



Dr. Pam Macintyre interview with
Alison Goodman - author of

The Two Pearls of Wisdom

Also: *Singing the Dogstar Blues*
Killing the Rabbit

Alison Goodman

PM: Your previous speculative novel *Singing the Dogstar Blues* was (partly) set in an imagined future Melbourne, extrapolating from the known. This one is in an imagined past in another culture. Why such a dramatic shift?

AG: I basically go where the story goes, and this story was set in the past. It was about the masquerade, which I have always loved reading about. *Singing the Dog Star Blues* was an extrapolation of what we know – a ‘what if?’ That’s what science fiction is about. *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* was about creating a strong sensory world which was luscious and rich. That was one of the challenges: not a new world, but one based in Imperial China and Japan, a mixture of cultures. I didn’t want it to be tied down to a particular time or place. The environment for this book was serving the story; it is part of the story, and is based on feng shui. This is fantasy, alternative world, speculative fiction. If the story fits in that genre I will use the conventions of the genre but not slavishly. And genre is such a slippery sucker of a word anyway.

Pm: Where did the interest in all things Eastern come from? Did it offer you particular possibilities as a writer?

AG: There has been an Asian influence in my life. My aunty was Japanese and brought her culture into the family. When visiting the family as a child, instead of lollies there would be seaweed sticks and Japanese food. Even though it was Australianised there were etiquettes which were observed. It piqued my interest, though not at the time; it seemed very normal. But thinking about it now, it did influence me. It was something exotic in a very Anglo Australian life style and I felt very attracted to it.

In *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* I wanted to create a culture that was bound by etiquette and I wanted that to symbolise the restrictions on the main character.

She is bound by the expectations of what a female can do in that society. And what she's forced to do, in order to do what she wants to do.

PM; And why dragons? Has your interest come out of a tradition of fantasy or the culture of the East.

AG: It's a bit of both. I was a big Anne McCaffrey fan, although the dragons in her books are very different from the ones I've created. Nor did I want to create a pet dragon. I wanted an elemental being bound by certain things to a human Dragoneye. It came out of my enjoyment in all things dragon, and my desire to create my own dragons. They are heavily influenced by the Eastern dragon, not Western dragons. They are not ravaging; they are nurturers...or so we think!

PM: You demand much from your readers, plunging them straight into the ceremony without explanation. You are placing a lot of trust in them that they will go with until you make the patterns clearer.

AG: It's the way I write. I do ask a lot of my readers, early. This is not a cookie-cutter fantasy book. This is going to have some challenging stuff. I personally like being plunged into a story, as such a book respects me as an intelligent reader and says 'trust me'. If you have confidence in the authority of the writing you will trust that the explanations will come when they are needed, and then you can get caught up in the excitement of the first few pages or maybe the chapter. You are in the hands of someone who will give you the information when required. It's about the placement and the timing of when that information comes. Give me some action. Give me a protagonist about whom I can say 'hey I want to follow this person's journey'. That's what I like to read, so that's what I write.

PM: One of the most compelling features of a fantasy novel is the world building. *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* is breathtaking in its elaborate and detailed world building. Where did it come from? How did you plan it and how did you keep it so consistent and real?

AG: The word 'plan' is quite loose. I wish I had planned a bit more. I did trip up a couple of times, which we found and fixed at the editing stage. The consistency was as much as I could get without driving myself mad. The world is quite detailed and I worked hard to make sure it is consistent.

I write from beginning to end, from chapter one right through to chapter whatever it is, because I want to write a compelling, suspense adventure story. I believe that if I am gripped as I write, then most probably the reader will be gripped too. The world-building is one of the most challenging parts, and the most enjoyable. I'm not a writer who likes to put in slabs of description. I like to seed it in. We have a character that is born into this culture, so she is not going to be startled by a lot of things in her everyday life. But because she is moving into a new milieu, and an opulent milieu, she can be overcome by the sheer opulence and decadence of the society she is entering, the Imperial Court. So I was allowed to say 'touch this'; 'what does that feel like?'; 'taste this'. One of the scenes I enjoyed writing is when Eon overeats: course after course of very rich food which, as a malnourished drudge, she had never tasted before.

