

member of a brutal guard that's supposed to find justice but more often causes strife. Falcon has recently earned the position of Steward of the Sage, a title he hopes to use to stop the cruelty of Enforcers and promote fairness and safety for the citizenry. After publicly disgracing his grandfather, a high-ranking Enforcer, he leaves his family home, cut off from the wealth of his heritage; to add insult to injury, he's dealing with chronic pain. His friend Beatrice Holmes helps him find lodgings to rent, as well as a roommate, Keene Kohli. While Falcon focuses on the rules of etiquette and worries about saying the right thing, struggling to transcend the teachings of his upper-crust family, the handsome and friendly Keene seems to have no worries at all. When Falcon and Keene come home to find they've been robbed of nearly everything they own, Keene doesn't wish to report the crime due to the notoriety of the Enforcers' brutality and the well-known horrors of the justice and prison systems ("I don't want someone locked away for the rest of their lives over mere stuff"). The men begin their own investigation, and soon Falcon finds himself growing closer to Keene as sparks fly between them. Fraedrich has crafted an excellent mystery story, returning to the familiar steampunk world of the Broken Gears series and its characters. Falcon's desire to reform the Enforcers is an unusual and compelling conflict and adds complexity to his character. Keene is an engaging presence who shows dimension as he grows closer to Falcon and reveals his own backstory. Their romance is believable, growing out of an initial friendship and sparked by genuine chemistry and compatibility. The romance is interwoven with the mystery, and both have a rewarding conclusion. **A fun-filled romantic steampunk story that returning readers will enjoy.**



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## House of Fat Man: Rules in the Golden Triangle

Gerard-Alesco, M. | Wise Media Group  
(366 pp.) | \$9.95 paper  
Oct. 26, 2023 | 9781629672625



In Gerard-Alesco's thriller, an American ex-pat in Thailand stumbles into a world of drug trafficking and shifting alliances when he tries to find a missing friend.

Greg Robber is an oddly named young man with a gift for languages. He's recruited by a CIA man named Elliot at Oxford's Christ Church College in England, and then sent to the Thai village of Chiang Mai. Greg's cover is that he's taking notes and photos to write a book about the customs of the hill people, but his real mission is to "watch, listen, and report" on the local drug trade to Elliot. In the process, Greg befriends some idealistic Westerners, including Albie Saint Clair, a wealthy geophysicist, who sets up a research facility, hoping to end the local practice of slashing and burning teak forests to grow opium, and Mary Peyton, a saintly nun who runs a health clinic. But a malevolent figure known as Fat Man runs a local gambling establishment, compels local businesses to pay protection, and distributes opium. His vicious offspring, Fat Boy, is his enforcer. When Greg's initial mission ends, he stays on as Albie's translator—but then Albie disappears. Greg searches for his friend in Thailand and then crosses the Burmese border, fearing that the worst has happened. Gerard-Alesco adeptly creates a corrupt world that recalls the work of Raymond Chandler with its morally ambiguous characters. Some villagers destroy forests and grow opium, for instance, but they do so for survival and are shown to be otherwise upstanding. Even the book's central player, Greg, is far from a hero: He cares about his friends, but he allows his loyal pal Wes to express racist,

antigay, and misogynist views unchallenged. The protagonist is also effectively shown to be lustful, uncertain, and aimless, and he allows others, including Elliot and Albie's sister, Gwen, to determine his fate for him. The author also paints a vivid picture of Thailand, in which tour buses mingle with water buffalo-drawn carts on the streets. Overall, the picturesque setting, flawed protagonist, and noir atmosphere make this thriller stand out.

**A grim but often engaging missing-person tale.**

## Virtuous Women

Goltz, Ann | Quiet Publications (348 pp.)  
\$16.99 paper | March 5, 2024 | 9780999521519



A teenage girl struggles with the teachings of her isolated Christian community as she attempts to navigate her own life in Goltz's novel.

Seventeen-year-old Hope Wagner's world begins to fracture with the arrival of a new woman at her church. When Jennifer Levine, a young nanny searching for the "right" spiritual home, shows up at Church of the Covenant, it causes ripples among the congregation. Soon, Jennifer and Hope's widowed father, Michael, marry, and the dark side of their conservative Christian sect comes to light. Shamed on her honeymoon, physically abused, and forced to give all her money over to her new husband, Jennifer struggles in her new life. Meanwhile, Hope is left devastated after her official "courtship" with her crush is shut down by the church elders. The second part of the novel explores what happens when Hope must decide whether to go out into the world or stay in the only life she's ever known. Through it all, Jennifer and Hope struggle to find themselves and determine whether that's even possible in their oppressive community. While the novel deals heavily with religious