

TLC Showcase

BETHAN JAMES

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Introduction to 'The Lost Magician'

The *Lost Magician* is a high-concept historical and fantasy fiction crossover for adult readers. My passion for the Victorian era and my travels around China collided to provide the inspiration for this book, which is a magical twist on the Opium Wars. Set in an alternative nineteenth century Beijing and London, it's about strong women surviving in a man's world. Unusually, all the main characters are women. The novel is aimed at fans of books like Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, Rod Duncan's *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*, and (of course) the works of my writing hero, Neil Gaiman.

It's 1851 and Queen Victoria's magician is missing. Magic Wielder Angharad Anderson is the only power standing between victory and defeat in the British Empire's war against China. In London, aspiring journalist Emma Delaney joins forces with reckless pirate Madame Ching to find the magician. Together they uncover a deadly conspiracy...

I turned to The Literary Consultancy for help with polishing my novel in September after a bad experience with an editor who'd previously critiqued my work. It ended up taking said editor (who shall remain anonymous) six whole months to send over feedback on a short opening extract of only 3,000 words! Needless to say I decided that next time around I'd use a more professional service, and that's where TLC came in. I'd heard positive feedback at networking events from fellow authors, and followed the company on Twitter, so did some further research into what they offered. The flexibility of different price packages really appealed as I'm only on a part-time income, plus after being stung by the last editor, the promise of a feedback report within around 6 weeks was perfect.

The process was reassuringly smooth from start to finish, and I was especially impressed with the consideration Team TLC put into matching me with an appropriate reader. My genre of historical fiction, meets fantasy, meets alternative history isn't the most straightforward... in the end, I was delighted to be paired with reader Jane Adams.

I was incredibly pleased when an extensive manuscript assessment landed promptly into my inbox. Jane's constructive and thoughtful feedback encompassed both detailed critiques on a sentence level, as well as more over-arching comments on aspects like world-building and characterisation. Thoughts on structure were also useful, as *The Lost Magician* features an intricate plot which covers two continents and four point of view characters – so there's a delicate balancing act needed. My draft agent cover letter and synopsis were critiqued too.

Furthermore, I was given the opportunity to ask Jane bespoke questions as part of my assessment submission about my book, ranging from her thoughts on my title, to more in-depth queries around pacing and the market for my work. One of the main benefits of an assessment is that writers get helpful pointers on both the manuscript itself and the wider publishing industry context.

Whilst I've had friends, family, and fellow authors read over my novel, nothing is as useful as an objective opinion from someone outside your inner circle – a critical friend who's not out to flatter your ego, but constructively guide your work in progress. Without this, I don't think I would've realised that aspects of my main villain are a bit clichéd and need developing further. I would also have missed some narrative inconsistencies. Opportunities for showcasing your work like the one you're reading right now are priceless as well.

So, where next? My goal has always been to submit my novel to agents by the end of 2017, and secure representation in 2018. Thanks to TLC I don't just feel steps closer to this target, but whole leaps. From there, who knows. But the dream is to see my story published and feel the thrill when I spot it in a bookshop somewhere.

Extract from 'The Lost Magician' by Bethan James

CHAPTER ONE

Beijing, China

February 1851

Empress Cixi was a woman on a mission, but onlookers in the palace gardens would not have guessed this from the delicate footsteps she took in her silk shoes. The scroll Cixi had recently received from her Spy Chief was tucked into a sleeve of her fur-trimmed robe. A dragon was embroidered on its back. As she gripped the message, the Empress remembered she hadn't paid her usual morning visit to her baby son Zaichun and his wet nurse yet. It would simply have to wait.

The Gardens of Perfect Brightness lived up to their elegant name today, draped in dazzling white snow that reflected the winter sun. No appearance of urgency marred Cixi's pale face. Her fan-shaped headdress swayed as she passed beneath the covered walkway that meandered around the frozen lakes. A retinue of courtiers trailed behind, with government ministers flanking her and jostling for an audience. They were saying something tedious about British forces gathering in the South and one thousand kilos of smuggled opium being impounded in Guangzhou. However, Cixi was undertaking a duty of such importance herself she barely listened. She couldn't abide how they flapped their mouths like fat prize carp.

