

The Pagoda Tree

Author: Claire Scobie

Penguin Q & A with Claire Scobie, author of *The Pagoda Tree*

What is your new book about?

The Pagoda Tree is a novel about forbidden love, loss and fate set in eighteenth-century southern India. It traces the story of Maya, a young girl destined from birth to be a temple dancer, or *devadasi*. Maya is talented and beautiful, and it is expected that she will have an extraordinary career as a courtesan for the prince himself. But India is on the cusp of change and the city is sliding into war. When tragedy strikes Maya's family she is forced to flee her home and heads to the port city of Madras where East and West collide. It is there she meets Thomas Pearce, an ambitious young Englishman who has travelled to India to make his fortune. But their love is forbidden and comes at enormous cost

What or who inspired it?

I became fascinated by the figure of the *devadasi* after going to Tanjore (now called Thanjavur). On the eleventh-century shrine walls of the Big Temple, the names and addresses of 400 dancing girls are still visible. I liked the idea of a continuum between past and present, and the fact that these women were once celebrated artists of their day.

What was the biggest challenge writing it?

There are very few historical sources about this group of women and so constructing their inner lives was a challenge. I found that by going to the places where my characters lived helped to understand them.

What did you want to achieve with your book?

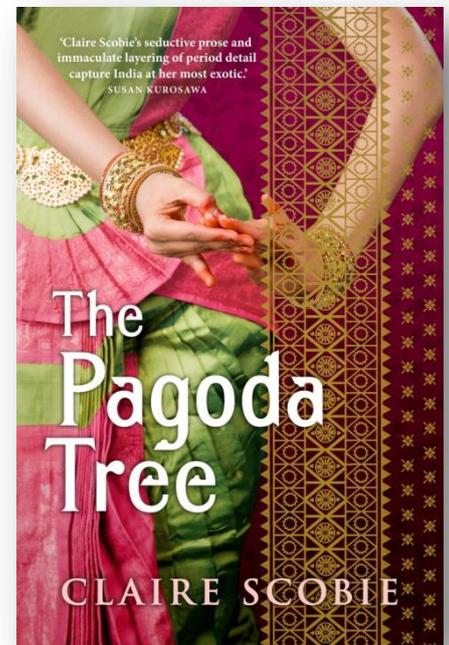
I wanted to bring to life the little known world of the temple dancer, with all its complexity, sensuality and mystery. I also wanted to explore the cross-cultural relations at this pivotal period of Indian history.

Who do you think will enjoy your book?

I think any reader who wants to dive into another world very different to our own. I am hoping women readers will enjoy the strong female characters in the novel and that all readers will enjoy the layering of history, drama and passion. Readers interested in India will also find it illuminating.

Do you have a special 'spot' for writing at home? (If so, describe it)

I have a separate office to my home and go to write there. It is quiet, set back from the street and sunlit with polished wooden floorboards. I have paintings and photos from India to inspire me. I also spent time in southern India when writing the novel. There, my favourite place to write was sitting on my hotel balcony with a view across the palm trees.



When did you start writing?

I started writing short stories as a child. At the age of 11 I set up a neighbourhood newspaper and from my early teens knew I wanted to write.

Tell us a bit about your childhood?

I was brought up in England, mainly around Oxford. As a child I was always an avid reader and kept a diary from the age of nine. We travelled regularly to Europe, Africa and within England, and I've never lost the travel bug.

If you've had other jobs outside of writing, what were they?

Waitress, secretary, publicist, journalist, writing tutor, and workshop facilitator.