

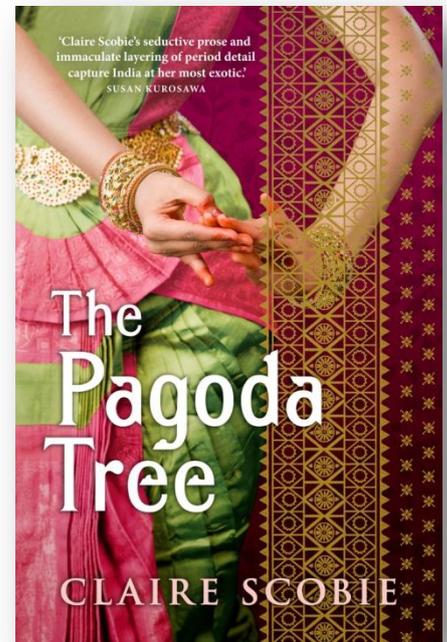
The Pagoda Tree

Author: Claire Scobie

Reading Notes

The Pagoda Tree, by Claire Scobie

1. Author Claire Scobie prefaces her novel with a note on the double meaning of the word 'pagoda'. How does the novel's title capture concerns at the heart of the book?
2. Maya is destined from birth to become a *devadasi*. At that time in India, it was a position of great privilege. But are the temple dancers of Tanjore and southern India liberated or imprisoned by their birthright?
3. The day of Maya's initiation into the world of the *devadasi* is one of great pageantry and reverence. When Lakshmi spots Walter near the temple, she sees him as a bad omen for Maya. Is he?
4. *The Pagoda Tree* is home to many birds. How are birds used as a motif in the book?
5. In the Indian households Scobie portrays, paternity is a noted absence; in the English characters, it is a weakened, troubled state. How is the notion of mothering portrayed in the characters of Lakshmi, Sita, Maya and Prema?
6. Palani is an empowered, sensual figure, yet life at court does not satisfy her. How does her relationship with Maya change that?
7. *The Pagoda Tree* brings to life a fascinating moment in India's history. It was a time of both beauty and brutality, a time of great change and exchange between East and West. How is this expressed in the friendship between Rao and Walter?
8. Dance is a recurring theme in the narrative. In what ways does dance enrich Maya's character and add depth to the novel?
9. When Walter and Thomas first meet, soon after Thomas's arrival in Madras, Walter reflects that India is a place that gets under your skin. Later, at the inauguration of Mudalier's temple, Jacob tells Thomas he has come to love India more than his own country. How does India change Walter? Is Thomas so altered?
10. There is a strong sense of the mystical in *The Pagoda Tree* and yet religion does not always help the characters. Among the Indian women, the power of the goddess is both a blessing and a curse. Walter privately curses the god he preaches to others. How is religion and faith depicted for the different characters?



11. Maya is drawn to the sea even as a child in Tanjore. At the novel's end, she finds herself in the English port city of Bristol. What is the final impression Maya makes? What do you think might be the next chapter in her story?
12. Suranita represents the ultimate legacy in the exchange of cultures. Like her mother, she has little control over her destiny. Discuss her fate – what will the future hold for her?
13. Despite the hardships of eighteenth-century India, despite war and famine, can you relate to some of the human dilemmas – such as grief, loss and thwarted love – portrayed in the novel? If so, how does immersing yourself in another period and culture through reading, feed into your own life?
14. *The Pagoda Tree* concludes with an additional Notes and Sources section, where Scobie shares some of what inspired her to write her book, and the historical basis of her story and of some of her characters. Did this enhance your reading of the novel? Discuss the art and challenges of fictionalising stories from history.