So part of it was planned and part was organic. The mechanism of the dragons and how they are connected to the Chinese horoscope was planned. The

buildings were organic. When we did the map I had to go through the manuscript and work out what I'd said so I could build the map from that, not being a natural mapmaker.

PM: How much research did it involve and how did you balance the 'borrowed' and the invented?

AG: There was a lot of research, for example into eunuchs and their role in the Imperial Palace. I also travelled to Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and went to museums. When I could, I touched artifacts, felt them. I also did a lot of eating – an excellent part of the job. There was a lot of sensory research, but the cornerstone of research is reading academic and non academic texts, especially about feng shui and the horoscopes.

I use the research as a springboard. I feel like a magpie picking up bits of shiny information. It is to do with what resonates with the story. I don't put a piece of research in just because I found it. If it doesn't push the story forward it doesn't go in. This is a fiction book and it's about weaving the research in to be part of that push, that profluence.

PM: Did you make up the movements that are based on the ceremonial forms?

AG: Yes and no. They are kind of based on the animal forms in Tai Chi. They are also based on the animal forms on the zodiac and how they would fight: the tiger claws, the goat butts, for example, so they are the kinds of form that come from each animal.

PM: One of the themes of the book is female identity and the place of female in society and female power. Are you suggesting that the world needs a season of ascendant women?

AG: Am I suggesting that? Not consciously. I was exploring the idea of what happens when someone powerless becomes powerful and that comes out very much in the second book, which is called *The Necklace of the Gods*. In *The Two Pearls of Wisdom*, the story is about a young woman who comes into her power and what that means. What is her power? So the next book will be exploring what happens to that power in the hands of someone who hasn't had power before. As a fiction writer I am an explorer. Why this female power got suppressed is one of the promises of the story. It's a power of the Mirror Dragon and she is an elemental female power, a wild power, a base power, and just what that is has yet to come out.

PM: Another theme in this book, which may be developed or altered in the second one is that knowledge, wisdom, tolerance (as symbolised by the Emperor) can't stand against might and brute physical strength as represented by Sethon.

AG: I think in this book, wisdom and tolerance are getting a battering. But there is the Resistance, and to me this represents the sense that you can batter us to the ground, but we will still pop up and still fight. It's quite fair to say in the first book there is a sense that knowledge and tolerance are under threat by ambition and a need for power.

PM: Rereading the book I saw all the hints of the Mirror Dragon being female and I wondered how I did not see them the first time.

AG: That was one of my challenges. One must play fair as a writer. I don't want to be accused of not playing fair, so the hints are there. A constant concern was, am I being too heavy with the hints, am I being too subtle? This is a society that is very focused on the male and to slide in the truth of things was quite challenging, and I was concerned about coming in with a sledge hammer. It goes back to what we assume about the hero in the story. What are the assumptions we come with? The assumption in the story is that power is male, particularly as all the other dragons are 'he'. Why would the Mirror Dragon be female? I was hoping to draw people into that thinking. You, the reader, are assuming too as did the society.

PM: Lady Dela is a fascinating character, a brilliant invention. Where did she come from? Were there such 'contraire's' in China's Imperial Court?

AG: Lady Dela is an invention and she came from being a character mirror to Eon. She is the other outsider. Ryko is an outsider but an insider/outsider in that he is part of the Imperial Court. What happens to Dela is a reminder to the reader of what may happen to Eon. Lady Dela has the protection of the Emperor and yet still she is attacked.

You will be surprised where the word came from. I have always been fascinated by the movie *Little Big Man*, and, a 'contraire' in the Indian culture in that movie had to do everything backwards because of a crime they had committed. That was their punishment: the contraire. When I was looking for a word to describe Lady Dela, that word came up. I'm using it in a different way and in a different culture. I don't know whether there was such an acceptance of a transsexual within the Imperial court. I don't think so because the eunuchs had an ambiguous status. Lady Dela was a gift from the Eastern Tribes, a hostage really. The Eastern Tribes come into the second book quite a bit. They are living in the stronghold of the Mirror Dragon's power, which has been suppressed for so long and they have become an outside tribe themselves because their slice of the country is barren up until this point. Lady Dela is an invention and I am very fond of her.

