

## Interview with NNedi Okorafor, december the 29th 2011

1. Can you introduce yourself to the French readers who don't know you yet ?

**Greetings, I am Nnedi Okorafor, literary sorceress/mad scientist.**

2. « Who fears death » recently won the World Fantasy Award. I can imagine you're very happy (I'm happy for you too and think it really deserves the award) but what does it mean to you as a writer, a woman, and a afro american woman writing about Africa ?

**I prefer to be called "Nigerian American", because I am a child of Nigerian immigrants who came to this country in 1969. I have no other (known) family history here in the US except what my family and I create from this point on. Because that's my background, I like for people to understand that.**

**What does the award mean to me? I am the first person of African descent to win this award and, I'll admit, that's left me pensive. I was kind of surprised about that. But of course, I was ecstatic to win and deeply honored. Of all the awards in the genre, this one felt like the best fit.**

**I like to think that I have shoved the door open much wider. I like to think that I have also alerted more people of color to the fact that they can win this award AND that they can write science fiction/fantasy that is of and about themselves and people will like it. I like to think I have complicated things...in a good way.**

3. « Who fears death » is a new kind of fantasy, an african fantasy, very innovative yet structurally classical. Which author do you like in the genre ? Did some of them influence your style of writing ?

**Who Fears Death is a novel that takes from the classic hero's journey structure AND the tradition of African oral storytelling. It reflects my cultural background of being both American and Nigerian. This is only something I realized *after* I wrote the novel. Authors within the genre that I enjoy include Stephen King, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Jonathan Stroud, Hayao Miyazaki, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushie... "in the genre", that's always a tricky phrase. What's "in the genre" really?**

4. The women are the real strong characters in your novel. Is it the same in Africa ? Or should it be ? In the meantime, many men in the book are bad, or at least blunt. Would you say that men and their love for war are the main problem in underdeveloped countries ?

**I think the male characters in *Who Fears Death* are strong, too. Many of them are deeply traditional, yes. But that's realistic. Yet, despite this, they are able to see**

beyond, they are able to still SEE the truth. That is not easy to do when born and raised to think a certain way.

It's funny how when a novel features strong female characters, people are more likely to say the male characters are portrayed as bad. I can name six central "GOOD" strong complex interesting male characters right off the top of my head. And there are more. I can name examples of "bad" women in the novel, too. Look at the scene of Onyesonwu's beginning. Who is there? Who is doing what? There are a plethora of characters in the book. It's not a novel where you can easily say, "this is good" and "this is evil". Even with the main antagonist. There's even a discussion about that in the book.

I don't believe in good and evil being separate. They are part of each other- you cannot have one without the other. In *Who Fears Death*, people get caught up in culture, people rebel and succeed and fail, even the heroine of the story. They are human. And humans carry both good and evil- every human being.

I grew up with a very strong father and I have a strong younger brother whom I am very close to. I have just as many male friends as female friends. It's easy for me to find examples in my world of strong men. I like to believe that this is reflected in the stories I write.

I think African women are strong and very resilient. And I am speaking very generally here. Africa is a big big diverse place and women, too, are diverse. But culturally, as a whole, I think African women are loyal, have incredible stamina and know how to survive and build. However, they receive very little credit or reward for all that they do. This must change.

5. Your novel explores the consequences of ethnic purification and extermination wars. But could you tell what, in your opinion, the causes are ?

The issues shown and touched upon in the novel are NOT the reason I wrote the novel. The novel started with this character, Onyesonwu, speaking to me. She wanted to tell me her story. I listened and wrote it down. Onyesonwu lives in the "world", so "real world" things happened to her. Those "real world" things were part of the story in an *organic* way. I had no agenda when I wrote *Who Fears Death*, unless you count wanting to tell a story that was good and fast-paced enough to hold my own attention. That said, when I look at the finished novel, I see that her story speaks to many issues.

Genocide (let's call it what it is) is something can happen anywhere, to any group of people. Americans look at Rwanda and Sudan and shake their heads in pity. Many don't remember that it happened in the United States, too. Genocide is embedded in the very foundation of the United States. Classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation,

**extermination, and denial- it's the same eight steps every time. We must all be vigilant.**

6. You know the concept of « empowerment ». Is Onyesonwu story a metaphor of this concept ?

**I don't like to speak of my characters or their stories as metaphors. I leave that to the literary scholars. To me, Onyesonwu is a living breathing person who does what she does.**

7. Sexual inequality is a big part of your novel. Would you say it is one of the problems that Africa has to face and overcome?

**Gender and Sexual inequality is a problem worldwide. I think every continent needs to overcome it. Once that happens, the world will be a better place.**

8. The society you describe stands in the middle of a ford, between tradition and modernity. How can these two urges coexist in a real world society and thus be a strength, rather than conflict and be a weakness?

**This is happening now in Africa, that is where I got the idea. And it is a strength. On my trips to visit family in Nigeria, I would see this blend of the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. When I would read speculative novels, I was not seeing anyone write about THIS Africa. The example I always use is seeing women going to the stream with containers of their heads to collect water for the day. A nice traditional African image, right? Well, as they women walked, they'd also be texting their friends on their cell phones! The futuristic setting of *Who Fears Death* was easy for me to write because the early version of it already exists.**