



# Freshwater

*Akwaeke Emezi*

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## **Freshwater** Akwaeke Emezi

An extraordinary debut novel, *Freshwater* explores the surreal experience of having a fractured self. It centers around a young Nigerian woman, Ada, who develops separate selves within her as a result of being born “with one foot on the other side.” Unsettling, heartwrenching, dark, and powerful, *Freshwater* is a sharp evocation of a rare way of experiencing the world, one that illuminates how we all construct our identities.

Ada begins her life in the south of Nigeria as a troubled baby and a source of deep concern to her family. Her parents, Saul and Saachi, successfully prayed her into existence, but as she grows into a volatile and splintered child, it becomes clear that something went terribly awry. When Ada comes of age and moves to America for college, the group of selves within her grows in power and agency. As Ada fades into the background of her own mind and these alters—now protective, now hedonistic—move into control, Ada’s life spirals in a dark and dangerous direction.

Narrated by the selves within Ada, and based in the author’s realities, *Freshwater* explores the metaphysics of identity and mental health, plunging the reader into the mystery of being and self. *Freshwater* dazzles with ferocious energy and serpentine grace, heralding the arrival of a fierce new literary voice.

## **Freshwater Details**

Date : Published February 13th 2018 by Grove Press

ISBN :

Author : Akwaeke Emezi

Format : Kindle Edition 240 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Contemporary, Literary Fiction, Health, Mental Health

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## **From Reader Review Freshwater for online ebook**

### **Marie says**

This is a startlingly raw and dark novel about spirituality, abuse, trauma and mental illness. In this fresh perspective, debut novelist Akwaeke Emezi embeds ogbanje, or nonhuman entities, within Ada, a girl born to parents who had prayed to the God Ala for a daughter. Ala, a serpentine God, the judge and mother who holds the underworld in her belly grants the parents their wish. Thus, Ada (name meaning the egg of a python) is born to suffer the fate of having spirits reside inside of her. For a time, Ada tries to present a unified front wherein she and the spirits within her are one. However, with abuse and trauma, she becomes more fractured and these spirits within her exert their influence in different ways.

Ada appeases the spirits within her from an early age by cutting. After a sexual assault in college she gives herself over to Asughara often and especially when she is to be intimate with anyone. Asughara is trying to protect the Ada from these incidents, but also derives pleasure from the experience, leading to sexual compulsion. Ada finds it hard to be herself even in a loving marriage. She struggles with self mutilation, suicidality, gender dysphoria and fractured sense of identity.

The life of Ada is based loosely on the author's own life. Akwaeke Emezi is Igbo and was born in Nigeria. Her sister, like Ada's, was in a terrible accident. Akwaeke was molested as a young girl. She self describes herself as gender dysphoric and has had surgeries to remove her breasts and her reproductive organs. She didn't want her breasts removed to become male, but to be able to wear dresses and switch between genders more easily. The author's name has a direct connection to an Igbo deity, like Ada's. She has attempted suicide.

I love that this novel brings attention to issues of gender violence, self mutilation, suicidality, mental illness, fractured identity, and gender dysphoria. It is written in such a unique way that incorporates spirituality and the author's Igbo culture. The writing is excellent. My only complaint is the dizzying and disorienting effect of reading narrations of the various different identities, but perhaps that is the feeling the author meant to convey. I did not trust my own recollection of what I had read at times, because one reality of the life Ada experiences is completely differently from the next. This novel offers a fascinating explanation and exploration of the experience of mental illness and gender dysphoria. There is so much to think about and ways to interpret what the author is conveying, that this would make a great book club book.

Thank you to net galley for an ARC of this book in exchange for honest review.

For discussion questions, please see: <http://www.book-chatter.com/?p=3197>

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### **Tudor Vlad says**

I think that the best praise a book can get is having the reader think to himself "this is something that I have never read", and this is what made Freshwater for me such an outstanding experience, the fact that I had no prior book that I could compare it to, it was completely new territory. It is also what makes it so damn hard to review, there are all these feelings mixed up in my mind and making sense of them is just as hard as it was for Ada to make sense of herself.

For starters, it is really hard to make sense of what genre you should place it in, but then you realize that labeling is just what this book tries to fight, so doing it to it feels wrong. Akwaeke tells the story of Ada, a girl that since her birth has always been considered by the people around her as peculiar for there were two spirits that lived inside her since her birth.