PM: You allow her a keen sense of irony and she seems not as cowed as others in the court.

AG: It's one of her defences. She has made herself a protocol expert to survive, to have a use at the court. She is like pet of the Emperor, under his protection. She is a very intelligent person, and her ironic distance is about surviving.

PM: Eona is very conscious of her body, her physical deformity and its challenges, how food makes her feel, etc – is this part of her power?

AG: That is all she has – her body and her mind. She has been poor, a drudge. It's also the way she has to meet the world. She is hiding her body. She is very aware of her senses, of how she has to move to cloak her female side. This super-sensitivity to what is male and female in movement shifted her into the realm of being very sensitive to her movement through the environment, her bodily

existence. It was also a way of underpinning that sensory world – a way into her world

PM: Why have the Master cripple Eona? That was a bit of a shock.

AG: Was it a bit of a shock? Good! It came out of reading about how wise women in English or French villages in medieval times had their hips broken so that they were lame and wouldn't wander far from the village they were servicing. A way of controlling someone's physical movement is by making them lame. Then I thought how did her hip get broken? And I thought her hips being broken is symbolic of her femininity, because our hips, pelvises are the seat of femininity and it became interesting for me to explore who broke it, how it was broken and why it was broken.

PM: Chart seems destined for greater things.

AG: Chart is another mirror to Eon and his story continues in the second book. I need to finish his story. He was a bit of surprise to me when he came into it. I write in a way that the major plot beats are set out, but everything in between is up for grabs. Chart is going to be a bigger part than I thought. I know I have to complete that story for my satisfaction and the reader's satisfaction, as this is a character that quickly becomes dear to your heart, I think. There were many challenges writing him. He has a role in the book as a balance to Eon, but he also has to have a strong and individual character, not just be representative of something. I think the words 'cheerfully lewd' are the words that best describe him.

PM: Tell me about that other compelling character – Ido.

AG: Ido is a mixture of Callan, Avon from *Blake's Seven* and every Georgette Heyer hero. I was trying for that charisma that villainy can sometimes have, unfortunately. He is a drug user in a big way. What happens to him is very interesting. In the second book there is a bit of a triangle happening. A young woman who has been suppressing her femininity is thrust into a situation where her femininity is prized and that is shocking for her. She finds herself in the middle of a violent triangle.

PM: Relationships are shadowy and hinted at, rather than explicit, such as The Master and Eona, Lady Dela and Ryko, Eona and the Prince Kygo. Is this because there is more to come?

AG: It explodes in Book 2! *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* is about a person fighting for survival so the finer things of life are not her prime directive (to quote Star Trek), which is to survive and to make allies and to do it in away that comes across as male. So her response to Prince Kygo has to be constrained. Although she is attracted to him quite physically, she has to pull back. He thinks she is a Moon Shadow, a male castrated before puberty.

Lady Dela and Ryko. What a tragedy in the making! I have to say at this moment I have no idea what is to happen with those two. Things happen to Ryko in the second book that change his life and what does that do to the blossoming

relationship? Obviously Lady Dela loves Ryko but we don't know how he feels about her.

The Master/Eona relationship is one the American publishers wanted to pull out and I said no as it is so obvious that there would be an attraction. Besides, it is not played out. It's important that it is not acted upon. It's about how important this masquerade is to both of them. He has her in his power; he is her owner, and he could abuse her with impunity. But he respects her – he is asking her to act as a male, and so he will act with her as a male so as not to put the masquerade at risk. He would like to sleep with her but he doesn't.

PM: Eon experiences powerful grief when The Master dies.

AG: The challenge when you are writing grief is not to bring the reader down too far and to keep the action going, so I decided to do it in small vignettes. The death of the master affected her deeply. It is a slower, more poignant part of the book.

PM: Eona's story in this book is about failing rather than winning, and the positives that can come out of failure. Is that a fair comment?

