

Zen Cho, *The True Queen*. London: Macmillan, 2019. 367 pp. ISBN 978-1509801077.

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This novel is a sequel of sorts to Zen Cho's first novel, *Sorcerer to the Crown*, which dealt with race and gender discrimination in an imagined Regency England where magic is real. Thankfully, it is also quite close to being a stand-alone novel. It would be helpful to have read the first volume, but anyone who hasn't can still pick up enough information to understand the background.

This is because Cho has decided to put Zacharias and Prunella (protagonists of *Sorcerer to the Crown*) in the background of this second novel. They have moved on from the events of the first novel, and are now well established in magical society, though there is still much resentment towards them because of ethnicity and gender issues. Now, the focus is on a mysterious pair of sisters, Sakti and Muna, who have washed up on the shores of Janda Baik (somewhere near Malacca) and are being cared for by Janda Baik's chief witch, Mak Genggang, who made a short but pivotal appearance in *Sorcerer to the Crown*. Sakti and Muna remember nothing about their lives before being found in Janda Baik, and when what appears to be a curse starts to afflict Sakti, Mak Genggang decides to send them off to England to consult with Prunella, who is now Sorceress to the Crown. On the way, Sakti disappears, and the rest of the novel is concerned with Muna trying to find her. As the story progresses, the hidebound order of magical society in England gets disrupted, as does the social order of Fairyland.

Between the two sisters, Sakti has magic while Muna has none. Cho takes an interesting approach by making Muna the centre of the novel. Although her entire motivation is to find Sakti, we become caught up in Muna's story – how she overcomes her fears, the friendships she forms, the perilous steps she must take to rescue Sakti, her slow unravelling of the mystery surrounding their lives. Muna is shy, hesitant, uncertain of her place, first in Mak Genggang's magic-infused home, and then in Prunella's school for witches. These qualities make her far more sympathetic than the imperious Mak Genggang or the brashly confident Sakti. Once in England, she meets Prunella, who throughout the story remains a distant, detached figure. Henrietta Stapleton, one of

the instructors at the school, who is as shy and hesitant as Muna although possessed of magical power, becomes Muna's closest friend in England. It is fitting that it is through their efforts, rather than through the efforts of the more gifted and confident, that the mysteries are cleared up, and tensions between Fairyland and the world finally resolved. All those whom we would normally consider fit to be the central figures in a story like this – powerful sorcerers and witches like Zacharias, Prunella and Mak Genggang or more flamboyant characters like Sakti – are sidelined in favour of the underdog. In this, Cho is continuing a theme begun in *Sorcerer to the Crown*, where both Zacharias and Prunella are very much marginalized – Zacharias by race, and Prunella by both race and gender. Both novels focus on those who are othered in some way (usually by race and/or gender), who then create a kind of accommodating space for themselves within a strange or even hostile environment.

Cho extends this idea of the other, taking the opportunity to insert something of a postcolonial note into this novel. Even in this parallel world, the British have colonized Malaya. Tuan Farquhar, the “English raja of Malacca” (22) is portrayed as a stereotypical colonizer, gathering *exotica* with no notion of what it means. He collects local magic, paying a small sum for each magical verse given to him, as if he might thus accrue the knowledge to himself. Sakti is dismissive of his efforts: “If the man has the impertinence to buy magic without being a magician, he deserves to be cheated. He ought to know his place” (23). She thus relegates him to a position outside the centre because, not being a magician, he is ‘other’. Cho continues this reversal of the centre-margin binary by positioning Mak Genggang as the most important node in a regional and even global network of magic, with her influence spreading to Siam, China, India, England and the Unseen Realm (Fairyland). This suggestion of Mak Genggang's power is emphasized by a slightly deeper examination of the local magic available to her. When Cho writes about Janda Baik, she notes that Mak Genggang has a host of tamed *lamiae*, more popularly known in Malaysia as *Pontianak*, “the spectres of women who die nursing a grievance” (8). When Mak Genggang sends Sakti and Muna off to England through the Unseen Realm, she gives them a *polong*, a tiny spirit sealed inside a bottle by blood magic, to help them if necessary. Cho also mentions the respectful fear with which the villagers treat the jungles of Janda Baik – reflective of Malaysian folk beliefs and practices even to this day. The idea of colonization and oppression has even taken hold in Fairyland; the True Queen has been thrown out, and in her absence, imps are held captive

and trees are turned into prisons. Order is restored once the True Queen is reinstated, lending a certain Shakespearean flavor to the story as well.

Cho adds yet another layer of complexity to this tale by gently pushing the boundaries of gender identity – she creates unusual gender (and species) pairings, and questions the necessity of marriage as practised in this society.

So on the one hand, this is a simple story – Muna must find Sakti, and the True Queen must be restored to the throne of Fairyland. But it is also complex, thoughtful and engaging. As a writer, Cho can shift between styles with ease – for *Sorcerer to the Crown* and *The True Queen*, she adopts a Regency voice. In her recent novelette “If at First You Don’t Succeed, Try, Try Again” (for which she won a Hugo Award in 2019), she adopts a lighter, often very funny, tone. In both the novels and this story, her gift for creating interesting and sympathetic characters is on full display. It is well worth spending some time with her work.