

“Okri, Ben (1959-)”

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Okri, Ben (1959–), Nigerian novelist, poet, and essayist, was born on 15 March 1959 in Minna, Nigeria, to Grace and Silver Okri of Igbo and Urhobo origin, respectively. Okri's father, a railway station clerk, left for London to read law in 1961, and his wife and four children joined him shortly afterward. Young Ben attended John Donne Primary School in Southwark in 1964. The following year, after Silver Okri's graduation, the family returned to Nigeria. Once there, Ben was sent to the Children's Home School, Sapele, and then enrolled at Christ High School in Ibadan, while his father set up a law practice in Lagos. During his teenage years, Ben Okri attended Urhobo College, Warri, and subsequently continued to study privately in Lagos.

Throughout his childhood, Okri assiduously read the books from his father's library and thus became acquainted with literature ranging from the treatises of Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, to English classics by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. From an early age he also enjoyed African and European folktales, and later he discovered twentieth-century African fiction. This eclectic reading experience was to have a significant influence on his own works.

Okri began writing in 1976 while waiting to be granted a place in a science course at a Nigerian university and simultaneously working as a clerk in a paint company. He published his first essays and stories in the local press and, upon learning that his university application had been unsuccessful, moved to London in 1978. There, he worked as a staff writer for the magazine *Afroscope*. His first novel, written when he was still living in Nigeria, was published by Longman in 1980. Entitled *Flowers and Shadows*, the narrative centers on a young man's disillusionment with corruption in postcolonial Nigerian society. The same year, Okri obtained a scholarship from the Nigerian government to study comparative literature at the University of Essex. In 1981, he published his second novel, *The Landscapes Within*, which focuses on the daily life and artistic aspirations of a young painter living in Lagos. By

describing the struggles faced by the hero of the book, Okri seems to be offering a glimpse into his own aesthetic practice and his conception of the role of the artist in society.

In 1982, the Nigerian government terminated its financial support of Okri, prompting the young writer to move back to London. After a period of homelessness, he became poetry editor of the journal *West Africa* (1983-1986) and worked as a freelance broadcaster for the BBC African Service (1983-1985). In 1984, he was awarded an Arts Council Bursary, and in 1986, he published his first collection of short stories, *Incidents at the Shrine*. In 1987, this work was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (Africa Region), and one of the short stories it contained, "The Dream-Vendor's August," received the *Paris Review* Aga Kahn Prize for Fiction. At the time, Okri also became a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature.

Both *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), Okri's second collection of stories, depict the poverty, corruption, and ethnic conflicts that riddle Nigerian society; these works mainly distinguish themselves from the author's early fiction by the introduction of magical elements into the narratives' realist settings. Okri's intertwining of the real and the fantastic, often likened to South American magical realism and to the tales of Yoruba writer Amos Tutuola, is pursued in novel form in *The Famished Road* (1991). The book follows the wanderings of an *abiku* – a spirit-child in Yoruba mythology – in an urban setting assumed to be Lagos around the time of Nigerian independence in 1960. As explicitly stated in the novel, the figure of the *abiku*, who is infinitely dying and reborn, acts as a symbol for the phoenix-like Nigerian nation. The year of its release, *The Famished Road* earned Okri the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction. This major award came only weeks after the writer had been appointed Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge, a position he held for two years.

Okri later wrote two sequels to *The Famished Road*, entitled *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), and a revised version of *The Landscapes Within*, released in 1996 under the title *Dangerous Love*. He also demonstrated his versatility by publishing two volumes of poetry, *An African Elegy* (1992) and *Mental Fight* (1999), an allegorical novel, *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), as well as a collection of essays, *A Way of Being Free* (1997).

In the decade following the publication of his Booker Prize-winning novel, Okri was conferred numerous titles and honors. Most notably, he was given the World Economic Forum's Crystal Award (1995), was presented with honorary doctorates from the University of Westminster (1997) and the University of Essex (2002), and was awarded an OBE (2001).

He was also elected vice president of the English Centre of International PEN (1997) and appointed to the board of the Royal National Theatre in London (1999).

In 2002, Okri published his eighth novel, *In Arcadia*, a book describing a film crew's journey from London to Arcadia, and which may be considered a fictional equivalent to the writer's own trip between the two locations on the BBC program *Great Railway Journeys* (1996). Drawing on Greco-Roman myth but also on European artistic media, including painting and architecture, the novel provides yet another testimony to Okri's fascination with the power of art, a theme already prominently featured in his fiction and essays.

The author's concern with the function and status of the artist in society took several forms in the following years. For example, in 2003, he published a controversial article in the *Royal Society of Literature Magazine*, arguing that the decline of Britain was reflected in the nation's failure to celebrate its writers appropriately. Four years later, Okri's interest in art also informed *Starbook* (2007), a fairytale-like allegory set in Africa during the early days of transatlantic slavery. The author's emphasis on the imagination as a key to the understanding and reshaping of the world became even more strongly marked in his *Tales of Freedom* (2009), a collection of pieces that includes hybrid tales combining the short story and haiku forms, which Okri calls "stokus."

[See also Tutuola, Amos.]

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