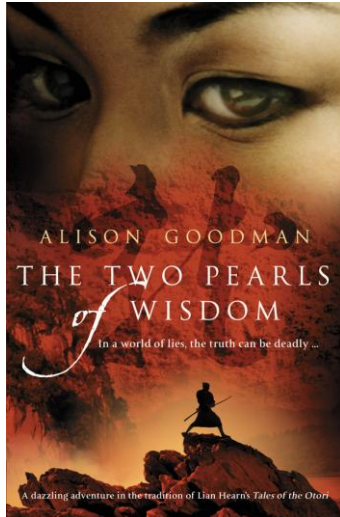
AG: I think she gets there in the end. She constantly fails to do what she sets out to do, which creates greater risks for her. In storytelling terms that is a mighty fine thing, but in terms of the character, she is an exceptional survivor – she adapts, she can't say she's had enough and reveal that she is a girl. She is driven.

PM: You are not shy about action and violence.

AG: It is a tough world and the violence is there and necessary, because Eona is acting as a male in a world that respects violent ways of dealing with things. Kinra's swords are female rage. And from that idea grew a lot of Kinra's background. I enjoy writing action scenes and took Chinese sword lessons to feel the heft of the blades, the movement, the figure eight that is part of the form. There had to be a face off between Eon and Ido and it had to be physical. To get it you have to build up the action sequences to that face off.

PM: What about the ending, which is also a beginning?

AG: Can you change someone or must it come from within? How changed is Ido? How much is Eona mistrusting her own change? Will the healing of her hip last? She doesn't trust her own magic yet. I am interested in power and how it is used, and exploring the power of the physical body.



THE TWO PEARLS *of* WISDOM

ALISON GOODMAN

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Teaching Notes prepared by Dr. Pam Macintyre

The Eternal Questions according to Natalie Babbitt are: Who am I? How did I get here? What is the meaning of life? Can I make my way through it alone? Must death be the final end?

(Babbitt, 1987, p.29)

These questions make a rich starting point to explore this fascinating, complex and intriguing story set in a mythical world; a patriarchal, hierarchical world that has been intricately built by the author in a rich assembly of architecture, lore, colour, etiquette and most of all characters. It is also a world of intrigue, machinations, dissembling and above all, the getting and exercising of power. Goodman plunges the reader into this universe, trusting that the compelling combination of the familiarity provided by resonances with China and Japan, and the intriguing strangeness of a universe not our own will carry the reader into the story. And the trust is well placed.

The novel is an adventure rich in incident and action as we follow the fortunes of crippled Eon, a girl disguised as a boy by her ambitious Master, in his attempt to have her become a Dragoneye, a human handler of one of the twelve elemental, mythical beasts whose control of Hua, the life force can be harnessed to change the course of nature. During the selection ceremony, Eon awakens the Mirror Dragon, not seen for hundreds of years. This dragon selects her as Dragoneye precipitating her into the Imperial Court and direct conflict with the ruthless and powerful, Lord Ido.

To add to the complications, Eon is seen as the saviour of the Imperial Court by a group called The Resistance, which is working to keep the kingdom in the hands of the current royal family and out of a potential, cruel usurper, Lord Sethon. What Eon hasn't revealed to any of them is that she has no dragon power: she did not 'meld' properly with her dragon during the ceremony. So the reader, with Eon, wonders how long she can juggle the various masquerades, and the expectations on her – a poor girl thrust into a Court of high etiquette and clever manipulators, particularly powerful ones who want to see her fail.

