



Litany of Madness

Freshwater

By Akwaeke Emezi

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Reviewed by Heather Hewett

I can't remember the last time I read a book as original and disturbing as Akwaeke Emezi's debut *Freshwater*. The novel follows the journey of a young girl, Ada, from her birth and childhood in Nigeria to her college years in Virginia and through an itinerant young adulthood. But this is not a typical immigrant coming-of-age story (if there is such a thing). Ada's experience is narrated by the voices inside her head, *ogbanje* spirits that share her body and mind. This multiplicity of otherworldly perspectives immediately hooked me and kept me riveted until the devastation of the story's end.

In a 2018 personal essay for *The Cut*, Emezi explains that: "An *ogbanje* is an Igbo spirit that's born into a human body, a kind of malevolent trickster, whose goal is to torment the human mother by dying unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again." In a departure from the usual course of events, these "godlings" inside Ada cannot easily return their human host to the spirit world. Over time the voices become individualized, as chapters spoken by a "We" become chapters narrated by two distinct characters: capricious Asūghara, a brash and feral "beastself" who becomes "giddy and ecstatic" to find herself in an embodied form; and the gentle and holy Saint Vincent, with his "slow and simmering hungers." These unseen spirits propel the story forward with charm and a droll attitude. "Forgive us, we sound scattered," the "We" cajoles, inviting the reader to see things from their perspective. At other moments Asūghara bickers with Saint Vincent—there's not much room inside a human mind, after all—and when the loving Christian god (named Yshwa) visits, materializing inside her mind ("as if he belonged there," Asūghara complains), she treats him with scorn.

Emezi imagines these mischievous *ogbanje* as deeply ambivalent: pulled toward the supernatural realm by their fellow "brothersisters," they revel in the newly discovered pleasures of human flesh. Asūghara declares that embodiment feels

"luxurious," as her hunger sets her off to "run wild and tear whoever fell into my mouth into pieces." She hungers for men, for sex, for sensation. She admits to her own narcissism but asks the reader for understanding when she describes her early days in Ada's body:

I was selfish back then. You can't really blame me—it was my first time having a body. [...] I was careless with her body, sha, not thinking about the responsibilities of having flesh. Consequences were a thing that happened to humans, not to me. This was their world. I wasn't even really here. It's no excuse—I know I wasn't fair to Ada—but it was still a reason.

Conflicted yet defiant, a female Lucifer for the African diaspora, Asūghara embraces contradiction: baldly stating that she wants Ada to die at the same time she claims to be saving her.

As readers, we see Ada's life through the prism of these voices, a technique that heightens the interior drama and asks us to reframe Western medical understandings of psychosis in terms of Igbo cosmology. At one point Ada seeks help from a therapist, but eventually the inner beastself turns her away, so that she (and we) are left without a diagnosis or a cure. More broadly, Emezi's "litany of madness" raises questions about identity. What is a self? Must it be unitary and individual, or can it be multiple? What's the cause of Ada's madness: the spirits inside her, or the violence inflicted upon her by humans? (At another point Asūghara tells Ada, "We're the buffer between you and madness, we're not the madness.") If Ada is mad, are not the spirits—exiled from their home and locked inside a human body—also mad? What is insanity, and what is healing?

Many writers have been fascinated by *ogbanje*, also known as *abiku* among the Yoruba. The male protagonist in Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* has a favored child, Ezinma, whose older siblings all died when they were young; her mother cherishes her beloved daughter with a watchful anxiety, hoping against hope that the *ogbanje* have left this one alone. Ben Okri's 1991 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* is narrated by a spirit-child, Azaro, who witnesses the daily deprivations and satisfactions of life in a postcolonial African city while remaining connected to the supernatural dimension of dreams, demons, and witches. More recently, Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* turns into

a tale of horror when a young British girl visits her mother's home in Nigeria and meets her *doppelgänger*, the twin who did not survive.

Freshwater reimagines these Nigerian mythologies and uses them to touch on other concerns, not only the individual self and mental illness but also gender identity. Ada's spirits, after all, are gendered—and through them (because of them?), she crosses back and forth between male and female, at times inhabiting both. It's an intriguing idea, made even more interesting when one considers the autobiographical dimensions of the novel. Emezi's 2018 essay documents her own transition from being identified as female at birth to embracing her genderqueer identity, as well as her realization that she herself is an *ogbanje*. She claims the space in between the binaries of spirit/body, Western/non-Western, and female/male: "It was inevitable that I'd be drawn to these overlaps, since I live there, inhabiting simultaneous realities that are usually considered mutually exclusive."

Yet despite the inventiveness of Emezi's vision, the power of its multiple voices and its searching questions, the story troubled me. Whereas a writer such as George Saunders uses multiple ghostly voices to increase empathy for his characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the spirits in *Freshwater* provide a sort of screen between us and Ada. There's a distance there, underscored by the definite article they place before her name: she is not Ada, but "the Ada." To be honest, I'm not sure I could have handled the violence Ada endures without this distance; even so, the objectification bothers me, particularly since the author has invited us to understand Ada's experience as a proxy for her own. Plus, as a feminist, I'm troubled by what seems to be an absence of agency for a victim of abuse. Where is agency, anyway, when the self is inhabited by multiple others? Thus, when the novel offers its version of "salvation," with Ada submitting to her fate, it was hard for me to accept the ending as resolution. Emezi's fictional universe, while brilliant, feels a little cold, devoid of love and my own (very human) attachments to the possibility of healing for those who are broken and traumatized. But maybe it's not such a bad thing to feel disturbed; while this world appears strange and a bit scary, its power left me breathless and wanting more. 📖

Heather Hewett is an associate professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at SUNY New Paltz. Her essay, "Remembering Alison Piepmeier," appeared in the *Women's Review of Books* blog in April 2017.