

Interview of Rin Chupeco, Author of *The Bone Witch* Trilogy

LAURA LUQUE I BRUGUÉ
UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA



Rin Chupeco (b. Manila, Philippines) is a non-binary Chinese-Filipino writer. They have authored popular adult fantasy series such as *The Bone Witch*, comprising *The Bone Witch* (2017), *The Heart Forger* (2018) and *The Shadowglass*

(2019). Previously, Chupeco had worked as a graphic designer but their first novels, namely *The Girl from the Well* (2014) and its successor *The Suffering* (2015), popularized the author and allowed them to become a full-time writer. Chupeco has recently published *Silver under Nightfall* (2022), their first fantasy adult novel. This interview mostly focuses on the author's most popular series, *The Bone Witch* trilogy since it features a rising character within young adult fantasy: the witch as protagonist and not as antagonist villain.

You have stated that Tea, the protagonist in *The Bone Witch* trilogy, is a reflection of who you were when you were a teenager. Who is Rin Chupeco and how was your growing up in the Philippines?

I was a very angry kid who was often frustrated by a lot of injustices I saw. When I was very young, I saw a good friend killed by the military and where justice was never served, even though people knew who the killer was, a high-ranking military officer. His name was Mark Welson Chua and you'll find a lot of articles about what happened to him

online. He died because he was trying to fight back against the corruption inherent within both the government and the military, and it had always left a bad taste in my mouth, feeling helpless to do anything about it back then, even though I was just a teen. It's why I like writing protagonists who have power to push back against a world that would have killed them without another thought.

Could you describe your writing process? What do you enjoy more, character writing or world-building?

I usually like to start with a very rough outline, as inspirations for my plot usually starts with an image in my head, like a screenshot of a movie, so I try to describe as much of that as I could to form my outline. From there, I start world-building and creating my characters at the same time, trying to choose what kind of characters I'd enjoy writing in context to the world I'm making. I have to say that I love both character writing and world-building equally – both have similarities in that you build up on something new for the first time, and it's a serotonin boost for me!

You have mostly written books which are part of a series and therefore the story has the capacity to expand more than in just one stand-alone novel. What does seriality offer you?

I do have a lot of readers who always ask me if there's more books of a certain series that they like (*The Girl from the Well* especially has a lot of fans who want at least another book). But sometimes when I write a book there are some more things in it that I want to expand upon but wasn't able to do because I had to keep the novel's word count in mind. There are some details and side plots that aren't as integral to the main story that I would have liked to explore

some more, and some long arcs like *The Bone Witch* isn't something that could be written into just one book without everything feeling rushed. *The Girl from the Well* was actually a standalone that I had already expanded into another book, as a sort of companion novel for the first!

Tea's story is told from two different timelines narrated by two different people: Tea herself and the Bard. What were the challenges of writing in this way and what was the reason to do so?

I wanted to experiment, and I thought that it would be fun to write about two timelines that eventually converged, to see the immediate consequences of some of the things that Tea told the Bard playing out in that second timeline. I thought that readers won't necessarily get the full story unless they see how Tea's actions in the past actually affect the events of the present, and I thought they would enjoy piecing things together themselves, seeing where each timeline aligns with the other! It was absolutely fun trying to tie the loose ends in each together, and I plan to employ that same technique in another upcoming work!

Back in 2017, when you published *The Bone Witch*, you said that you had based the character of Tea on Filipino witch doctors and Geisha. Is this right? How much did you research to prepare for the writing of the books?

The Asha in *The Bone Witch* were inspired by *mangkukulam*, who are the Filipino version of witch doctors. People actually fear them and go out of their way not to involve themselves with them—until they need help, such as needing medicines only they could provide, or wanting a way to get rid of a curse that had been cast upon them. So like bone witches

in my book, there's a strange dichotomy that's similar—people fear and even loathe *mangkukulam*, but still go to them for help, which is obviously a bit hypocritical. I wanted that same push and pull of tension that Tea has to deal with when it comes to interacting with people who don't actually care about her well-being until they need something from her.

Witches used to be depicted as old, wicked characters. However, in the past twenty years witches have been popularized and portrayed favorably not only in fantasy fiction but in all kinds of media. Why did you choose to have a witch as the protagonist of a story?

I do love witches! I'm not Wiccan, but I am fascinated by the culture and the history behind practicing witches and the very notion of witchcraft as practical magic. I enjoyed reading about black magic and ghosts as a kid and actually had a lot of books on the subject, though I wasn't one to actually do any of the recipes and practices that I wound up collecting. I was just really fascinated by the notion of good witches and the idea of how potions and magic spells could be so powerful, and I suppose they were the symbols of being outsiders / outcasts in a society that didn't quite understand them, which I could very much relate to!

