

Who Fears Death

By Nnedi Okorafor

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An award-winning literary author enters the world of magical realism with her World Fantasy Award-winning novel of a remarkable woman in post-apocalyptic Africa.

In a post-apocalyptic Africa, the world has changed in many ways; yet in one region genocide between tribes still bloodies the land. A woman who has survived the annihilation of her village and a terrible rape by an enemy general wanders into the desert, hoping to die. Instead, she gives birth to an angry baby girl with hair and skin the color of sand. Grippled by the certainty that her daughter is different—*special*—she names her Onyesonwu, which means "Who fears death?" in an ancient language.

It doesn't take long for Onye to understand that she is physically and socially marked by the circumstances of her conception. She is *Ewu*—a child of rape who is expected to live a life of violence, a half-breed rejected by her community. But Onye is not the average *Ewu*. Even as a child, she manifests the beginnings of a remarkable and unique magic. As she grows, so do her abilities, and during an inadvertent visit to the spirit realm, she learns something terrifying: someone powerful is trying to kill her.

Desperate to elude her would-be murderer and to understand her own nature, she embarks on a journey in which she grapples with nature, tradition, history, true love, and the spiritual mysteries of her culture, and ultimately learns why she was given the name she bears: Who Fears Death.

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Who Fears Death By Nnedi Okorafor Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

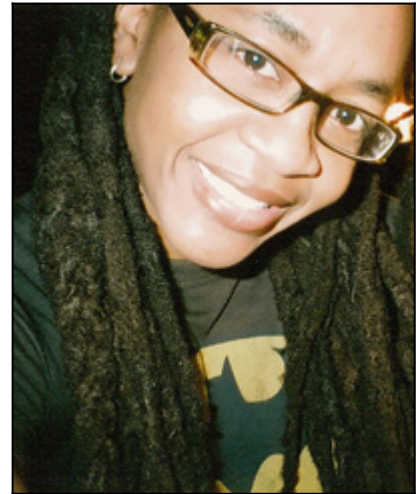
An Origin Story

Nnedi Okorafor is a writer of Nigerian descent known for weaving African culture into creative evocative settings and memorable characters. She is known for her young adult novels, including *The Shadow Speaker* and *Zahrah the Windseeker*.

“My life fell apart when I was sixteen. Papa died.”

Those are the opening lines of *Who Fears Death*. I remember when I wrote them. I was thinking of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. I was thinking of change, cultural shift, chaos. Okonkwo’s death. And my own father’s very recent death. Yeah, all that in those two lines.

In more ways than one, the opening scene of *Who Fears Death*, titled “My Father’s Face”, was the beginning of it all. Originally, it was not the beginning of the novel. This scene takes place well into the story when my main character Onyesonwu is sixteen and has been through so much. The original beginning was when Onyesonwu was five years old and happy, living with her mother in the desert. Nevertheless, “My Father’s Face” was the first scene I wrote.



Though my stories tend to be mostly linear, I’m a non-linear writer. I’ll write the middle, then the ending, then the beginning and kind of jump around until I’m done. Then I’ll tie all the scenes together and neaten it up. Nevertheless, when *Who Fears Death* was all said and done, I wasn’t surprised that “My Father’s Face” turned out to be the beginning of the actual book.

I started writing *Who Fears Death* just after my father passed in 2004. I was very very close to my father and writing was my way of staying sane. I based “My Father’s Face” on a moment I experienced at my father’s wake when everyone had cleared out of the room and I found myself alone with his body.

I was kneeling there looking at his face, thinking how much it no longer looked like him and how terrible that was. My morbid thoughts were driving me into deeper despair. Then suddenly I felt an energy move through me. This energy felt highly destructive, as if it could bring down the entire building. Almost all the details in the scene I went on to write were true, I felt them...well, up to the part where Onyesonwu makes her father’s body breathe.

As soon as I wrote that scene, everything else rushed at me. My father’s passing caused me to think about death, fear, the unknown, sacrifice, destiny and cosmic trickery. Only a week or so after my father’s passing, I read the Washington Post article, *We Want to Make a Light Baby: Arab Militiamen in Sudan Said to Use Rape as Weapon of Ethnic Cleansing* by Emily Wax. I was absolutely infuriated. The storytelling spider in my head started weaving faster. I realized that this article was showing me why the people in my story’s town disliked Onyesonwu and why she was so troubled.

My mother, my sister Ifeoma and my brother Emezie flew with my father’s body back to Nigeria for his

burial. When they returned, I learned through my siblings about the way widows were treated within Igbo custom, even the ones with PhDs...like my mother. I was again infuriated. And I was reminded yet again of why I was a feminist.