- Such **world building** feeds the reader's fascination with the imagined world, which is like ours but not. It provides a valuable way of thinking and talking about the narrative. This is a rich, involving fantasy of the Dragoneyes, full of lore and a rich palette of culture and geography, ritual and society – a tantalising mixture of Chinese and Japanese geography and custom and original creations of the author's. Goodman has given the reader a plan to follow to locate events, but also to understand the structure of the society. The following are a few elements to examine, but readers can find what fascinates them.
 - The positions at the ceremony (pp74-82)
 - *Dragon lore*: It is forbidden to use Dragons in warfare; they are agents of nurture and protection (p74).
 - A Pearl of Dragons – the complete circle (p177), the first time in 500 years that there has been the twelve of them.
 - If a Dragoneye kills all of the other Dragoneyes and their apprentices then the energy of all twelve will channel through him (p189).
 - Dragons have elemental power – Dragoneyes use up their Hua to control it.
 - String of Pearls joins the energy of all the dragons into one devastating force (p 237).
 - The Dragoneyes – why do we so readily accept their power? What are their functions – (p 44) manipulating earth energies for the good of the Empire.
 - Staminata: control of Hua through meditation and controlled movement. Lin Hua, (good) Gan Hua (bad).
 - The Council.
 - The story robe.
 - The grieving rituals and funeral customs. What does this respect for the dead suggest about this society? (pp244-5)
 - The food.
 - The plan (preliminary pages) could be enlarged and used to map events and to fill in the detail for the visually adept, or be scanned into a computer as the basis for a three dimensional representation of the court buildings.
 - The diagram of the Twelve Dragons could be expanded to include what you imagine their positions to be from the descriptions of the ceremony. Also what their colours and tastes are. This is a very sensual world.
 - This is complex society that on the one hand is hierarchical, patriarchal, violent, oppressive and racist (pp12-13, 16, 63) for

example, yet is also one that values learning and scholarship. For example, the library, which contains 'every subject known to man', and the librarian, Prahm, who is devoted to the scholarly life (p161). Are these contradictions unique to this world, or are there contemporary resonances as you read?

- Food: consider how much food could be contemporary, such as sweet buns, shark fin, (p126) tea and moon cakes, cinnamon pastries, (pp139) – the banquet. And the description of Eon drinking chocolate for the first time. This is a wonderful description that could be used as a model for writing (p107).
 - The harem (pp154) is part of the Imperial Court, but the Emperor loves Lady Jila. What does this suggest about him – that he is a modern man? A weak man?
 - In the harem, the women practise musical instruments and are educated. Is this an enlightened society? For example, Eona says she did not know ladies could be educated (pp162-163).
 - **Imperial Court:** Hierarchy, etiquette.
 - Pavilion of Earthly Enlightenment – (p162) 'all who enter are equal in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. Eon thinks it is unnatural – even slaves have ranks. Is Goodman suggesting a hierarchical society is inevitable? For example, the irony of Prahm being ordered out of 'the room of equality'(p166).
 - **Politics** There is much gamesmanship in the Imperial Court: (p127) such as Eon being given Lord Ido's family's gift to the Emperor.
 - Consider the views of isolationism versus opening up the country (p163). Will it dilute the culture, or enrich it? What are Eona's beliefs – search throughout the novel. Is this similar to Australia's policy of multiculturalism? What sort of country would we be without immigration?
 - P174 Ido's plot to overthrow the emperor and replace him with Sethon.
- Another approach would be looking at the novel in terms of the **hero**, especially as Eon/Eona is such an intriguing hero: she is a girl masquerading as a boy, as Lord Eon, and as someone with power she does not have. Many trials are put in front of Eon/Eona that would daunt lesser, fully complete heroes.

Joseph Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines the stages of the mythological hero's journey, and identifying these in *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* would provide a rich way of examining the narrative, the way the author is inviting the reader to share the journey, and highlighting the careful construction of the world and the story. The pattern according to Campbell is separation, adventure, return:

- *The call to adventure:* 'destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown'. Accepting the call means the rite of separation.

- *The herald*: summons the hero to cross a threshold – from the real world into mystery, life to death, waking state to dream.
- *Protective figures or charms or talismans*: ‘symbols of the benign, protective power of destiny’ without whom or which the hero could not survive the trials of adventure.
- *Trials*: facing the confusions, terrors, dangers and pains that stand between the hero and achievement of spiritual growth; or lessons to be learned, before. The central quest is to find the name of the mirror dragon
- *The hero's return*: having survived the trials the hero is free to return to the real world, to re-cross the threshold bringing new knowledge.
- *Refusal to return*: suggests that for the hero reality is not worth returning to.
- This frame could be put around the narrative structure of, and sequence of events in, the story. For instance, identify all the tests that Eon/Eona has to undergo and survive. Consider the significance of Eon and what is attached to her seeing all the dragons and the return of the Mirror Dragon. Is this too much of a burden? (p135, p136) – the ‘fevered belief’ in her. Are they naïve, or do they know something she doesn’t?