The case of Tea within *The Bone Witch* is a very interesting one when it comes to the representation of witches within young adult fiction because even though witches, or Asha, are an extremely important part of the Eight Kingdoms (the fantasy world created by Chupeco), it seems that there is always the one character that needs to be vilified so the others can be accepted. Along the narrative, Tea fights to dismantle the negative connotations

associated to Bone Witches (who receive this name because of their ability to raise the dead) but she also worries about falling victim of darkrot (corruption of the mind and soul), seemingly having internalized the loathing towards Bone witches. Therefore, Tea's journey is about accepting who she is and fighting to change the system that makes her and others like her ostracized. What was the most difficult part of writing Tea's character and journey?

I think the most difficult part was how much I could identify with her, and writing about Tea also made me reassess myself as a person as well. I'm non-binary and pansexual, and being those had no place in a country that was extremely religious and conservative. Like bone witches as well, LGBTQ+ people here are tolerated but only for entertainment purposes. There are no laws here that actually protect them, and gay people aren't even allowed to have same-sex marriages or legal unions. I have also seen far too many gay people here try to cope with this by sometimes internalizing how society treats them, by arguing that they don't even need those protections or leaning heavily into stereotypes so they could find work and meet expectations (in show business especially). And I feel very strongly for Tea in particular because like her I had always felt like an outsider in a place I had lived at all my life, where it felt like everyone would reject the real me.

In 2014, you wrote in your blog that *The Bone Witch* trilogy is a fantasy version of the Middle East / Asia influenced by the Ayubbid dynasty. Could you be more specific about the cultures that influenced your writing and the choices you made to create such diverse characters?

For *The Bone Witch*, it was actually a mix of Middle Eastern and Filipino influences, with certain kingdoms having some Chinese elements. I am Chinese-Filipino, and the Philippines is a melting pot of different cultures, especially from neighbors like Indonesia and Malaysia, so I tried to portray a fantastical version of my own country through these influences. For the Middle Eastern inspiration, I was always fascinated by the Ayyubid dynasty, especially during King Saladin's rule, which is often depicted as an enlightened period where a lot of economic progress was made, in no small part because of King Saladin's forward thinking and his humanity (I wrote a thesis on the subject back in college, so it's something I've been interested in for a while). I love the aesthetic of that time period, and wanted to bring something similar to it to my work, but I also thought that Saladin was the kind of ruler I wanted some of my protagonists to be like (mostly with Prince Kance) and the way Saladin ruled to also be the kind of progressive nation that Odalia was.

Most of my characters are heavily coded as Filipino as well, though it's not mentioned outright in the book. There are hints that I tried to convey without being too direct about it (how Tea and Fox interact as siblings, the naming conventions for Kance, Kalen, and Khalad where their names all start with the same letter, etc.) because I do want some distance between depicting real world elements and the fantasy setting that I was creating, so that it becomes more immersive for readers.

Tea is described as having brown skin and most characters in the series are non-white. Skin color in the series does not seem to be a cause for concern or something characters are discriminated against, since many characters of color

hold positions of power. What role do you think race plays in the Eight Kingdoms? Did you consider race a factor when writing the series?

I grew up in the Philippines and the majority of the people here are brown-skinned, so it was just something I wanted to incorporate in my books as well when depicting a fantastical version of it. I was actually pretty adamant that race in my books be something that isn't given the same weight as it has nowadays, particularly because during the heyday of some kingdoms like in Greece and Rome, skin color was actually not a factor. Discriminating because of skin color is a product of more recent periods in history because it's been weaponized by people who claim they're only preserving their own culture which is, honestly, all just in their heads. 'Culture' constantly shifts and adapts, and it's only because it extends beyond our own lifetimes that we think it is permanent in the short timeframe where we experience it. Culture changes all the time; it's people who are resistant to change because we find comfort in what is familiar.

The ending of *The Bone Witch* trilogy leaves no one indifferent, as it is not clear what the ultimate fate of the protagonist is. Had you always planned it would be like it is, or did you change your mind as you were writing?