These spirits that long to complete their passage from the real world into the other side, with their only obstacle toward that goal being the fact that they are linked to Ada's physical body. Over time, the spirits, begin to form a sort of relationship with Ada and they become protectors to her. They take hold of her body when the reality and the people around her are just too much to handle because for a girl that is possessed by two evil spirits, she is remarkably good and innocent, and easily corrupted by the world.

The way in which Akwaeke uses mysticism in order to detach the reader from what they believe to know about mental illnesses is something that I found extremely clever and I was left in awe by how effective it was. This book explores a lot of modern themes such as identity, self-acceptance and what makes as normal and for that matter, does normal even exist?

Freshwater celebrates owning and accepting your own voice, no matter what that voice might say or in how many other voices it might fracture. A book that speaks to that little voice inside of you that wants to be heard, but you never had the courage to let it free. It really is a groundbreaking work of literature.

*I received an advanced copy of this book courtesy of Groove Atlantic, Groove Press and Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Jessica Woodbury says**

I did an unusual thing before writing this review, I looked at what other people have said about the book. Usually I like coming to a book without any advance knowledge and reviewing it without any awareness of its reception, but this time I was curious. It is a hard book to pin down, I was still trying to figure out which words I could use to describe it. It turns out that seeing the reviews helped. I saw many people calling this book "magical realism" and I knew right away that this was wrong, at least for me. For me, this book feels literal not figurative, it is not supposed to be magical, it is simply supposed to be real. There are threads of mythology, threads of religion, but I don't see the book as fitting into "magical realism" at all. That gave me some clarity.

I also read a little bit of Emezi's writing and press around the book's release, and found some of her tweets where she lays out what the book is meant to be. And while it was interesting to see her point of view, ultimately as a reader you have your own experience with the book. I found her notes helpful, but I didn't use them as a decisive primer on how to interpret my experience.

Ultimately where I've come down is a bit muddled, my impressions are hazy, seen through smoke, and that feels just right. FRESHWATER is a book that uses Igbo religion to understand the way the self divides and fragments to protect itself. It is a book about trauma (and there is plenty of it) and what a person must do when you cannot be saved from it but you still must survive it. Ada is the primary body in the book but not the primary character, for Ada is an ogbanje. Ada exists not as one self but as several selves, and those selves negotiate with each other for control of her body to help her survive in the world. Ada is scarred by sexual assault so Asughara takes over for Ada's sex life. Saint Vincent feels determinedly un-feminine and eventually is able to define Ada's gender in a way that makes all the selves feel more whole.

Traditionally ogbanje are described as trickster spirits, reincarnated over and over again to torment mothers. But Emezi sees the ogbanje as something else, as several selves. While reading the book I decided to take the descriptions on their face, to see the selves as spirits or gods, and gradually figure out how it all fit together. I have a different view of it now that it's done, but I feel comfortable with my reading. There's something about seeing this too much as a metaphor for mental illness that rubs me wrong, that feels like it's imposing a lens the book doesn't want you to have. To me, this doesn't feel like a book that is using metaphor to describe multiple personality disorder or depression or gender dysphoria or suicidality, it feels like something else entirely and that's the reading that felt right to me.

The other selves do most of the narrating and their voices are astonishing and chilling. They view Ada with affection but also detachment, their remove from human endeavors would seem to hold you at a distance and yet I didn't feel that way at all. I was spellbound. This book is a true feat, with prose and structure and voice and concepts that all feel vivid and singular. It is both bold and quiet, it is shattering and soothing, I can't imagine I will read a more interesting book this year.

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## **Elyse says**

When I got the depths of this novel, here during these dark hours, I was blown away! My eyes were misty at the end.

It's absolutely the most brilliant creative book written of its kind ....

It became personal to me....looking back at my own journey- my own struggles - my own fight - my own growth - my own inner peace.

At one point I kept thinking,

“No wonder it's soooo hard for people to get well”.

“No wonder people repeat the same repetitive unwanted behaviors for years”.

I don't usually write reviews on my iPhone from bed -

I'm usually not 'this' vague about the story either. But honestly it's best to TAKE THIS BOOK IN....read each word - digest it!

Its possible to read this novel in different ways. Many ways to experience it.

For me... I related it to our little voices in our heads ... that little voice which always speaks to us.

