

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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## Zen Cho

in conversation with Vassili Christodoulou

**VASSILI CHRISTODOULOU:** Hello, Zen, thank you so much for joining me for this WritersMosaic podcast.

**ZEN CHO:** Thanks for having me.

**VC:** You're a Malaysian expat living in Britain. Can you tell us a bit about your upbringing in Malaysia and the impression you formed of the UK in your childhood?

**ZC:** Yeah, so I grew up as the member of the kind of substantial Chinese minority community in Malaysia, in a town called, well mostly in a town called Petaling Jaya, which is a kind of satellite town outside the capital of Kuala Lumpur. And we spoke English at home. My parents had both attended schools that were taught by British monks/nuns, depending on your gender. And I read a lot of British fiction growing up, you know, whether that was Jane Austen, or Enid Blyton, or Terry Pratchett. And actually, one of the things I think of as being most influential in my development as a writer, was my parents getting, you know, membership of the British Council library... a card for me, and they used to drive me the hour or so to the library each weekend, so I could stock up on reading

material. And they did that when I ran out of things to read at the KL children's library. So, it was an interesting upbringing that, you know, I was reading all these British novels, which were generally, you know, in settings and kind of about people that I had very little to do with in real life; and, you know, they never reflected the kind of setting I grew up in. And so, I think my overall perception was really that, you know, only white people were allowed to be in books, because that was kind of all the evidence that I saw. And yeah, that's kind of part of what drives me today, you know, in my writing...

**VC:** I get the impression that historical Britain, the Britain of Jane Austen, was almost a secondary fantasy world for you, as you were growing up. Is that... is that fair?

**ZC:** Yeah, I think it's a fair thing to say. Yeah. You know, obviously, that... that was intensified by the fact that I was growing up in a different country, and a different culture. But Diana Wynne Jones, you know, the children's fantasy author, she wrote an essay once talking about, you know, giving her son, the book, *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, and finding out when he finished it, that he had read it as a fantasy, you know, not as historical fiction; or, well, it wasn't even really historical fiction at the time Kipling was writing it, you know. And so, I think given my age, because I was reading... I was reading these kinds of Victorian novels and Georgian novels relatively young, you know, kind of in my early teens. Yeah, they did read as kind of secondary fantasy, although obviously, I knew they weren't fantasy as such; I knew they were taking place in a historical period of our own world, but I enjoyed them in much the same way that I enjoyed fantasy.

**VC:** And all this is directly relevant to your debut novel *Sorcerer to the Crown*. Can you give listeners who've not had a chance to read it yet the elevator pitch for that?

**ZC:** Sure. It's a novel about Zacharias Wythe who is England's first African Sorcerer Royal in Regency Britain. And he meets a plucky orphan girl who has made a discovery that will blow apart English magic, basically. And my really quick pitch for it, depending on the audience, is either it's Jane Austen with magicians and people of colour, or else it's Edward Said crossed with Georgette Heyer, who wrote these wonderful Regency romances. Edward Said wrote *Orientalism*, of course.

**VC:** What drew you to the Regency, in particular, especially given that generic fantasy readers, genre fantasy readers, are accustomed to medieval or pseudo-medieval settings?

**ZC:** Well, Regency fantasy, or what we call fantasy of manners, is actually a fairly established sub-genre in its own right. So, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke is probably one of the most famous examples. Naomi Novik wrote a very popular and successful series called the *Temeraire Series*, which is essentially Age of Sails – you know, the Napoleonic War – only fought with dragons. And then there are other examples. So, I was kind of following, you know, a hallowed tradition. But what I was really inspired by was these Regency-set romances by Georgette Heyer, you know, a very popular author, albeit in a different genre. And yeah, because, you know, of what we spoke about earlier about the kind of connection between historical fiction and fantasy, it felt very natural to take that setting and then just add a bit more fantasy to it.

**VC:** And empire is an important thing, both in *Sorcerer to the Crown* and in the next book in the series, *The True Queen*. Empire's not an uncommon theme for SFF. Why do you think that is, and how did your knowledge of imperialism both in the real world and in SFF influence the direction the novels took?

**ZC:** Well, I think the answer to the first question is that SFF likes kind of big stakes, you know: saving the kingdom, the destruction of the galaxy. And so, having a kind of big empire fighting a kind of plucky underdog works quite well for that. You know, there's lots of different answers to the question of why empire is so central to a lot of SFF but I think another answer is that a lot of it is, you know, was written or conceived historically by American writers. So, *Star Wars* was kind of a really classic example of, you know, science fiction, kind of science fiction space opera – where you've got that big empire and people fighting it. And so, I think Americans liked this idea of themselves as, you know, as part of the kind of historical narrative, their story of themselves that they were fighting the British Empire so that, I think, enters into their fiction.