When I start writing a book or a book series I usually already know how I'm going to start it, and how I'm going to end it—it's everything in the middle that I always find difficult to do. I mentioned before that when I get an idea for a book I usually have an image of it in my head first, like a screenshot from a film, and that usually serves as the start of my novel. With *The Bone Witch*, that image was of a girl facing a dragon-like creature, and that

was the scene that I did start the novel with. Usually after that I get another screenshot in my head, this time of how I envision it might end, and it's of a couple looking up at a statue of the girl in the first 'movie' still, now venerated as a heroine. I tried my best to make that a bit more ambiguous so that people are free to choose the ending they prefer.

Back in 2020 you published a short story in your blog based on Kalen's POV. Have you considered doing the same for other characters in the books? There are plenty of great secondary characters in the series and I am sure that many readers would love to read more about them.

I originally wrote the Kalen POV as a thank you to readers, because Kalen was easily one of the most popular characters in *The Bone Witch*. I'm not quite sure yet if I would write about other characters in the series that extend beyond the books' ending—when I usually conclude a trilogy, I do my best not to go back and write more. It's like coming back for repeated encores—eventually, the original ending feels more diluted and less impactful with every new performance. I was very pleased with the way I ended the trilogy and didn't want to keep adding to it. Kalen was a special case, because you don't quite get into his head for a large portion of the books—you only have Tea's perception of him for the most part, so it was easy enough to write down some of his thoughts as the story progressed, and I'm pretty happy with how that ended as well. The only other character I can think of who can benefit from that same treatment might be Likh, who is also another fan favorite. I won't promise that I'd write anything in her POV in the future, but for her I am at least open to the possibility!

If the trilogy was to be adapted to become a series or a movie, what actors do you envision portraying the characters?

That's a hard question to answer! I actually would really like it if unknown actors and actresses can be cast for the role—unfortunately, there aren't as many Filipino or Middle Eastern actors as there are American or British, so I'm convinced that there's someone out there who would be perfect for the roles of say, Tea or Fox or Kalen, but their names are unfamiliar to me. The emphasis would be more about finding the right casting director who would be willing to listen to my requests to make the chosen actors as close to their characters as possible. (If they cast Tea as someone white I am pretty sure I will be the first to rebel—a lot of people think that authors can influence who gets to be cast on any movies based on their books, but the reality is that they have no influence at all!) There has actually been some interest over the years but Hollywood moves at a glacial pace, so I try not to dwell on it too much!

I do think there is one actress/singer who would make an amazing Tea, though! Her name is Ylona Garcia, and I think she has the right looks and personality that would make her perfect for the role!

You have recently published *Silver under Nightfall*, your first fantasy adult novel. How was the experience of writing for a different public? Now that you have both written for both an adult and a young adult readership, what does young adult fiction offer you as a writer?

I think that YA fiction is always going to be where I write the kind of books that I wished I could have read when I was a teenager, because back then I never saw books that talked about my experiences and my culture, and what little that did was always parsed through a Western

viewpoint. But writing adult fantasy is where I write books that present ‘me’ wants to read, and I want it messy and explicit and a bit smutty and all those experiences that me in my twenties and thirties had that a teenage me wouldn’t have known about yet! So it’s also very freeing and cathartic to write for the me in the present while I write YA fiction for the childhood me.

How do you feel about being the object of academic interest?

A bit intimidating! I’ve wanted to write since I was a kid, but beyond writing the books I didn’t really think much about how people would look at me as a writer or about what kind of personality I inadvertently reveal in those pages. Writers joke a lot that when they write books, they mine what trauma they’ve experienced to make their novels better and it’s true on my end, but it’s not something we consciously think about until after the book’s done. I call myself an extroverted introvert and I do enjoy talking with other readers about books but I usually find myself needing to recharge afterward and hide somewhere where I don’t have to be perceived. So I try not to think about all that and just assume that the majority of people are more focused on my books instead of anything about me as a person!

Your works have not been translated to many languages. What languages would like them to be translated into?

I’ve actually have some of my works translated into Dutch, French, Russian, and Turkish, which I found cool! I just recently signed a contract that would also allow some of my books to be published in Italy and translated into Italian! There’s been a lot of interest in translating my books into Filipino as well—most Filipinos read and speak English, but some do prefer reading books in the mother tongue—but there isn’t any big book distribution company in the Philippines like in other countries to make that happen, unfortunately.

What are your next projects?

I’ll be writing the first book for Nickelodeon’s new *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* book series, which I loved to watch as a kid! I also have some more YA horror coming out in the next couple of years, and a few more non-YA horror I still can’t talk about yet! I’ll still be writing adult fantasy, and have plans to finish one that’s a spin on a popular fairy tale, but with a villain as the love interest!