The critical voice -the happy voice too -

I thought about the deeper evil spirits ... the personality splits.

I loved the metaphysical storytelling. At times it felt contemporary as any other novel - ha!!

Parents - family - struggles - coming of age

- interests - education - travel - sex - friends - but....

THIS IS NOT like ANY BOOK I've ever read!!!

It took me about 8% to understand what I was reading - what was going on...

It took me almost half way to get the DEPTS AND POWER of this novel...

And then the ending... OH MY GOSH....it's soooo beautiful. It still wants to make me cry!!!!

“Freshwater” is FRESH!!! Soooooooooo GORGEOUSLY written....

It allowed me to distant myself - FROM - myself - and be incredibly thankful that I have made remarkable

growth in the area of healing in my lifetime.

This is one of the most unique and symbolic transforming books I've ever read!!!!

Thank you Grove Atlantic, Netgalley, and the brilliant author Akwaeke Emezi

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### **Shannon says**

Having been a follower of Akwaeke Emezi on Instagram for some time, I was thrilled to see she'd written a novel. I expected it to be a reflection of the beautiful images and energy she floods us with on her Instagram feed. My oh my - I had no idea this book would be the exact opposite.

The book's blurb does do a bit of foreshadowing by including phrases like: 'troubled baby,' 'source of deep concern to her parents,' 'volatile and splintered child,' 'something went terribly awry,' 'traumatic assault,' 'dark and dangerous direction.'

So maybe it's my own damn fault for being so naive. But I just didn't think she had it in her!

While I guess I can now say the warnings were there, I did not gather from the book's blurb that As?ghara and Saint Vincent were actually spirits. They were described as 'alternate selves.' Through the first five chapters, the narrative is presented from the point of view of 'We.' So even though the spirits are present from sentence one, Ada (their human vessel) is very much present as well. And I was enjoying reading about her.

As?ghara takes over the narrative in the sixth chapter and we see less of Ada - she is only present as As?ghara's vessel. I didn't like As?ghara. Well, As?ghara is evil so I guess I wasn't supposed to like her. But I could not deal with her either. It was too heavy. Too much. She was destroying Ada. So I guess this is where I have to give Akwaeke credit because As?ghara was f-ing me up too! I tried to read past her, hoping to return to a more balanced narrative (a 'We' chapter) that didn't have Ada completely in the background. But with As?ghara leading five of the next eight chapters (and the some of the chapters she wasn't leading were as short as 2 pages), I'd had enough of her by page 142. When I saw the following chapter was As?ghara's as well, I was done.

As I started skimming through the rest of the book, I was taken aback to see some of the Ada's experiences begin aligning with Akwaeke's. Akwaeke recently published a piece in The Cut about being "nonbinary trans, ogbanje, and related surgeries." If you're like me and are wanting to read this book because you love Akwaeke's Instagram feed, I'd recommend reading this article and then picking up the book.

All of that said, unfortunately, this book goes on my list of books I did not finish. I never give books I didn't finish more than one or two stars. But as you may have surmised, this is certainly not a one or two star book. How can I even rate it!? I need this book tour to get a Washington, DC stop added ASAP!

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### **PattyMacDotComma says**

5★ DEBUT!

**“Dedication  
To those of us  
with one foot  
on the other side.”**

**“By the time she (our body) struggled out into the world, slick and louder than a village of storms, the gates were left open. We should have been anchored in her by then, asleep inside her membranes and synched with her mind. That would have been the safest way. But since the gates were open, not closed against remembrance, we became confused. We were at once old and newborn. We were her and yet not. We were not conscious but we were alive—in fact, the main problem was that we were a distinct WE instead of being fully and just HER.”**

Outstanding, mesmerising, poetically macabre and believably unbelievable. “The Ada”, as her captive spirits refer to her, is never alone. Her constant mental companions are spirits which should have been able to possess and influence her and then come and go at will, through the gates, across the bridge.

But not these mischievous, evil beings. The gods closed the gates behind them, so they lead The Ada into all sorts of trouble, both in Nigeria where she was born, and which has a tradition of *ogbanje* possessing children, and in the US when her family migrates.

The *ogbanje* are reminiscent of the scary faeries at the bottom of the garden (Ireland’s Little People who steal children and some adults and leave changelings in their place), the witches of the witch trials, poltergeists, and malevolent voodoo spirits. She befriends a girl familiar with the voodoo traditions, too.

