

➤ *The Beach*,

extract from chapter one, Alex Garland, 1996.

This text is an excerpt from a best-selling first novel entitled *The Beach* and written by Alex Garland in 1996. This novel was later turned into a film by Danny Boyle starring Leonardo Di Caprio, Virginie Ledoyen and Guillaume Canet.

The extract here is made of the first three pages of the novel, a big chunk of the first chapter. The whole action is located in Thailand and the opening scene takes place in Bangkok, more precisely on Khao San Road. To quote the text "Khao San Road was backpacker land", the phrase "backpacker land" gives away from the start the slightly ironic and detached tone used to describe the place. It evokes the travels of the young people from rich western countries using backpacks or rucksacks but makes an implicit link with a kind of Disneyland, thus disparaging the whole thing, implying that these travels are not the real thing. Such idea is also to be found in the way drugs are described as a kind of local tourist folklore, especially when the narrator says about the taxi driver : " I wasn't planning on crime but I wanted to oblige his conspiratorial charm." It seems that in this "(I quote) halfway house between East and West" it is possible to get the thrill of adventure without the danger.

After his arrival in Bangkok, the narrator, a young Englishman, needs to spend the night on this famous Khao San Road and is looking for a suitable guest-house of which the reader will be given a detailed description. We are also given the obligatory reference to the cockroaches, but again the first impression is given through a reference to drugs, with the "heroin hippie" that gestures to our hero that the guest-house is a good one. And it's the only "exotic" element we get, because otherwise the people there are described as "young and friendly looking", "watching the TV" or "chattering over their dinner" all very ordinary activities.

Aside from the cockroaches the impression the reader gets of the guest-house is that it is extremely cramped and that the walls are about to collapse. This certainly doesn't do much for a feeling of safety and creates a feeling of oppression which added to the mosquito net and the fans conveys the idea of tropical heat.

Among the other people in the hotel are a young French couple, and, again, another drug user. This character remains unseen, all our hero knows about him is through what he can hear through the flimsy walls. This gives this character a ghostly quality, even his footsteps are qualified as "creepy" and he is either cursing or muttering incoherent words.

What is interesting in this text is the way the author manages to create an atmosphere. Indeed these are the first pages of the novel and he needs to set the tone. His mildly ironic and detached tone does a good job of both describing the place and at the same time plays on the fantasies that people, especially young people, tend to have about travelling to Thailand and all the young pop culture carefree references to drugs

The author uses pretty much the same device when he uses a swear word as a title for the first chapter, and it is only after a few pages of the book that the reader is given the explanation of this strange title, which in fact is linked to the title of the whole book, "The Beach" simply pronounced by a Scotsman.

Reading this first chapter made me curious about reading more of the book, especially because of the ghostlike depiction of the Scotsman, so I guess the author succeeded in catching my attention.