

BOOK REVIEW

Zen Cho, *Sorcerer to the Crown*. London: Pan Books, 2016. 371 pp. ISBN 978-1-4472-9946-2.

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In a fantasy book market, which habitually serves up multi-volume epics such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* or *The Wheel of Time*, it is a relief to come across a novel that is action-packed and filled with original and exciting characters but manages to contain them within a single volume. Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown* is a stand-alone novel which nonetheless offers potential for sequels. And I certainly hope that the author builds on that potential.

Cho is Malaysian but now lives and works in England. *Sorcerer to the Crown* is her first novel, and in 2016 it netted her the British Fantasy Award for Best Newcomer. She had previously been joint winner of the IAFA William L. Crawford Fantasy Award for her 2015 short story collection *Spirits Abroad*. In 2016 she was also a finalist for the Locus Award for Best First Novel, for *Sorcerer to the Crown*. She has edited a volume of cyberpunk stories (*Cyberpunk: Malaysia*, Fixi Novo, 2015), and has written two self-published novels, *The Perilous Life of Jade Yeo* and *The Terracotta Bride*.

This being a fantasy novel written by a Malaysian author, I was not sure what to expect when I approached it. Would it be peopled by the magical/supernatural beings of Malay legend? Would it be set in the olden days of Malaya? To some extent I assumed this would be the case – after all, would a Malaysian writer not set her work within a world familiar to herself? So, I was somewhat surprised to encounter a world of sorcerers and magicians set in a parallel-universe Regency England, where magic is real and sorcerers are a central part of politics and society.

Comparisons with Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* are inevitable – that novel, too, is set in a Regency England where magic and faerie are interwoven into everyday society. Clarke's novel, however, is quieter in tone and grimmer and darker in atmosphere. Cho's novel certainly offers a fair share of grimness: the two protagonists are faced, time and again, with spells which aim to kill them. This is leavened, however, by bouts of humour (a magical free-for-all at Mrs Daubeney's School for Gentlewitches, where the heroine Prunella is a kind of maid-of-all-work: the thaumaturgical equivalent, perhaps, of a food fight), as well as some penetrating insights into the workings of race and gender discrimination.

The novel centres on two characters who are in many ways marginal figures in their society. The first is the eponymous Sorcerer, Zacharias Wythe, who is part African, while the second is the half-Indian witch Prunella Gentleman. One wonders if the names are ironic – Wythe is noticeably not white, while Prunella's mixed-race status seems to preclude her from being considered a gentlewoman. Their racial identity is central to the development of the novel. Wythe faces considerable prejudice from a very early age – it is assumed by British thaumaturgical society that since he is part African, he cannot possibly be a magician, let alone a sorcerer. Prunella, too, is held back – by her mixed and uncertain ancestry, and her gender. Initially, no one is sure who her late father was, or what position he held in society; and although she is taken in and treated reasonably kindly by Mrs Daubeney, the Head of the School for Gentlewitches, she can never be considered to be on an equal footing with the young society girls who make up the student body. Her racial identity creates a strong sense that she is not one of 'us', making it fairly easy for the Head to quite summarily cut ties with her when she needs to.

The race question also throws up another important point, namely the idea of white privilege. Wythe must constantly prove himself to be powerful and a skilled sorcerer. He is strongly suspected of having murdered his adoptive father Sir Stephen Wythe, the former Sorcerer to the Crown, in part because of lingering disbelief that

he can possibly be qualified for the position. The assumption is that he must have murdered Sir Stephen in order to wrest away the Sorcerer's staff, despite the fact that the staff cannot be taken by someone who is not deserving of it. Despite holding the most powerful position in England's magical society, his skin colour bars him from getting the kind of respect that would be naturally accorded to a white magician in the same position.

Cho somewhat counters this idea of the whiteness of magic by also highlighting magic from Asia – China, India, and a surprising appearance from Malaya. What we see of English magic seems to focus mostly on the negative, in the form of repeated attempts to harm Zacharias. Asian magic, however, appears far more 'magical' – harnessing wind and clouds, shrinking spells, wings, blood magic and so on. In the discourse of the English magicians and sorcerers, the only other power that concerns them is France. Cho's inclusion of Asian magic serves to show their blinkered vision.

Gender is also a major issue explored in this novel. Just as Zacharias is considered to be 'less than', women too are marginalised and discriminated against. Just as the English magicians chafe at being governed by a "wooly Afric" (27), they dismiss the idea of women doing magic, comparing a magical female to a flying pig: achievable, perhaps, but of no "earthly good ... to anyone" (3). Indeed, the School for Gentlewitches is far from being a Hogwarts-type training ground. Rather, it is a place where women with magic are trained to actively *suppress* their magic, with the predictable result that their magic often bursts out in ungovernable fits. Prunella, as a coloured, magical female is doubly marginalised. And it is only Zacharias, also marginalised by factors beyond his control, who feels that women should be properly trained in magic. Again, the better example seems to come from Asia, where female magic is not forbidden.

While the *Sorcerer to the Crown* offers us an adventure laden with fun and excitement, it also gives us the chance to reflect on some fairly serious issues, adding considerable depth as well as enjoyment to the reading experience.