Ada grows up, and a little like the well-known The Three Faces Of Eve, has a split personality, influenced not only by the first two WE who were born with her, but also by a wild and naughty girl, Asughara, who is “born” when Ada first has sex. A real troublemaker, but sometimes Ada enjoys the excuse to cut loose.

Speaking of cutting, she does that, too, “feeding” her demons, as it were. The only way they can enjoy more lives is to escape this life and cross back over, as they were supposed to do.

But remember? The gates closed behind them, so you know what that means? Who’s the bridge? Their “host” body, that’s who, and while Ada/Asughara bounces from lover to anorexia to psychiatric ward and back again, they all have conversations with her, and they may even hug her somehow. Sometimes she feels safest “inside” with them.

She survives the American college experience, the club scene, pubs, you name it. She/they have an active social and love life and don’t miss much!

It’s a wonderful read and I found it absolutely compelling.

I especially enjoyed this author’s thank you to award-winning Nigerian author, Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie:

**“Chimamanda Adichie, for the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop and the ripples from that. For that moment when I started to tell you about the book and you tilted your head, looked at me, and said, ‘Ah, so you’re an *ogbanje*.’”**

Emezi obviously got it right. AND THIS IS A DEBUT!!!

Thanks to NetGalley and Grove Press for the review copy from which I've quoted, so quotes may be changed.

This isn't due for publication until February 2018 but is available on NetGalley until then, so I'm posting my review early to encourage other reviewers to have a look.

UPDATE: <https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer...>

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## **Jennifer ~ TarHeelReader says**

### **4 fresh, imaginative stars to Freshwater! The most creative book I've read this year! ? ? ? ?**

I have read nothing like Freshwater before. It is hard to categorize. It is literary fiction, but what else? Magical realism? Mysticism? The author noted at the end that this was her spiritual book, so I will go with spiritual literary fiction.

I went with the literal flow while I was reading. Freshwater could be murky, even incoherent, at times. Ada was born in Nigeria, a difficult baby with a "fractured self." What transpired is hard to describe but as Ada grew up, the selves within her grew stronger and more powerful. Ada took the backseat, while her alternative selves were in charge, and her life became dangerous and volatile.

I do not want to spoil anything, so I am keeping this review brief. This is a novel, the layers, the writing, you have to experience for yourself. Keep your expectations loose, your mind open. If you enjoy gorgeous prose with profound messages of healing, hope, and truth, Freshwater is a most worthy read.

Thank you to Akwaeke Emezi (I'm eagerly awaiting your next wondrous work!), Grove Atlantic, and Netgalley/Edelweiss for the complimentary copy.

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## **Dianne says**

How to review this, how to review this.....

The first 50 pages or so of this book were really tough for me. I felt like I was physically fighting the book, trying to wrestle it into submission. After the initial struggle, I fell into a somewhat uneasy rhythm with the story but I never quite managed to embrace it. I can appreciate it somewhat remotely as a very original and inspired work of art, but it stirs very little depth of feeling or emotion in me.

This seems to be an allegorical narrative about mental illness, sexual identity and other ways in which a person might feel "other." The story is narrated by various selves contained within Ada, who apparently suffers from multiple personality disorder. The selves express themselves as gods called ogbanje. They contend with each other inside Ada's mind, with other gods outside of Ada that they refer to as "brothersisters," and with Ada herself. It's a funky scene, starting with Ada's birth in Nigeria to her adulthood in the US.

The writing is very dense and lofty - well written and imaginative for sure, but tedious at the same time. It



just all felt too much, too much, too much.

I'd rate this as a 3.5, but am rounding down because, for me, it was more chore than pleasure. **Don't let my lukewarm review stop you from reading this book; it has gotten stellar reviews from my most trusted Goodreads friends.** Sometimes books just don't speak to you, no matter how skillful the execution and the talents of the writer.

Thanks to NetGalley and Grove Press for an ARC of this novel. My review, however, is based on the hardcover version.

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## Rachel says

It's hard to talk about something that has no precedent. Freshwater is utterly unique, and the result is breathtaking. It's a dark, sensual, and thoughtful novel about a young woman coming to terms with and accepting the multiple identities that define her.

