *Quake*, you may also want to check out Android *Doom*, too.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOOGLE



## ESCAPE FROM THE DARKNESS

*Mystique. Chapter 1: Foetus* is a scary but fun adventure game where you awake in a dark locked room. You must find clues around you and use whatever you can find to escape. The game features a decent-looking 3D engine and the ability to walk around the room by dragging your fingers and using the trackball. Occasionally figures will appear in the darkness adding to the atmosphere. A great time-killer if you are on a long journey or just bored.

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Hardcover: UK

# Philip Roth's not kidding

The ageing protagonist in 'The Humbling' faces a fate that, to its author at least, may seem worse even than the end of sex

BY CRAIG SELIGMAN  
BLOOMBERG

Chapter 1: An elderly actor loses his chops, can't perform. Fearing suicide, he checks himself into a psychiatric hospital. Chapter 2: After his release, he falls into an intense, rejuvenating affair with a lesbian 25 years his junior, the child of old friends. Chapter 3: Can any good come of this?

*The Humbling* is the fourth novella Philip Roth has turned out in as many years. In these efficient little volumes, the author takes an almost sadistic pleasure in clasp the reader in a tightening vise. The Roth alter ego this time is Simon Axler, a powerful 65-year-old actor who, in the course of a run at the Kennedy

Center (where he is starring, on alternate nights, in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*), suddenly finds himself unable to act. The conviction is gone.

His incapacity certainly doesn't suggest Roth, who at 76 is still leaving scorch marks on the page. Instead it must be the embodiment of Roth's worst fears. Something similar was going on in *Everyman* (2006) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), whose protagonists were suffering the humiliations of old age, foremost among them impotence.

Simon isn't infirm (apart from a bad back), his sexual powers appear undiminished, and his wealth and fame add to his allure. Yet on the scale of nightmares, vanished talent may look

even worse to Roth than the end of sex.

Pegeen Stapleford, the woman he falls hard for, is a risky commitment, given her age and her sexual history. Much about her seems designed to make the reader ill at ease, including Simon's recollections of her "as an infant at her mother's breast." Her parents are less than thrilled with the romance, and Simon soon begins to wonder whether they might be sabotaging it.

More disturbing is the way Simon sets out to divorce Pegeen from her lesbian past by buying her femmy designer clothes and an expensive new haircut — that is, by turning her into his (Roth's?) idea of a straight woman:

"Wasn't he dressing her up in costume

as though a costly skirt could dispose of nearly two decades of lived experience? Wasn't he distorting her while telling himself a lie — and a lie that in the end might be anything but harmless? What if he proved to be no more than a brief male intrusion into a lesbian life?"

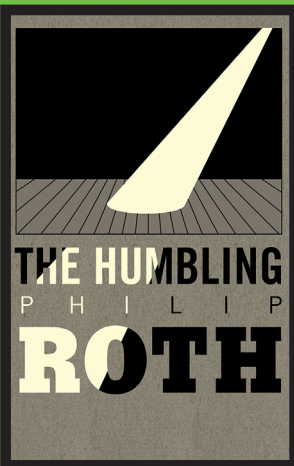
These pages suggest a long outmoded notion of gay women as uniformly butch. But because Roth is such an expert craftsman — he's wily enough to have Pegeen play along with Simon's project — it's impossible to say whether the prejudice is the character's or his creator's.

Roth's books haven't been funny for years, but even when they were sidesplitting the laughter carried an

element of horror. As far back as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth would take a joke and push it dangerously far — and the further he pushed it the funnier it got, but also the crazier, the scarier. Even as you wiped away the tears you knew it was about something all too real. He wasn't kidding.

But if these late novellas aren't funny, they're not quite humorless, either. It's as though the joke is buried somewhere deep and he's still pushing it to extremes that no reasonable writer would. And better that it should stay buried, because it's a vicious joke whose butt is the hapless protagonist — as once it was Alexander Portnoy — and if we could hear the laughter it might be unbearable.

## PUBLICATION NOTES



THE HUMBLING  
BY PHILIP ROTH  
140 PAGES  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT