



## Happiness, Like Water

*Chinelo Okparanta*

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## **Happiness, Like Water** Chinelo Okparanta

Here are Nigerian women at home and transplanted to the United States, building lives out of longing and hope, faith and doubt, the struggle to stay and the mandate to leave, the burden and strength of love. Here are characters faced with dangerous decisions, children slick with oil from the river, a woman in love with another despite the penalties. Here is a world marked by electricity outages, lush landscapes, folktales, buses that break down and never start up again. Here is a portrait of Nigerians that is surprising, shocking, heartrending, loving, and across social strata, dealing in every kind of change. Here are stories filled with language to make your eyes pause and your throat catch. *Happiness, Like Water* introduces a true talent, a young writer with a beautiful heart and a capacious imagination.

## **Happiness, Like Water Details**

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Author : Chinelo Okparanta

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## From Reader Review Happiness, Like Water for online ebook

### Monica says

*Happiness is like water,' she says. 'We're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers.*

Do not be fooled by the title. This collection of stories has very little to do with happiness or even the pursuit of happiness. These stories are actually quite dour with a few moments of happiness drowned by the ongoing persistence of life and surviving. Dour does not mean bad. In fact this is a collection of moving and emotional stories that are far more rooted in reality than fantasy. Okparanta's characterizations are powerful and it takes but a few paragraphs to find her characters compelling. I found that I wanted to know more about all the characters at the end of each story. Yet I would not characterize her stories as unfinished.

Okparanta writes strongly about mother/daughter relationships. The inherent struggles within that framework or the idea of motherhood itself is the fuel to most of these stories. A few other themes that were hit repeatedly in these tales were related to class structures, the patriarchal nature of the culture of Nigeria, academia seems to loom large especially as part of the class structure in these stories. The characters that are upwardly mobile tended to be either students or professors in her stories. A few of the stories in this collection explore lesbian relationships. Men do not fair very well in Okparanta's tales. Even the kindest male characters in this collection are distinctly unconcerned with the feelings and emotions of the women in their lives. Most of the mothers are overbearing and trying desperately to enrich their own lives through their daughters or at best mildly disappointed in their daughters choices.

Here are the stories in review:

(view spoiler)

Overall I am impressed with Okparanta's ability to crowd so much depth and meaning into each short story. It's pretty masterful. This is a fine collection.

4 Solid Stars

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## Aubrey says

4.9/5

*Days later, when the scabs start to form, I imagine peeling them off like the hard shell of a velvet tamarind. Eno's flesh underneath the scabs is the reddish-yellow of the tamarind's pulp, not quite the yellow of a ripe pawpaw peel. And even if I know that this scabby fairness of hers is borne of injury, a temporary fairness of skinless flesh, patchy, and ugly in its patchiness, I think how close she has come to having skin like Onyechi's, and I feel something like envy, because what she has wound up with is fairness after all. Fairness, if only for a while.*

The majority of us are so well trained, we don't know our needs until we either stumble across them or starve from the lack. If you want to know how you should be afforded to demonstrate your anger over what you do not see, observe the boycotts of *The Force Awakens*, *Fury Road*, the latest Ghostbusters, the most recent character attribute reveal in 'Overwatch', none of it literary and yet so representative of what goes on in the more papery realms. A black woman playing the part of god, a white woman considered the 'best' for a Japanese role, and guess which one is considered blasphemy. Thus my starvation for the stories of 'America', 'Grace', and others contained within this collection, which, while tackling homophobia rather than the very different beast of biphobia, does so under far less canonically represented circumstances than my pasty uninational self will ever know.

There aren't many short story writers I can think of who set out to lance every boil they encounter in their own particular corner of the world. O'Connor is one, I suppose, but as bled-to-the-bone her stories are, they never deal with bleach, or green cards, or her country as playground for foreign powers which carry off all the profit to the promised land and leave the wasteland behind. About what she'd make of stories about black women (with nary a white in sight), or black women falling in love, or black women falling in love with each other, I care only to the point of her past affecting my future; for, as Faulkner said in one redeeming line, the past is never dead, and it certainly isn't past.

I admit to coming to these for the love stories, and what I got was more than satisfying. What I didn't expect to encounter was a multifaceted probing at domestic abuse, culminating in the final 'Tumors and Butterflies' that's as deceptively invasive as it sounds. Some might chalk off the lot of Nigerian parents as abusive, the fathers more physically demonstrative than the mothers, but it's the United States that is the only country without a bill of rights for children, making the magical number of eighteen as much of a threat as only legal ownership can create. Only people who have had abusive parents know what it means to take all that filial fealty your particularly country and culture and creed have shoved down your throat and break what it is needed, rewrite what is needed, and bury what is needed. More often than not, the best defense is a good offense.