The details of Ada's life - raised in Nigeria, relocated to the U.S. for college - are only an elemental framework for what is ultimately an introspective story. The majority of this book is narrated by a chorus of Ada's selves - conceptualized as Nigerian ogbanje - until a traumatic assault in college causes two of these selves to take shape, as As?ghara and Saint Vincent.

What I found so stimulating about this novel is that it challenged a lot of my conceptions about health and identity, particularly in how these are often so heavily informed by western culture. The perceived objectivity of psychology is something I've always found comforting and taken for granted, but with this book, I'm reminded of the significance of the relationship between culture and identity. Steeped in Igbo folklore, Freshwater chronicles Ada's journey (and Emezi's, as the book is informed by a lot of autobiographical elements) in a way that's challenging, unexpected, and beautiful.

Emezi's prose is so assured and lyrical it's hard to believe this is a debut. This is an author to watch and a novel that absolutely everyone should read.

*Thank you to Netgalley, Grove Press, and Akwaeke Emezi for the advanced copy provided in exchange for an honest review.*

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## Evelina | AvalinahsBooks says

***Freshwater is a stunning novel, one that I dove into and couldn't surface out of for a while.*** It's like a pool of dark water that you don't really even want to get out of. And I was sad when the book finished - despite it being quite a violent and shaking experience. I am not lying when I say I intend to read it again.

This review is quite long, so I suggest reading it on my blog.

***This Story Is What You Make Of It***

***The most incredible aspect of Freshwater is that there are two ways to read it: either as magical realism, or as stark naked reality.*** I chose to read it as magical realism. Keep that in mind when you read this review. And it's not that things change based on how you read it - it's that your understanding of the story changes. So let's pause a moment here to consider how amazing a story must be, if it can have two layers like that. That's partly why I want to reread it.

### ***Understanding The Fractured Self***

***I don't know if there are many novels with a main character who suffers a personality disorder, particularly - novels where a character like that isn't just written off as 'not quite all there'. Ada is portrayed as completely normal despite her problems, and in multiple instances it is stressed that she is sane, and that none of this is her fault.*** This is something that I would like to see more often in literature, when it comes to mental health.

While reading this, and knowing none of the author's backstory, I kept wondering if this is how it really is for people with multiple personalities. I know I'm probably a bad reviewer for not looking this up and considering the book simply on its own, but regardless of whether it's well researched or actually experienced by the author or someone close to them, ***I loved reading about the experiences of the main character because it helped me learn more about such personalities and what they go through.*** Don't get me wrong - nothing that she goes through is even remotely rosy or beautiful. It's all dark, messed up and very painful. But ***getting behind the eyes of such a person through fiction is why we should be reading books. It's education in empathy and understanding.*** And that's why I loved this.

### ***The Mythology***

***As I mentioned, I chose to read Freshwater as more or less magical realism, so I went with the fact that Ada's suffering comes from the fact that she is essentially multiple beings, born into one, and not given the gift of forgetting - being born aware.*** That was an amazing concept to wrap my mind around. Imagining how such dynamics would shape a person, affect their growth. Like a dark fairytale, where you can have your wish granted, but at a price you can't even fathom - one cannot be a powerful, ageless being and not pay a price. Seeing and explaining mental health problems through the prism of demons and old gods might not always work in our reality, but it's an incredible concept - ***how traumatic events can both be interpreted as a forming of a new personality branch, or as a surfacing of an ancient being in a person's mind.*** This is a battle between the old, shamanistic worldview, and the modern scientific one.

*There is a reason there is a two-headed snake on the cover. But I won't spoil. Read the book!*

### ***Strangely? It's Relatable***

Maybe it should worry me that I could relate to a character who had life threatening mental illness? But I believe that you could as well. ***Even if just in little ways, it's not hard to see how traumatic events can change you, branch out new traits in you, even if you're 'normal'.*** Maybe you won't develop a new personality branch, but it's easy to say you won't be the same person as you were before the event. It was an incredible experience having these ideas put in my mind, ideas I've never pondered before.

### ***The #OwnVoices***

You might have noticed that I'm not talking about ***the #OwnVoices*** bit too much. Partly, it's because I wanted my review to focus on the mental health bit (and I can't confirm whether that part is #OwnVoices or not), and partly it's because it's not really my place to talk too much about the PoC part of #OwnVoices. But yes - it's totally there. There is talk about race, about what it means to be from another place, to lose your roots. ***In fact, that's the main theme - that you can only heal yourself, when you find your roots, know where you are from.*** The whole mythology bit is steeped in wonderful names, legends and religious lore of Nigeria. ***But I will not talk much cause I'm very uninformed! So forgive me and just experience it yourself. It's well worth it.***

### ***But Beware Of The Triggers***

***Oh yeah, this book has triggers - loads of them.*** Nothing with these tough topics could be free of them - and this book has *rape, suicide attempts, a lot of suicidal ideation, lots of violence, some of it contains blood etc., brutal accidents, drugs...* You name it. Well, I don't think it contains murder or animal abuse, but that's about it. ***If you are sensitive, keep in mind that you can't read this book without submersion. And it's pretty dark waters.***

### ***Other Books You Might Like***

I'm surprised that it wasn't hard to find some recommendations that are connected in at least one way or another. ***Heart Berries*** is a memoir of a First Nations/Native American woman struggling with mental illness and her place in the world, ***In Case I Go*** is about a child who ends up being haunted by his grandfather's spirit over old secrets of the past, also related to the indigenous - and this is similar both because of the 'your roots' themes, and the double personality, or someone else's personality inhabiting your mind. ***An Unkindness of Ghosts*** doesn't exactly have the personalities theme, but it has a lot to say about mental illness, and is both #OwnVoices and talks a lot about Black Culture. And ***The Gargoyle***, perhaps the most different of all of these, also meshes magical realism with mental illness, and also talks about bodily harm.

*I thank Grove Press for giving me a free copy of the book in exchange to my honest opinion.*

## Hannah says

This was absolutely stunning. From the very first page I knew I was in for something extraordinary and unlike anything I have ever read. This debut combines many things I adore in books: unconventional framing and unreliable narrators, a story that gets recontextualized constantly and kept me on my toes, a basis in mythology that informed but did not over-shadow the actual story, perfect sentence structure that packs an unbelievable punch, and so many more things that I am still struggling to adequately talk about.

This is Ada's story, or more accurately Ada's and her other personalities' story. The first part is told in a we-perspective from her alternate personalities, brothersisters based in Nigerian mythology, that frame her story in what that means to them rather than her. The Ada, as she is called by them, then moves to the US where a traumatic events leads to a further fragmentation of self, As?ghara and Saint Vincent who will take over more and more. These two selves are even more different to her than the brothersisters were and tend to wreck havoc in her life. This description does not really do the book any justice because more than a straightforward narrative, the story unfolds forward and backwards with things happening (or not?) and is highly introspective. As I was wondering about the timeline, Akwaeke Emezi pulled the rug under me more often than I could count, leaving my head spinning and my heart broken.

I do not think I can do this book justice, but believe me when I say that this is an extraordinary achievement and unlike anything I read before. This will for sure stay with me and keep me thinking for months to come.

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I received an arc of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Grove Press in exchange for an honest review.

You can find this review and other thoughts on my blog.

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## Navidad Thelamour says

*It's not easy to persuade a human to end their life – they're very attached to it, even when it makes them miserable, and Ada was no different. But it's not the decision to cross back that's difficult; it's the crossing itself.*

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* is a novel of layers that do not always nicely overlap; in fact, the pieces often seem to not fit together at all. It is a novel born from trauma and emotional paroxysms, a read that erupts with them throughout. You have to peel back the layers to get to what Emezi has laid underneath, to find the gems, to find the hidden well of pain and sentiment offered here, and that may not be a satisfying journey for many readers.

*Freshwater* is the story of Ada, a young Nigerian woman with a fractured self, or multiple personalities, due to the gods who have mistakenly taken root in her body and mind. It is a dark novel portraying the malevolence within us – that darkness at the very deepest depths of us that we hope to never have to witness of ourselves or in others. It is a novel that portrays the psychological effects of such darkness and emotional violence. When Ada comes into adulthood and leaves her splintered home for a new existence in a Virginia

college, a traumatic sexual experience further shatters her mind and her multiple personalities are born. Ada fights a battle between herself, her other selves and her God she left behind, a battle to regain her equilibrium that veers her onto a dangerous course of self-destructive behavior. A path of bloodshed, tears and an equal dose of sexual trauma and exploration. Ada fights with herself, realizing something is wrong. She wants a change but her other personalities refuse to let her go.