The Dowager Empress checked her bejewelled pocket watch. It had been a gift from an English diplomat to her late husband many years ago. Her long nails traced the path of a mechanical caterpillar, which nibbled its way around leaves of jade to signify the hours. It was now the period of the Snake. There was still time to resolve matters.

Cixi allowed the sweet songs of the swallows on nearby willow trees to drown out the wittering of her followers. Their wings were clipped so they could not fly home to warmer climes. The Empress noticed her most cherished automaton fluttering towards the flock: a kingfisher fashioned from amber and sapphires. It flew as nimbly as if it were made from sunbeams. The contraption had been yet another gift for her

husband from some big-nosed foreigner before the Opium Wars – and before the British acquired magic and found no need to create clockwork curios anymore.

The creature continued to glide gracefully, even as the flesh and blood birds attacked it with razored beaks. Metallic joints were imperceptible as it swooped to snatch a fly it could never eat. The other birds did not like this thing which looked like them, but was swifter, brighter, more beautiful. Its song remained unbroken and eventually the swallows gave up on their assault and flew back to the willow that was draped in a cape of snow. They would not survive the cold for much longer.

The courtiers behind the Empress noticed her observing the birds, and each attempted to out-enthruse the others with feigned delight. The animals, the gifts, the people. All were trifles in comparison to the one thing Cixi truly desired. It was her son who held the divine mandate from the Gods: how dare an insignificant grain of an island like Britain claim the only magician for itself?

Cixi continued past the Western-style Mansions, and remembered it was here that she played a game with her eunuch advisor and greatest ally Dehai not long after seizing the throne. She made him guess her favourite place in the Imperial Gardens. It was neither the Apricot Blossom Orchard, nor the Library of Collected Fragrances. It was not the Jade Terraces beside the lotus ponds either. The only place Cixi felt truly herself was the Red Cells sealed one hundred feet beneath them. Dehai had guessed correctly.

She shivered and pulled the yellow robe closer to her skin. Cixi was now heading towards the underground prison to pay an urgent visit to an old acquaintance. Who better for the mission in hand than her captive in the Red Cells, Madame Ching? Some called Ching the Queen of the Pirates, others Scourge of the South China Sea. To catch the most dangerous of prey, one needed the most ruthless of hunters. This was another game that Cixi very much looked forward to playing.

The Empress was soon wrenched from her reverie by one particularly insistent voice in her ear.

‘Gracious one, I implore you.’ A minister had dared to walk in front to secure her attention. ‘Famine is coming to these lands. There are ministries of War, of Sacred Rites, of Punishments and of Great Works, yet no special division for Agriculture. Please allow me the honour of establishing one.’

Cixi continued along the path and observed this insolent worm who thought himself worthy to tell an Empress how to run her own nation. It was Minister Li. His emerald robe had a round insignia bearing the symbol of grain.

'My people will never starve,' she countered, waving her hand to signal for him to step aside. 'We have new varieties of rice from the south and new crops such as maize from the Americas. So you will not get your special division.'

Li wore a peacock plume in his black hat, a sign that he had been a favourite of her late husband.

'I wonder what Empress Zhen would've counselled—'

'Enough. Do not mention that name. I will not discuss this further. I have a far more important task to attend to concerning one of my prisoners,' Cixi said, 'and I am on my way to visit the Red Cells.'

The shuffling footsteps of her retinue halted abruptly at the mention of the Cells. Colour drained from the face of a handmaiden, her pallid complexion resembling that of a wandering ghost. Murmurs rippled through the courtiers until shudders of unease had spread all the way to the attendants at the back. Cixi continued onwards and saw that it was beginning to snow again.

'The Red Cells are too dangerous for you,' Minister Li declared, keeping his footsteps in rhythm with hers along the walkway. 'Please permit me to go down there in your place, Empress.'

The Dowager had no intention of letting this upstart peasant know what she was planning.

'I rule over millions of subjects, thousands of soldiers, and have overseen the construction of hundreds of acres of palace gardens. Yet you think me incapable of walking down some steps. Should I be insulted, Minister?'

'Forgive me,' Li said, as they approached a gateway flanked by stone lions. 'No offence was intended, my gracious lady, I simply fear for your safety. The most dangerous criminals in all of this land are kept in the Cells.'

Cixi's hand slipped down to her side where an iron key hung on her belt.

