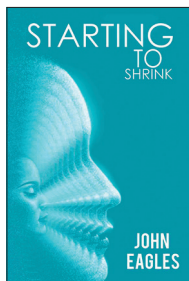


## Starting to Shrink

John Eagles

Austin Macauley Publishers, 2017, PB, 338pp, £8.99, 978-1786938541



### EVERY DOCTOR'S WORST NIGHTMARE

*Starting to Shrink* starts with every doctor's worst nightmare — a letter from the GMC about an upcoming hearing. In this case, Douglas Barker, a senior house officer in psychiatry, has been accused of having a sexual relationship with a patient.

The story is set in the early 1980s, and follows Douglas through his first year as a psychiatry trainee in Scotland. Much of what Douglas experiences is very relatable to anyone who has been through postgraduate medical training — an educational supervisor who he doesn't see eye-to-eye with; a diagnosis that could have been picked up earlier and the guilt that goes with this; and the kinship formed between other trainees and ward staff. However, from the opening chapter it is clear that Douglas is also going to have to contend with a GMC investigation, and whether the allegations against him are true remains to be seen until the very end.

As a female reader, I have to say I didn't find Douglas to be an overly likeable character. He comes across as somewhat misogynistic, has a reputation among his peers as a 'womaniser', and it was very noticeable that almost every female character who appeared in the book was described in relation to how attractive Douglas found her. Perhaps this was intentional, to sow the seed in the reader's mind throughout that Douglas may well be guilty, but it failed to endear him to me.

In the '#metoo' era, the case against Douglas is very topical, and the GMC investigation is well described, as is the fear and anxiety that come with it. The book is by a retired psychiatrist, and is very well written, with interesting psychiatric cases scattered among the main story. However, the view of women held by the protagonist is off-putting, and continues even post-hearing, indicating a lack of insight that I'm sure the GMC wouldn't approve of!

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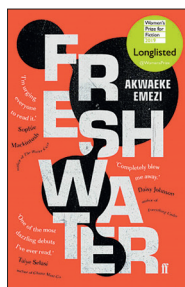
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp20X708701>

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## Freshwater

Akwaeke Emezi

Faber & Faber, 2019, PB, 240pp, £8.99, 978-0571345403



### ADRIFT IN OUR INTERNAL INTRICACIES

*'How do you survive when they place a god inside your body? ... It should be no surprise that her skin would split or her mind would break.'*

There exists within the Igbo, Yoruba, and Urhobo communities of Southern Nigeria the cultural belief in the Ogbanje.<sup>1</sup> In its simplest description, the Ogbanje are spiritual entities that enter a child on the day of its birth. The child will hear the voice of the Ogbanje internally; the spirit will make obscure and relentless demands that are often damaging to the body, and if the requests are not met the Ogbanje will threaten to die, taking the child's life with it.<sup>2</sup> Ogbanje children live in perpetual conflict with the self; part-human, part-spirit:

*'... half of [their] loyalty is to the human lineage of [their] birth; the other half remains committed, even if unconsciously committed, to the capricious world of spiritual forces.'*<sup>3</sup>

For the Ogbanje child, life is a ceaseless war.

Within Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater*, the Ogbanje spirits are our narrators as they invade the mind, body, and life of a young girl named Ada. Akin to the torture of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, tied to a chair, eyes prised open, we watch powerless as Ada endures the harshest of realities, as the voices in her head, with no moral compass, imprison her within her own mind, and force her direction through life.

*Freshwater*, however, is in no way an

exploitative text. Emezi has produced a novel that explores the depths of abusive relationships, both with others and the self; challenges conservative views on personal identity within a society where many are focused on retaining a binary perception of gender and appearance; and most potently demands a re-evaluation of what it means to suffer from mental illness.

To delineate between 'good' and 'poor' mental health is not easy to do without falling into cliché, and via the use of differing Ogbanje voices and perspectives, each with varying pains, pleasures, and motives, Emezi is able to present an original discussion on the complexity of the human mind, our internal voices, and the depth of our emotions:

*'It was too late for the Ada to do anything except try to keep up with us [Ogbanje], try not to be doomed in the liminal fluid we swam in.'*

As a reader of *Freshwater* you will become Ada, attempting to stay afloat in a torrential current. But on making it to the end, you will have experienced a unique and incredibly important novel; an analysis and examination of mental illness, perceptions of mental illness, spirituality, misogyny, identity, isolation, exploitation, abuse, and much more.

Longlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize and the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2019, *Freshwater* is a wholly original, challenging, and harrowing text; one that you will not forget.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp20X708713>

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