So. My first book of 2017. A good start, seeing how it tackles issues that will only continue to rear their genocidal heads in the coming US presidential era. Even more articles will be published about how my upcoming year of studying will prove a waste in one way or another, even more will bemoan Millennials unless they join the local Nazis and proclaim themselves the alt-right, even more will politely request that the

commonly targeted continue to deal with the terrorism of the status quo while they calmly negotiate with fascists like good little boys and girls. Whether to various readers of the world will continue to sit back and congratulate themselves on their armchair criticism until the molotov cocktails start coming through their window remains to be seen.

*I]n rebellion, certain emotions become amplified at the exact moments when you are expected not to feel them at all.*

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### **Stian says**

*'Happiness is like water,' she says. 'We're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers.'* (p. 144)

The elusive nature of happiness is a recurring theme in this collection of debut stories by Nigerian Chinelo Okparanta. The stories are thoroughly *sad*, and deal with topics that are uncomfortable to read about: rape, forced marriages, domestic violence, "illegal" feelings, jealousy, cheating, identity crises, and so on. It's easy to opt to ignore these things and see the world through rose-tinted glasses instead. But you shouldn't. That's why works such as this one are important; the same can be said for Junot Diaz's collection of stories in *Drown*. Sure, it's not always happy reading, but it illuminates many issues that are often and sometimes easily swept under the rug. It can even be hard to really enjoy the stories, because you feel slowly ripped apart inside from what is happening in them, and the remarkable feeling that Okparanta evokes: this stuff *happens* to people, this type of suffering is *real*. It's much the same feeling that Bjørneboe also draws out of you, this whole feeling of, "jesus christ, is this really what we humans do to one another?"

Nevermind that the writing is sometimes sub-par and sometimes just poor (though perhaps I shouldn't compare *everything* I read to Pynchon...), the stories here are incredibly powerful. I feel I gain insight into the lives of human beings far, far away on this huge planet, and that's pretty remarkable in itself and is testament to the power of words. Much like Corregidora, for example, or like much of Bjørneboe's oeuvre, it's not happy reading, but it's good that it isn't.

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### **♥?Alotta Warmheart♥? says**

"Happiness is like water, we are always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers...and my fingers are thin, with lots of gaps in between." Absolutely loved this book. Chinelo is a writing goddess. The choice of topics/themes in these short stories shows she isn't scared of writing about stuff many people would be uncomfortable with. She has a way of putting one word in front of another and just make you enjoy the whole reading journey. For someone that has been reading average books since the year started this is my version of a 'reader's breakthrough'.

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### **Leslie Reese says**

Ten female-centered stories written in the way with which Ifeinwu---one of Okparanta's characters---cleans

vegetable leaves for a salad: soaked and rinsed carefully, one by one. Her simple, unadorned language seems benign until, gathered en masse, lands like a brick tossed slow-motion to the gut. Each story---even when not told in her own voice---features a girl, a woman (daughter Uchenna; Grace, a student; "Mama"; new wife Chinwe; Gloria Oke's lover; barren Nneoma) whose history, whose pensive breath, whose predicament, whose questions, thoughts, and self-determining power fuse into the underlying tension linking each sentence together. Persistent, unimaginative ways in which maternal love and spousal fidelity are supposed to fulfill a woman's "happiness" are challenged in these stories. Each woman's self-awareness unfolds and is expressed differently, yet without fanfare. Not every decision yields a happy result, and no one's life shifts magically and dramatically into an easy betterment. In the story, "Fairness", I was chilled by the way two young dark-skinned girls of different classes respond to a mother's messages about beauty.

While I felt that each story deserved a 5-star rating, I thought I wanted more variation and color in the collection as a whole. By the time I got to reading the last three stories, the emotional ache of each story's kinship with the others had made its presence felt in my body, melting-away my earlier critique.

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### **Annabeth Leong says**

There's something hard to express about what it looks like when an author hits every emotional note exactly right, but this collection is one of the best examples I've come across. There's a lot of range here, too—hope, love, rebirth, disappointment, escape or the lack of it, leaving home, diaspora, trauma, queerness, family, the desire for family, cultural clash, sickness, healing or the desire for it...

I think the stories dealing with abuse hit me the hardest because they're some of the truest depictions of the emotional realities involved that I have seen.