A third approach is through the richly created characters, especially the atypical hero/heroine who is in disguise and maimed.

Eon/Eona

Stages in her life:

Before and during the ceremony:

- What do we make of Eon as a character? Perhaps not what we expect? We know from the beginning that she is special in that she can see all the dragons. What do we predict from this? (p4) She is disliked, even feared. Why?
- She has a double disguise as a boy and then as a ‘Moon shadow’.
- P7: she is sixteen but disguised as twelve. She makes enormous sacrifices to her training. She suppresses her femininity. Are there parallels to elite sportspeople now?
- P11: her special powers. Alert readers might pick up the hints as to what is to come. Or a subsequent read could identify the clues the author has placed in the text.
- Why is having a deformity important? What does the author want us to consider? How does her deformity operate symbolically in the novel?
- P13 and page 19 give us glimpses of her past through memories. Perhaps put these together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle to see what the whole reveals.
- P31: the Master doesn’t understand why he tested a girl. Is there some higher power operating?
- P42-3: her friendship with Chart and the painting she does for him. Is it just that she identifies with his disability or does it suggest something about her character?

- P51: the Master says that being a cripple has proved useful – what might he mean?
- P55: Eon has drawn four, an unlucky number; everything seems to be against her.
- P56: the armsman says the swords are ‘powerful luck bringers’ another hint – the swords have a silver moon crescent on them, moon being the seat of female power, and Eon tastes rage and fear when she handles them – ‘They must have very old energy’ says the armsman.
- P78: who or what is giving her instructions in her mind?
- Pp84 - she has enormous courage and inner strength to make the bow. Is this her first test?

After the ceremony, at the court: does power change her?

- She is precipitated to the highest order in the land below the Imperial family. It seems she is in the hands of destiny. How active is Eon in shaping her fate?
- Eon says (p 115)– ‘perhaps I just can’t remember how to act like a girl’. Is that her most important task in the scheme of the novel?
- P116 she talks of the ‘accident’ and recollects the man with the tattooed face looming over her.
- P146 she realizes she cannot call her dragon, and on p152 whispers her true name but still it doesn’t come. Why not?
- Importance of the verse – why does Ido’s head ‘snap up’?
- P157 – her friendship with Kygo at the behest of Lady Jila. Do you predict what might eventuate?
- P197 dresses herself in Lady Dela’s bracelets etc and feels energy booming in her.
- P198 ‘a female Dragoneye was a travesty for everything that was natural in the world’. Is this true? Ironical?
- P203 Eon becomes hopes of the Resistance, while living at the Court.

Prince Kygo

- P158 Kygo says he values friendship and love. Is this ‘too womanly’ as he thinks? Does that then position the reader as favourable to him, as female things are being valued?

The Master

- What do you make of him? What are his motivations for Eon? Are they purely selfish? Has he come to love her?
- P110 Is he driven by power alone? Or by a desire to ‘hobble Ido’s ambitions’? Is that about altruism or revenge?
- p110 when he touches Eon’s breast he is ‘burned’. Does she have a protective female power?
- P112 what does he mean ‘that is how it must be’?
- P178 ‘He had waited years for this return to wealth and power. I could almost feel the triumph humming through his body’. What does this tell us about him?

Lady Dela

- P 114 She is a Contraire – a man who lives as a woman: the body of man with a woman's spirit. A Contraire has two souls: male and female. She has both Sun and Moon energy and is thought to bring luck to the Eastern tribes only. She is barely tolerated at court, and is attacked.
- Is she only a supporter of Eon because her existence at court depends on the Emperor being in power? Are there any genuine friendships at the Court, or only alliances?
- P199 she explains her impulses as a child
- P200 she thinks women have power but that it is different from men's. Eon can only see suffering in womanhood. Who is right do you think?

Rilla Chart's mother

- Is she loyal to the Master only because he tolerates Chart? And why does he?
- Is she loyal to Eon only because she fears the consequences (p105)?
- There is a calm dignity about her isn't there?
- The author says she acts a mother figure to Eona. Do you agree?

