As the saying goes, patience is a virtue. However, Patricia Powell’s novel, *The Pagoda*, will test how virtuous you really are. But, if you have been gifted with even the slightest bit of patience and willpower, then the satisfaction of reading an astoundingly intricate, perplexing, and extraordinary tale will be your sweet reward.

Set in the late nineteenth century on the island of Jamaica, *The Pagoda* focuses on the multi-faceted life of the immigrant Chinese shopkeeper, Mr. Lowe. Having fled his home country in an escape from revolution, poverty, and an arranged marriage, Lowe carves himself a small niche in the predominantly black village of Manchester. He strives to raise his young daughter Elizabeth while meagerly running his shop, which also serves as their home. Cecil, a man whom Lowe “befriended” on the ship during his passage from China to Jamaica, introduces Lowe to Miss Sylvie, a wealthy and white landowner. The two are wed and Lowe and his daughter move into Miss Sylvie’s large home on the hill overlooking the town. Though this may seem a fairy tale ending, events unfold and transpire and secrets are revealed that produce a vision of humanity that is as far from bliss as one can imagine.

*The Pagoda* begins approximately thirty years after these base settings have transpired. Lowe continues to live with Miss Sylvie and still ekes out a meager living running his small shop, which serves as the nightly gathering place for the village people to drink rum, reminisce, and tell stories as well as secrets. It has been twenty years since Elizabeth left to marry a man whom Lowe “disliked so much that he’d refused to meet him in person all these years”, and neither he nor Elizabeth have spoken since. Faced by his aging body and ailing health, Lowe aspires to write Elizabeth in hopes of amending their broken relationship. His aspirations are quickly pushed aside, however, when his shop is burned to the ground, with Cecil inside. This solitary act sets in motion a deluge of conflicts between Lowe and the villagers, Miss Sylvie, Elizabeth, and more predominantly, himself. With the only diversion to his troubled life, along with the person responsible for his masquerade, now lying in ashes; Lowe is forced to confront his past, his dreams, and the secret which he has been harboring all these years.
Powell develops Lowe’s character through snippets of information and flashbacks that culminate in the revelation of secrets and hidden truths. Lowe periodically returns in memories to his childhood days in China and the delightful relationship he shared with his father, who had been so loving and open with him until “he turned thirteen and puberty struck.” The relationship between them subsequently fractures and is the center of angst that all of Lowe’s other conflicts and troubles revolve around. Lowe’s character is riddled with lies, masquerades, broken dreams, ineptness, and frustration; and all of these feelings are effectively transferred from the page to the reader. Through Mr. Lowe, Powell has crafted a multi-dimensional character that pleads for sympathy as much as it causes frustration. The landscape of *The Pagoda* is dotted with a multitude of themes throughout the novel. While she interjects with themes of racial relations, familial obligations, and community; the focus of the novel is on gender roles, identity and transcending across one’s imposed and self-imposed boundaries.

The character of Miss Sylvie portrays an effective transcendence across the boundaries imposed upon women in the latter half of the nineteenth century by becoming an independent, wealthy, and powerful landowner. Miss Sylvie is forced to confront the past littered with wrong choices, reprobate actions, lies, and veiled identity.

Mr. Lowe confronts the problems of prejudice against Chinese in the predominantly black countryside of Jamaica, and the question of whether or not he is able to transcend across the racial boundaries and find acceptance within the community. Lowe’s battle with identity, however, goes much deeper than Miss Sylvie or any other character. The years of deceit have slowly chipped away at Lowe’s spirit until he is left “burdened by his costumes, loaded down by his masquerade; by the labyrinth of lies, the excessiveness of his imagination, that self no longer had inherent meaning and instead was just a compilation of fiction. Sometimes he knew not where one thing began and another ended. He no longer knew whether or not his stories matched up, if people realized the gaps in connections, the holes he was always digging.”

Troubled, frustrated, and always dangling near the end of his mental and physical rope, Lowe continues to pursue his dream of building a meeting house. A place where the Chinese Jamaicans can congregate, a place where they can celebrate their heritage, a place where they can revive and pass down their traditions, a place where they can discover and rediscover their identities — a Pagoda.
Powell vividly explores the verdant heritage, landscape, and culture of late nineteenth century Jamaica. The Pagoda is a passport to a rich and haunting tale of life, love, community and self. The form of the novel gives us an outsider’s view of the setting, but grasps a firm hold of the reader and brings us up close and personal with the tumultuous world of the characters, their feelings, and their lives.

Born in Jamaica in 1966, Patricia Powell is currently the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer at Harvard University. She is the author of two other novels; Me Dying Trial and A Small Gathering of Bones.

Reviewed by Andy Burth