*Let me tell you now, I loved her because in the moment of her devastation, the moment she lost her mind, that girl reached for me so hard that she went completely mad, and I loved her because when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation, bawling and broken, she absorbed me fiercely, all the way; she denied me nothing. I loved her because she gave me a name.*

*Freshwater* was a novel that took a lot of patience for me to read. If you're a reader who clings to continuity, who needs progressive character development to follow the path a protagonist's life, or a reader who is in the least bit squeamish, this will likely prove to be a difficult read for you. Not an unworthy read – but a difficult one. The narrative leapt back and forth in time with new personalities and overlapping stories already told being retold differently. This book was a collage, a kaleidoscope, a reflection of a splintered self. Given the subject matter, the shattered quality of the narrative is understandable but at times arduous to read.

It was hard for me to fully connect with *Freshwater* when the moments of truth, heartbreak and the demise of entire relationships in Ada's life were narrated, not fully shown in action. Emezi's debut novel is more about the relationship between Ada and her other selves –internally—than it is about her outward experiences in the world. (view spoiler) It wasn't enough for me, though some parts of the novel were absolutely gripping, and there were some lovely lines scattered throughout.

*He wanted to pretend he was somehow better than he knew he was; he wasn't ready to throw himself into sin. Humans find it easier to just lie and lie to themselves.*

However, in those neglected moments (which is probably why the book is relatively short) the novel loses its soul and misses opportunities.

Other qualms:

The quote headings at the start of each chapter made no sense to me in the context of the story. Often, they made no sense to me at all though I got the feeling that they were Nigerian sayings. And I had too many **WTF** moments here because of the haphazard way life events and realizations were thrown into the narrative, no build-up, just dumped. I found myself reading whole passages and thinking, ***Where did this come from – outta thin air?*** That was the main issue I had with this novel: there was no real character development aside from Ada and Ewan, just a series of narrations and events.

I also never understood the title of the book. There was a reference to it at the end of the novel, but I found it to be too cryptic and unclear, so I still have no idea what it was trying to convey, why it was the namesake of the book. Because of this, I had the noteworthy experience of loving and hating *Freshwater*. There were moments where I couldn't wait to turn the page and others where I skimmed past the incoherence of the We. Because of that, *Freshwater*'s dazzling and dreadful moments condensed down into a grade of 3 stars overall. \*\*\*

\*I received an advance-read copy of the book from the publisher, Grove Press, via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

## **Darkowaa says**

!!! <https://africanbookaddict.com/2018/02...>

If I had known this book was as evil, dark and sinful as it was, I probably wouldn't have bothered to read it. But now that I've marinated the story in my mind for a while, I can confidently declare that *Freshwater* is so much more than it's insane level of lust and blasphemy. *Freshwater* is a dark, layered tale based in and out of the spiritual realm, which focuses on how past traumas deeply affect one's well-being and mental health... (the FULL review is on the book blog - link above)

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## **PorshaJo says**

Review to come.....need to gather my thoughts about this one.

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## **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I was pulled in to this story (narrated by the author) of Ada, who is a gift from the (plural) Igbo serpent god to her parents for praying the right way. But because they were the child, the god(s) own her, and are always with her. There is a disturbing description of it at the beginning where they go inside the lining of her uterus, among other places. During a traumatic event, they take hold of Ada's body and then have the ability to completely take over when they want or need to. If she has sex with anyone, it is never her, always them.

Halfway through listening to this novel, I encountered this article, which explained to me how this novel is more autobiographical than I would have imagined. The author discusses being *ogbanje* and also genderqueer, how the one informs the other, how they have modified their body to fit more how they feel. And Ada goes through this as well, except it feels like greater discomfort from the spirits than from Ada. When she hits puberty, they are uncomfortable at how they can't fully identify or control the humanity that comes into being. Ada also pursues surgical answers, and struggles with suicide along the way.

It is worth the read, worth the experience, the writing is beautiful while also being disturbing. The gods in Ada interact with other gods, like "Yeshua" and "Allah," and "Yeshua" is often hanging around waiting for Ada to come back to him. He even reaches out to the serpent gods in friendship. The mother is an important character who is actually shut out from Ada's life at one point, by the gods.

Typically these gods are considered spirits, but of course... they might not see themselves that way. I enjoyed how the author wrote from their perspective, and it is a bit trippy.

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