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Helen Oyeyemi

The Icarus Girl

United Kingdom (2005)

TAGS: Icarus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Icarus Girl
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2005
First Edition Details	Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, 325 pp.
ISBN	0747578869
Genre	Fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Crossover (teenagers, young adults, adults)
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Creators



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Helen Oyeyemi , b. 1984
(Author)

Helen Olajumoke Oyeyemi is a British novelist of Nigerian origins. She was born in Nigeria and moved to London when she was four. She attended the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School and wrote her first novel, *The Icarus Girl*, while studying for her A-Levels. This novel was published in 2005 when she was a student of social and political sciences at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University. She had a difficult childhood trying to cope with cultural and racial issues. After Cambridge, she lived a nomadic lifestyle within Europe and finally settled in America where she is a resident writer at the University of Kentucky. Some of her works include: *Victimese* (2005), *The Opposite House* (2007), (inspired by Cuban mythology), *White is for Witching* (2009) (which won the Shirley Jackson Award in 2009 and the 2010 Somerset Maugham Award in 2010), *Mr Fox* (2011), *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* (2016), (which won the PEN Open Book Award in the same year).

Sources:

writersmakeworlds.com (accessed: August 4, 2021);

wikipedia.org (accessed: August 4, 2021).

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Additional information

Translation

The novel has been published in China, France, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK, USA.

Summary

The Icarus Girl tells the story of eight-year-old Jessamy Harrison (Jess). She is a mulatto from an English father and a Nigerian mother. When the novel opens, the Harrisons live in England. Jess lives a solitary life and has no friends. After she has shut herself in a cupboard for almost half a day, her mother is puzzled and proposes that they visit their Nigerian relatives, thinking that this may permit Jess to open-up a little and make friends. Jess is particularly excited about visiting Nigeria, especially as it is her first time to go there.

Upon arrival, Jess has a strange feeling about Nigeria. Things are not the way she expected. Everything is different from what she knows in England. Nigeria seems too ugly and too hot for her. Her mother's family, according to her, behaves in a very strange way. At the beginning, she has difficulties in accommodating most of their traditions and customs, especially as her grandfather calls her Wuraola (meaning "gold"), a Nigerian name, instead of Jess. When they finally get to know each other, they start feeling at ease.

One day, Jess decides to visit her grandfather's Boys' Quarters. She is surprised and frightened when she sees a "HEllO JEssY" written on the surface of the tabletop in the dusty Boys' Quarter. Nobody has ever called her like that before. It becomes evident to Jess that someone lives there, observes her permanently and switches the light at the Boys' Quarter on and off in the night. This incident seems particularly strange to Jess because her aunt earlier told her that the Boys' Quarter is abandoned and nobody lives there. She however does not talk of this to anybody.

Later, Jess meets a strange girl named Titiola. The latter repeats the same "Hello Jessy!" that was inscribed in the Boys' Quarter. Jess concludes that Titiola (Tilly Tilly) is the mysterious habitant of the Boys' Quarter. At first, Titiola just repeats exactly what Jess says when she attempts to have a conversation with her. Thereafter, she starts a real conversation and even proposes friendship.

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With time, Jess and Tilly became good friends. However, Tilly Tilly seems to be a supernatural creature since she is able to pass through locked doors and appear wherever she wants to. She becomes very close to Jess, to the extent of knowing all what is going on in her life, right from England.

The time comes when Jess' family moves back to England. The problem of solitude she had before moving to Nigeria seems to have gotten worse. Doctors are inept since they cannot detect what Jess is suffering from and she cannot express how she feels.

One day, Tilly Tilly mysteriously appears in Jess' school, pretending that her family has just moved to England. With time, Jess notices that she alone can talk to and see Tilly Tilly. The latter starts behaving in a strange way, destroying things and revealing secrets, one of which is the fact that Jess once had a twin sister, Fern, who died as a child.

Oyeyemi tells us that twins are supernatural beings in the Yoruba tradition. If one dies, the family has to make some rituals and sacrifices to Ibeji, the god of twins. Otherwise, the dead twin will keep on tormenting the living one. Jess' grandmother is particularly troubled by this situation since she remembers that the sacrifices were not made after Fern's death.

Jess' parents take her to a psychiatrist, Dr. McKenzie who has a daughter named Siobhan (Shivs). Jess' friendship with Shivs makes Tilly jealous. The latter therefore decides to deal with Shivs by injuring her in a mysterious fall down a flight of stairs. In the course of reading, we notice that from time to time, Tilly takes control of Jess' body. This situation alarms Jess' family. They all rush back to Nigeria for the sacrifices to be made to Ibeji. It seems to be too late for this to be done. Jess' grandfather proposes to take the child to a traditional Doctor but Daniel, Jess' father, refuses. To escape from this dilemma, Sarah tries to run away with her child but they have an accident in which Jess is injured and hospitalized.

The novel ends with Jess' grandfather bringing an Ibeji statue to the hospital in Jess' room, to reclaim Jess' body from Tilly Tilly' control. There is some sort of fight between Tilly and Jess over who will take final control of Jess' body.

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Analysis	Oyeyemi's title stems from the Greek legend of Icarus, Daedalus' mythic son, who escaped from the island of Crete and got his wings burnt by sun rays. The liaison between the Icarus myth and Oyeyemi's novel is Jess's rebellion against tradition. Like the mythic Icarus who scuffles with his desires to fly high and Daedalus' cautioning to fly low, Jess struggles and negotiates a new form of hybrid identity within the cross-cultural identities where she finds herself. Jess, like Icarus, who does not heed Daedalus' advice, wants self-affirmation, without Tilly Tilly's intervention. The Yoruba people believe that so-called spirit children *abiku** die and return. Tilly Tilly's return reflects the belief common among religions like Hinduism, and Buddhism, that the living is born from the dead by way of souls which never die but come back to life in other bodies. Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, thus has recurring classical motifs like spirits, identity, and journey. As the author was awarded prizes and the book gained a huge popular success, it remains the subject of significant scholarly interest. * Spirit Child in Yoruba.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Icarus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Child, children Family Identity Journeys Parents (and children) Tradition Twins
Further Reading	Downer, Lesley, "*The Icarus Girl*: The Play Date From Hell", *The New York Times* online, July 17, 2005 (accessed: August 4, 2021).

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