A year later, I went to Nigeria for the one-year memorial where I met my cousin Chinyere's fiancé Chidi. His last name was Onyesonwu. I was intrigued. I knew "onye" meant "who" and "onwu" meant death. I wondered if it was an ogbanje name (these named often have the word "death" in them). I'd always been interested in the concept of the ogbanje. Amongst the Igbos, back in the day, girls who were believed to be ogbanjes were often circumcised (a.k.a. genital mutilated) as a way to cure their evil ogbanje tendencies.

I asked my cousin's fiancé what his name meant (I thought it would be rude to ask if it was an ogbanje name. Plus it was his last name, not his first.). He said it meant, "Who fears death." That night, I changed my character's name and the title of the story. When I did that, it was as if the novel snapped into focus.

During that trip, I touched my father's grave. I heard stories about the Biafran War and arguments about how what happened during this civil war was indeed the genocide of the Igbo people. I saw death on the highway and thanked the Powers That Be that my daughter (who was some months over one year old) was asleep. I got to watch the women in my father's village sing all night in remembrance of my father. My maternal grandmother, mother, daughter and I were all in the same room at the same time- four generations. My sister Ngozi and I visited the lagoon that seemed so huge when we were kids but was really quite small. It was populated by hundreds and hundreds of colorful butterflies.

I wrote, conceived and incubated parts of *Who Fears Death* while in my father's village, sometimes scribbling notes while sitting in the shade on the steps outside or by flashlight when the lights went out. I wrote notes on the plane ride home, too. When I think back to those times, I was in such a strange state of mind. My default demeanor is happy. I think during those times I was as close to sad as I could get.

When I got back to the States, I kept right on writing. *Who Fears Death* was a tidal wave and hurricane combined. It consumed all of my creativity and sucked in all the issues I was dealing with and dwelling on. It mixed with my rage and grief and my natural furious optimism. Yet when it came to writing the story, I was more the recorder than the writer. I never knew what was going to happen until my character told me and my hands typed it. When I finished *Who Fears Death*, it was seven hundred pages long. A Book 1 and a Book 2. Don Maass (my agent) felt this size was too great and suggested that I pare it down. This process took me another two years.

One of my favorite quotes is from one of my greatest idols, Nigeria's great writer and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka: "A tiger does not proclaim its tigrity. It pounces." This tiger of a story definitely pounced on me without proclamation or warning. I'm glad I was ready for it.

--Nnedi Okorafor

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Well-known for young adult novels (*The Shadow Speaks*; *Zahrah the Windseeker*), Okorafor sets this emotionally fraught tale in postapocalyptic Saharan Africa. The young sorceress Onyesonwu—whose name means Who fears death?—was born Ewu, bearing a mixture of her mother's features and those of the man who raped her mother and left her for dead in the desert. As Onyesonwu grows into her powers, it becomes clear that her fate is mingled with the fate of her people, the oppressed Okeke, and that to achieve her destiny, she must die. Okorafor examines a host of evils in her chillingly realistic tale—gender and racial inequality share top billing, along with female genital mutilation and complacency in

the face of destructive tradition—and winds these disparate concepts together into a fantastical, magical blend of grand storytelling. (*June*)

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Review

Praise for *Who Fears Death*:

"**Haunting and absolutely brilliant.** My heart and guts are all turned inside out." —John Green, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

"*Who Fears Death* is one of the most **striking, chilling, truly fascinating**, and all-around remarkable novels I've read in a very long time." —Peter S. Beagle, bestselling author of *The Last Unicorn*

"Nnedi Okorafor is American-born but her Nigerian blood runs strong, lacing her work with **fantasy, magic and true African reality**. Many people need to read *Who Fears Death*, it's an important book." —Nawal El Saadawi, bestselling author of *Woman at Point Zero*

"To compare author Nnedi Okorafor to the late Octavia E. Butler would be easy to do, but this simple comparison should not detract from **Okorafor's unique storytelling gift**." —*New York Journal of Books*

"Both **wondrously magical** and terribly realistic." —*The Washington Post*

"**Believable, nuanced characters of color** and an unbiased view of an Africa full of technology, mysticism, culture clashes and true love." —*Ebony Magazine* (editor's pick)

"A fantastical, **magical blend of grand storytelling**." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Beautifully written, this is dystopian fantasy at its very best. **Expertly exploring issues of race, gender, and cultural identity**, Okorafor blends future fantasy with the rhythm and feel of African storytelling. " —*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Her pacing is tight. Her **expository sections sing like poetry**. Descriptions of paranormal people and battles are disturbingly vivid and palpable. But most crucial to the book's success is how the author slowly transforms Onye's pursuit of her rapist father from a personal vendetta to a struggle to transform the social systems that created him." —*The Village Voice*

"Okorafor is a master storyteller who combines recent history, fantasy, tradition, advanced technology, and culture into **something wonderful and new that should not be missed**." —*RT Book Review* (top pick)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Travis Ralls:

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John Hickman:

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Heather Garcia:

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