Emperor

- P18 He appears to be a good man but not an especially wise one to allow Lord Sethon to gain power. Why do you think he allowed Sethon to live? Is there wisdom in the old practices that he ignores at his peril?

Lord Ido

- He is threatening when we first meet him, and according to the Master he is 'treacherous and unpredictable' (p 49).
- P63-4 He tramples on protocol, is physically powerful, ruthless arrogant. The picture of him is as very masculine – violent, self-seeking – all the negative masculine traits. Is this a fair reading of him?
- p64 Eon sees his shrivelled compassion – but it is still there. How significant is this?
- P176 Eona says of him 'Lord Ido was one of those who took his pleasure in the fear and pain of others.' And yet she is susceptible to his charm isn't she?
- P180- He is out of control. Is he a thug? A megalomaniac? A drug-taker whose judgment and sense of reality is vastly skewed?
- P183 Dillon says he thinks Ido is insane. Is he?
- What do you make of his transformation at the end. Do you trust it?

Ryko – Shadow Man

- p201 Ryko was a thief, got knifed and was saved by a fisherman. He then joined the resistance to Sethon's controlling of the islands.
- Lady Dela clearly loves him but his emotional attachments are enigmatic. How do you read him?

Chart

- p -7 born to one of the unmarried maids. Could The Master be his father? Consider his transformation in the novel from a pitiable being always on his mat near the stoves, to a property owner. His physical state allows him to mask a shrewd intelligence – to his advantage.
- Eon sees this person beyond the disability. What does this suggest about her?

A fourth approach can be the exploration of central ideas:

- Male and female power, identity and behaviour is a large part of the novel. For example (p115) Eona feels a male spirit in her: 'A fierceness that whittled me down to a sharpened spear of ambition. And as a boy, I was applauded, not punished for such raw energy. It was not beaten out of me for my own good, or worn away by women's chores'. Is it any different in the contemporary world?
- The position of women in the society: 'women did not have power. Or, if they did it was from the shapeliness of their body. Not from their spirit. And certainly not from their mind' (p 31) Is this real or default power? Also (p50) I knew by intuition – the irrational knowledge only claimed by women'. Is the author being ironic?
- Differences between male and female – (p116) what she had to learn to be a boy. What do you think? Is there more freedom for boys still, in our society?
- The male gaze (p116) and the idea of 'temporary possession'. The way that women can learn to use it (p117) Is it apparent still – consider advertising.
- Woman Script (p141). It is very old. Why is female power ancient? And why has it been stolen or subdued?
- Although Eon has her glimpses of her past (p141) and being taught by her mother, she suppresses anything female.
- Question: 'How can we know a man's heart? How can we know if he means us ill or good?' (p164). Discuss.
- Discuss what is meant by: 'fear made misers of us all' (p 58); 'a man's true character is revealed in defeat. I thought it was also revealed in victory' (p 266)
- **The Ceremony**
- P72 the arena and thousands of men – no mention of women
- P78 the power in the swords – what is it telling Eon?
- P80 Eon is defeated by a ruthless Ranne who breaks the rules. Why do they hate her so?
- P85 Eon can see all the dragons. How do you feel when Eon fails. Had you predicted that she would? Why/Why not?
- P95 What is happening with the mirror Dragon? Why won't Eon reveal her name and what does it mean that the Dragon knows she is female?

Research: For some readers, reading such a text prompts a desire to know more, and they might like to find out about feng shui, the Chinese zodiac and the ancient Chinese and Japanese societies that have inspired the author.

Related reading

Women in disguise

The Song of the Lioness series by Tamora Pierce.

Here Lies Arthur by Philip Reeve

Damaged hero

Garth Nix's *Keys to the Kingdom* series.

Michael Pryor's *Laws of Magic* series

Dragons

Anne McCaffrey *Dragonsong* series

Ursula Le Guin *A Wizard of Earthsea*; *The Tombs of Atuan*; *The Farthest Shore*;

Tehanu: The Other Wind

Carole Wilkinson's *Dragonkeeper*; *Garden of the Purple Dragon*; *Dragon Moon*

View

Callan (BBC) and *Blake's 7* (BBC) as mentioned by the author to see if you can see the links.