When people write about trauma, it sometimes rings false for me because it's either too big or too small to be true. People sometimes write about traumatic events like they're always fiery, always volcanic, and miss the way that they can happen almost casually, and then the way they can reverberate. Other times, people write about them as if they're single, as if they're not interconnected with everything else about a person's life or who they are.

This book falls into neither of those traps, and that made the stories dealing with domestic violence that much more intense for me. They felt absolutely real, and Okparanta's explorations were all the more significant and important because of it. Okparanta deals with complexities of love and familial duty and pain and confusion in a way that felt true and refreshing for me partly because her stories don't apologize for anything supposedly unhealthy about the characters' reactions, and she doesn't try to explain things that can't be explained—she depicts them, with devastating accuracy.

I'm dwelling on this, but I think it's the part of the book I'll carry with me the longest.

I want to say something about the way the book is written, though, because that deserves attention, too. Rarely have I read stories that handle sensory description as well as these do—smell in particular. Never obtrusive or overly ornate, the descriptions display a sort of specificity that makes settings vivid, even if I've never seen them before (the smell of dead millipedes, for example).

This book wasn't a fast read for me, because many of the stories build dread to such a level of intensity that I couldn't just go from one to the next without a break. I'm so glad that I did read it.

"Shelter" means a lot to me, but there are so many others. "Story, Story!" is a master class in horror and building tension. "Tumours and Butterflies" is another story of domestic violence that took me inside my own life even as it offered me new insight. "Fairness" is an exploration of colorism that cut me to the core.

I'll be looking for Okparanta's writing in the future.

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### **CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says**

It's perhaps best to begin with the fact that happiness you won't find much in Chinelo Okparanta's short story collection *Happiness, Like Water*. After all, as one character points out, happiness is like water if "we're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping through our fingers." What you will find, however, are some tenderly written stories about Nigerian women, sometimes in the US or in Nigeria, grappling with the demands made of them in a racist, sexist, and homophobic world.

If that sounds depressing, well, maybe it is; it's important work that Okparanta is doing, investigating the myriad of ways in which her characters are bound by a limited set of choices in a world that often doesn't value them; however, she does have this to say in an interview with Saraba magazine: "in some ways I write about what is positive. I write about brave and ambitious men and women. I write about intelligent people. I write about kindness, about love. I write about people who, like me, are trying their best to make sense of their lives within the societies in which they find themselves." In this way, I didn't find *Happiness* a sad book, despite the often bleak subject matter.

Okparanta writes simply but beautifully, something which also helps break the sometimes gloomy circumstances in which her characters find themselves. It is also not a collection without hope. For example:

And I think perhaps all this will do. The waterfowls are still quacking, and the sun is high in the sky. The river is still glowing in shades of silver and gold. Grace is sitting next to me, and I can't help thinking that perhaps the verge of joy is its own form of happiness.

This is an unrepentantly feminist book, dealing with issues such as shadism, beauty standards, domestic violence, gender roles, class, and queer [and straight] sexuality. *Happiness* doesn't feel like an 'issue' book, though, I think because the voices of the women play such a big part in the stories. My two favourites, "Grace" and "Story, Story!" in particular, featured palpable, unique voices. "Grace" is narrated by a middle-aged divorced woman who's a (English?) professor teaching a course on the Old Testament. It's not clear exactly what her beliefs are, but it seems like she's some kind of Christian, or maybe has a Christian background. The story centers around her relationship with a Nigerian student, definitely a Christian and grappling with her sexuality and what the Bible (supposedly) says about queerness. I thought Okparanta nailed the world-weariness of this older woman's voice, as well as the youthful one of the younger woman.

"Story, Story!" is, I think, the strongest in the collection, and probably features the voice that is the most different from the rest of the narrators. I don't want to spoil this climactic, powerful story by giving away important details, but it is a chilling narrative about the lengths of insanity to which women can be driven by the white heteropatriarchy. If there were one part from this book I would want everyone to read, it's the brilliantly titled "Story, Story!"

Despite the innovation of those two I just discussed, several of the other stories featured women whose voices began to run together a bit for me by the end of the collection. There were a lot of middle-class

women who were teachers, which isn't in itself a problem, if the voices are differentiated; however, I didn't find that to be the case. This is a fault I've found many a time in first books by new writers: drawing from their own experiences, sometimes they fail to fully turn that inspiration into wide-ranging fiction. There wasn't a problem with the voice itself, just that it was shared by characters in different stories in different places and situations, which makes them seem less like, well, real humans. Okparanta is at her best when trying on distinct voices, such as in "Story, Story!" and "Grace" as well as "Shelter" (whose narrator is a child).