For me, the kind of role imperialism played in my life was total, you know. I grew up in a country that would not have the demographics it has now if not for imperialism; it was profoundly shaped by imperialism. You know, my ancestors would not have come to Malaysia, if not for imperialism. I wouldn't be living in the UK, if not for imperialism. So, I wanted to write, you know, when I was writing these novels, I wanted them to be kind of fun and entertaining, but I also wanted to think a little bit about that; and I would say that the message in *Sorcerer to the...* well, one of the things that I'm saying in *Sorcerer to the Crown* and *The True Queen* is, you know, sure, I and the colonies are maybe a product of the ex-colonies... are a product of imperialism, but so is Britain, and so is all this historical fiction,

or, you know, books, these books that I read growing up, you know, whether that's Jane Austen or Georgette Heyer or the like, you know, all these, this, this whole kind of idea of the Regency and, you know, these kind of... this genre with the kind of pretty frocks and the gentleman and so on. That all was kind of profoundly implicated with imperialism.

**VC:** I hope some of the some of our listeners who are not normally fantasy or science fiction readers, might be tempted to try your work after they've heard this interview. But will you speak a little to the role of fairy magic and other elements of the fantastic in your work? Why do you infuse your writing with speculative elements rather than just write straightforward mimetic fiction?

**ZC:** There is a short answer, which is, I don't know. [Laughs]

**VC:** [Laughs]

**ZC:** That's how it came to me. That was what the idea was like, you know, when I started writing. There are lots of different potential answers. I think, in the context of *Sorcerer to the Crown*, specifically, and the sequel *The True Queen*, when I started writing *Sorcerer to the Crown*, I got the idea actually, it was from my kind of childhood reading, and one of the things that used to really puzzle me when I was reading these, reading these, you know, old British books growing up, you know, Enid Blyton, for example, is that they would describe characters as being dark, but then... and in my, you know, in my context, if you said someone who's dark, you meant dark-skinned. But I knew that in books, like everyone was white, so... so that really confused me. And it took me a while to work out that what they meant was dark-haired.

And so, I had this idea, you know, as a grown-up looking for a book to write; I was like, 'Wouldn't it be funny if you wrote a book in kind of that setting?' I know Enid Blyton is a bit later, but you know, in that kind of historical setting in Britain, and the main character was dark, but he was, you know, dark-skinned; and how would that... how would that affect the story? But I knew I wanted to write something that was really fun, you know, that was kind of all the balls, and all the banter, and all that like, all the kind of fun of the Regency romance genre and the fantasy genre. And I wanted to give my main character, Zacharias, a certain amount of status and amount of power. So, his position, although it is threatened, is not precarious in the book because he is Sorcerer Royal; he's got this important title. And the reason why he is in that position is because he's got magic. So, to me, kind of magic was almost a way of equalizing, you know, these, this kind of historical, historically unequal position and, kind of, I guess, putting a couple of my characters, who are people of colour, in a position where they can kind of infiltrate the British establishment and, kind of, access some of the privileges attached to that.

**VC:** Can you, just to build on that little bit, can you speak about your approach to racism in these books? Because even though the African and Indian characters do have power, which they wouldn't necessarily have had in the real world, or, and indeed, people who were living in London at the time didn't, this is not a colourblind approach to casting. The racism that they experience is real. Can you speak about your experiences of dramatizing that?

**ZC:** Um, yeah, well, I wanted it to be a fun book, but I also wanted it to feel real, you know, emotionally real, even if... even if it's a book that features dragons and people flying around on clouds. Um, you know, I think you can have all that kind of bullshit in a book. [Laughs]

**VC:** [Laughs]

**ZC:** But then have it still have like, emotional resonance and feel emotionally real to the readers, if, if you keep some, some things true to life. And one of the things I thought was important to keep true to life was to show that, you know, it's a fairly light-hearted novel, but still, as people of colour, these characters do face racism, and, and they do face issues due, for example, to their class status, as well. And that, you know, that affects their relationships with those closest to them, because they're both, they both grew up essentially, as kind of Third Culture kids. They're kind of international adoptees, you know, they're brought up by white people. And I thought, you know, I wanted to kind of show that even in these kinds of very close relationships, you could, you know, racism was still an issue. And it was still something... it was something that they experienced that the people immediately around them might not understand, really. So that was... that was important to me.

**VC:** In the novels, you use this wonderful period term 'hag-ridden', to mean tormented; but then in your latest novel, *Black Water Sister*, you take this metaphor very literally. Can you tell us about that?

**ZC:** Yeah. So, the original title of *Black Water Sister* was *Hag-ridden* because I just thought this was such a great word. When I was writing *Sorcerer to the Crown*, I spent a lot of time on the Oxford English Dictionary website, like online, looking up these archaic words. And the reason why I did that was because I was building a historic, you know, a version of our world, a historical world. And I wanted readers to feel that they were in a real kind of magical version of our world. And I thought, if I use these words that had fallen out of common usage, you know, they'd have a kind of

robustness to them, because they were real world, real words; but at the same time, they'd be kind of foreign and exotic, and they kind of create that sense of being in a different world. And so that's how I came across 'hag-ridden' as a word. And I just, you know, such an amazing word, and immediately I had this idea of this story about a young woman who was being ridden about by, you know, a hag, and terrible ancestors. And that led to *Black Water Sister*, which is about a young woman; she's grown up in America but she's returning to Malaysia, which is where her parents are from and where she was born, when she starts hearing a voice in her head and that's the voice of her deceased grandmother; who has very strong ideas about what she wants her granddaughter to be doing with her life; and they involve ghosts, gods, and gangsters.