'You are still so young, noble Empress,' the minister continued. 'Please allow me to use my wisdom to aid you in this task – may I enquire as to what it is that you seek exactly?'

'No. I will not leave such a vital mission to an amateur like yourself. You are all dismissed.'

Li responded by bowing deeply, swiftly hiding the anger that flared on his face. He disguises his slight well, Cixi thought, I must watch out for this dragon camouflaged as a pet lizard. She proceeded through the gates alone.

It was rumoured that the Red Cells were named for the blood of prisoners that permanently stained their floors. However, the more scholarly ministers at court insisted the moniker originated from the watchtower clad in crimson tiles that stood above the entrance. Chambers sprouted off tunnels that took root downward into caverns as dark as a winter's night. The furthest room at the bottom of the deepest root held the most feared of all the captives. Madame Ching. The jailers had implored Cixi not to approach, though none dare defy her wishes.

The Empress knew the pirate queen was ruthless and arrogant, but she was also no fool. Ching had manoeuvred herself into leadership of the entire Red Flag Fleet by the age of thirty. She would listen to what the Dowager was proposing even if she longed to rip off her head at same time. It helped that Cixi had what remained of the pirates' crew members imprisoned at her mercy. The Empress was no fool either.

Cixi was accompanied by half a dozen guards, whose double crescent blades at the end of long staffs could restrain the captive if necessary.

'We've removed the prisoner from the cramped solitary confinement quarters, Empress, so that you can keep a safe distance,' a jailer whispered into Cixi's ear, before beckoning her to follow.

It took three brawny guards to slide away the iron bolt barring the cell door. The jailer stepped forward bearing a flaming torch, which illuminated a room around ten feet square that was lined with slime-slicked boulders for walls. In the middle sat a cross-legged figure.

Madame Ching's limbs were draped in thick chains that seemed more suited to anchoring a ship than restraining a person. A matted ponytail hung like frayed rope down her shoulder, with stray hairs clinging across the teak skin of her face. The pirate wore a long tunic over trousers which Cixi assumed had once been white cotton. They were now rags grimed with two years' worth of sweat and dirt and decay.

'It is such a pleasure to see you again, Madame Ching. I believe the last time we met you were being paraded through my palace clapped in irons.' Cixi withdrew a bottle of jasmine fragrance from her robe to mask the odour of rotting flesh that drifted in from the cell opposite. 'That memorable welcome was the least we could do for you after your fleet plundered half of my Imperial Navy.'

The prisoner remained cross-legged. Beneath the layers of crusted filth and tangled hair, Ching's ivory-coloured teeth flashed in the dim cell like a tiger's fangs. Cixi realised she was grinning.

CHAPTER TWO

London, England

April 1851

Emma woke at sunrise as she did every day, with clockwork precision. She plunged her hands into the basin on the dressing table and splashed her face with a cascade of cool water. Then, as usual, she spent an eternity agonising over what to wear, even though Emma owned so few dresses her wardrobe was currently being used as a makeshift bookcase.

Today was a particularly difficult decision. If she was interviewing for a position as a governess, or some other vaguely respectable job, it would have been easy enough to guess the appropriate clothing. But this was different. In the end, Emma settled on a gingham dress that was the closest to hand, as the drafts of her attic lodgings began to wind themselves around her thin frame. The fireplace hadn't seen so much as a spark for days.

Emma stopped in front of the mirror to fix her unruly hair. She must try her best to look respectable today. Chestnut curls poked out in every direction in place of the smooth ringlets she longed for. She put her bonnet on to hide them and was grateful for how its curves also masked part of her face. Even in a city as vast as London, she couldn't take any chances – what if someone from back home was on a visit to the capital, and recognised her?

About the Writer

Bethan James is from Wales and works as an Account Manager for a book publicity agency in London. Her short stories have been published in several anthologies and magazines, including Litro, and she was a winner in Neil Gaiman & Word Factory's Fables for a Modern World competition. Bethan was shortlisted for the 2016 London Book Fair Trailblazer Award, which recognises rising stars under 30 in publishing. She received New Writing South's New Buds Award, and is a Faber Academy and Arvon course alumna. Bethan was also longlisted for the TLC Pen Factor Writing Competition this Summer.



An Earl Grey drinker, book lover, and identical twin, she can be found Tweeting @thebethanjames