

Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*. London: Faber, 2019. ISBN: 9780571345403

Reviewed by Brooke Maddison

The dedication in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* is telling: “for those of us with one foot on the other side” (iii). This is a novel that straddles great divides—across cultures, international borders, human relationships, the gender binary and most crucially, the heavenly gulf between gods and humans. Yet the story that unfolds on its pages is deeply personal: it recounts a young person’s journey towards accepting their multifaceted and mythological selves. Emezi’s distinct voice, which draws heavily on Igbo ontology, channels the reader to surreal places many have never dared dream of. The result is a novel, much like its writer, that is based in liminal spaces.

The novel heralds its plurality from the opening pages – the first chapters are narrated by the first-person collective voice “We” (1). This section introduces the protagonist Ada, a child of Igbo and Tamil heritage, born in Nigeria, along with the many spirits, the collective we, who have inhabited them since birth. Ada is an *ogbanje*, which translates roughly as children who come and go in the Igbo language. Usually *ogbanje* die as children and are reborn into the same family, causing repeated grief and trauma down the lineage. When Ada’s parents, Saachi and Saul—“the thin woman and the forceful man” (3)—pray for a daughter, the gods answer. The *ogbanje* spirits are wrenched and dragged through the gates that separate spirits from humans, thrust into the sleeping baby within Saachi’s womb. These spirits, the godlings, coil within Ada

throughout childhood: hidden in the “pit of her stomach,” stretched across her shoulders, tucked behind her liver and deep within her bones (15). The narrative voice used in these opening chapters is captivating, lyrical and surreal; reflecting the unique kind of madness that occurs when gods are “stuffed...into a bag of skin” (20).

At the age of 16 Ada makes the journey to America, carrying the spirits within her like cargo as she heads off to college. After a disturbing experience a new and singular voice breaks free from the pack and takes up residence in the marbled room of Ada’s mind: Asughara (59). The shift in narrative voice is pleasantly jarring, and the tone swings from the deeply descriptive, almost poetic style of the first five chapters to a more forceful, individual and at times colloquial voice. Increasingly under Asughara’s control, Ada takes a troubled path towards self-destruction: alcohol abuse, promiscuity, toxic relationships and self-harm are all explored as Ada attempts to satisfy and quell the voices in her head. Another distinct spirit personifies in her mind: Saint Vincent, who benignly encourages Ada to explore sexual and gender identities. Although still compelling reading, the almost methodical recounting of self-annihilation is the weakest part of *Freshwater*. Some of Emezi’s unique voice and style is lost as Ada somewhat predictably jumps from one bed to the next and obliterates herself at all too familiar college parties.

Yet from within these fractured selves Ada’s voice begins to break through, at first tentatively (through poetry and journal entries) and then more urgently. *Freshwater* contains two more segments: Ilaghachi, meaning to return (137) and Nzoputa, meaning salvation (205), and by the end of the novel Ada is the narrator. These last two sections offer a remarkable synthesis of narrative voice and theme as Ada moves towards understanding and acceptance. There is a marked return to the lyrically mythical exploration of mental health and identity as Ada journeys back to Nigeria and attempts to come to terms with their multiple identities.

Interestingly, *Freshwater* has been marked as a novel; the words themselves are emblazoned across the front cover. However, Emezi’s reality parallels the events that transpire within *Freshwater*. Emezi refers to themselves as the “Opulent Ogbanje” on social media and describes how they live and work in liminal spaces in the author bio of the novel. Emezi, like Ada, is of Igbo and Tamil heritage, and grew up in Nigeria before moving to the USA to attend university. And like the protagonist of the novel Emezi is also queer, trans nonbinary and has undergone two major surgeries (one of which is outlined in *Freshwater*, the other chronicled in the personal essay *Transition*,

published in *The Cut* in 2018). In *Transition* Emezi describes these surgeries as the acts of a god altering their vessel to truly embody their identity. Emezi's personal experience is surely richly fertile ground to draw from in order to tell such an exceptionally personal story.

This may partly explain how Emezi has been able to craft such a richly layered and truly unique text. Yet to claim that their personal trajectory defines the work would be doing a disservice to the skill and artistry required to create such a noteworthy debut. There is precedence for *ogbanje* representation within literature, most notably in fellow Nigerian Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, however *Freshwater* is exceptional in both its scope and in its centring of the *ogbanje* identity. This centring of the in-between identity, or *ogbanje*, not only challenges Western ideas of individuality, plurality, mental health and spirituality, but places these squarely within an Igbo framework.

Freshwater is a transformational read. The novel exists firmly within liminal spaces—a threshold or place of transition. Emezi's deft exploration of the nexus between gender, sexuality, identity and mythology renders a new and unique lens through which to view the human psyche, and to fully embrace this novel, the reader must let go of preconceived notions. If you are able to do this, accepting the middle place of not knowing, you will be greatly rewarded.

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