**VC:** Does your approach to Malaysian magic differ from your approach to English magic? And does that speak at all to differences between how Malaysians read fantasy fiction and how the genre tradition exists in the UK or US?

**ZC:** Um, my approach does differ as between writing English magic versus Malaysian magic, because my sources of inspiration are different. So, with English magic, I you know, I wrote about it in *Sorcerer to the Crown* and that was, that was drawing a lot of inspiration from my reading, you know, from other books that feature magic in an English context whether that is, that was, like Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* or just kind of general fairy, fairyland myths, or, you know, Hope Mirrlees wrote this wonderful book called *Lud-in-the-Mist*. But with my depictions of Malaysian magic, either, generally either, I make something up, which really puzzles actually Malaysian readers, because quite a lot of my short stories are studied by university or secondary school students in Malaysia. And, periodically, I will get emails saying, 'Where is this myth from?' And I'll have



just made that up. But I also do draw on, you know, on folklore... on Malaysian folklore, and that's not something I learned about really from books. Although I do have books about Malaysian mythology and folklore, that's the kind of thing that people just talk about and believe, you know. So, Malaysian superstitions form a lot of my inspiration. I don't know that it speaks to any difference in how Malaysian readers read fantasy, because if you're reading fantasy novels in English, you have been taught to read fantasy novels in English, if that makes sense. Like, you know, if someone is reading *Black Water Sister*, it's very unlikely – in Malaysia – it's very unlikely that that's the first English language fantasy novel that they've read. So, they will have read other examples of the genre, most of which I guess are more kind of conventional to that idea of what fantasy is.

**VC:** So, although you're very successful as a fantasy author, you also continue to practice law. Can ask whether lawyering influences your writing and, equally, whether writing has made you a better lawyer?

**ZC:** I don't know if writing has made me a better lawyer. In the way that if you've got more than one thing to do, so there's kind of a, you know, a saying about when people become parents – they often just become much more efficient at work. I don't know, maybe this is kind of wishful thinking of parents. [Laughs] Parents having wishful thinking...

**VC:** [Laughs]

**ZC:** That certainly is something that a senior lawyer said to me once. So, you know, women who go away and have children, they become, you know, much more efficient after they come back from maternity leave. And, and so in that sense, perhaps, you know, I do feel that I became a lot more efficient, and kind of worked out, you know, these are the things in my job

that I need to do, and these are the things that aren't as important, once I started publishing in a kind of serious way. At the same time, I do less of the lawyering because I found I had to go part-time really in order to sustain a publishing career. In terms of how it's... how lawyering has influenced my writing, though, there's a couple of ways. The most important way is that being a lawyer, as my day job brings in various things that I don't get via writing. So, it brings in money; consistent money is one thing. I do earn money via writing, but it's much more inconsistent, and hard to predict, and hard to plan, you know, plan for. It also gives me a chance to kind of work in a team, a kind of external, external... consistent external validation, kind of an objective framework for achievement, you know, all these kinds of really boring sounding things that actually are quite important to my well-being. Another way in which it's influenced my writing – I don't often see many kinds of synergies between them, but I struggled for a long time from... to make the leap from short fiction to longer form, because I was writing short stories, and I just couldn't really grasp how I would go from writing a 5,000-word short story to 100,000-word novel. And then I was working on a case, where, and this was when I was a trainee lawyer, where I was being supervised by a senior associate who was drafting this witness statement, it was one of these massive, massive financial cases, and so, there were loads and loads of documents. The witness statement basically functioned as a way to put these documents into evidence, you know, present them to the court in a kind of coherent narrative. So, what it was, was a continuous story – a very boring story, but a story. And it was 80,000 words long, right, which is a novel. And I thought, and I saw, I saw this being written by essentially... by one person, and I thought, 'Oh, okay. So, you know, that's how you write a narrative that runs that long, with great effort over a long period.' But it kind of made something click for me, and after that, I kind of, you know, it helped me kind of on that way to kind of writing novels.

**VC:** Last, but not least, who would you recommend our listeners check out when they've finished your novels?

**ZC:** Oh, that's a good question. So, I always recommend Karen Lord, who's this wonderful Barbadian author, who writes I would say kind of literary SFF. Her style is quite literary, but it's quite funny as well; very funny, intelligent. And she wrote a wonderful book called *Redemption in Indigo*, which is, it's not too long and it's a kind of retelling of a Senegalese folk tale, in a way that kind of draws inspiration from Caribbean oral storytelling, and it's... it's great. And so, that's one book I would definitely recommend. I think, if you like that kind of *Sorcerer to the Crown* style fairy story and want to read more, I will recommend Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist*, which is relatively obscure, but one of those kind of cult classics within fantasy. I think it was it was written in the early 20th century, and it's a kind of yeah... it's a kind of fairyland tale and beautifully written. Actually now I'm talking about it, I want to go back and re-read it.

**VC:** Well, Zen, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Thanks so much for joining me for this podcast.

**ZC:** Thanks for having me.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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