Interestingly, if you look at Happiness as a whole, it seems to be suggesting that heterosexual relationships are doomed, but ones between women have hope. It's not that the queer relationships are painted idyllically, but there is a distinct sense of optimism in the stories that feature romantic relationships between women that is lacking in the ones featuring men and women. Relationships with men and /or heterosexual marriage seem to be too steeped in patriarchal power dynamics to offer women any real options. While I see the appeal of this argument, it also puzzles me; my first thought is, okay but what are heterosexual women supposed to do? Also, it feels defeatist, like confirming men will and can never be feminist allies and never have respectful relationships with women. Is that actually how we want to look at the world?

It's the system, paired with and run by individual men, that creates and upholds the values Okparanta is writing against and many of her stories actually make a point of focusing on the fact that it is the women's mothers who are the agents of the patriarchal trap of marriage, as well as enforcing racist and sexist beliefs about women's roles. In other words, women enforce patriarchy too, and we won't get rid of it even if we secluded ourselves away and never had any contact with men ever again. So, Okparanta's argument there seems to contrast the one that relationships with men are ultimately hopeless.

Anyway, there's lot of food for thought in this book, as you can see! If you want to see more from Okparanta, like I did when I finished the book, check out the more recent story published in The New Yorker (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/201...>) as well as this interview with Okparanta (<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-t...>) about the story.

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### **Jean says**

Okparanta's short stories blew me away. Each of the ten stories relates an issue in the life of a female protagonist. Her writing is so passionate that in each story, I actually felt what the character appeared to be feeling. The book looks at mother/daughter relationships, physical and mental abuse, homosexual relationships, and infidelity. Okparanta, gives great incite into Nigerian women. Although I must admit that these issues are every cultures issues. Wonderful, wonderful read.

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### **Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says**

A compelling, well-written collection of stories about unhappy people. This is Okparanta's first book, and she's certainly an author to watch.

This book contains 10 bite-sized (average length 20 pages) short stories starring contemporary Nigerian

women, who struggle with family pressures, societal expectations and unhealthy relationships. The word that comes to mind when thinking about the subject matter is *brave*; the stories are unabashedly feminist, not in an easy sort of way but in their unstinting look at the forces that shape women's lives.

The chilling "Story! Story!" is perhaps the strongest in the collection, with suspense and just the right amount of foreshadowing leading up to its powerful, inevitable, and yet startling conclusion. "America" and "Grace" are also excellent: in the former, a teacher attempts to get a visa and join her lesbian lover in the U.S., while the latter focuses on a budding romance between a divorced American professor and a young Nigerian student. Interestingly, the only romances in the book with any hope of success seem to be between women; those featuring a man and a woman turn out to be emotionally damaging if not physically abusive. "Wahala!" skillfully depicts a woman trapped by her husband's and mother's desire for her to have a child. I was somewhat less convinced by the abusive relationships in "Shelter" and "Tumours and Butterflies," which seem perhaps too simplistic, but both stories succeed in other areas: the first deals with the shabby way immigrants are often treated when seeking services in the U.S., while the second paints a complex picture of a mother and daughter torn apart by the mother's loyalty to her abusive husband. The only noticeably weak story is "Designs," which is also the only one with a male protagonist, and which seems uncertain just what it's trying to accomplish.

I can't help but compare this to Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, also a collection of stories about Igbo women in Nigeria and the U.S. Adichie's stories are more technically proficient, the writing more polished, but I think I like Okparanta's better. These stories feel heartfelt, never devolving into a recitation of gripes, and their protagonists have to struggle more; they come from a lower rung on the socioeconomic ladder and a place of less self-assurance. My biggest reservation about this book is that the character development doesn't quite match up to the intensity of the subject matter; most of the protagonists feel similar, both in obvious ways (they're all teachers, except the few who are children) and in their somewhat amorphous personalities.

Overall though, this is a very promising collection. The writing is good, the descriptions vivid; the author has a strong sense of pacing and tension. If Okparanta writes a novel I will certainly want to read it.

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### **Mary says**

<https://maryokekereviews.blogspot.com...>

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### **Friederike Knabe says**

Chinelo Okparanta came to my attention after her story, *America*, was a finalist for the 2013 *Caine Prize for African Writing*. It tells the touching story of a very special friendship between two young women that challenges Nigerian traditions and social conventions... *America* has been published as one of ten stories in this, her first collection, *Happiness, like Water*. Okparanta is without a doubt becoming a promising representative of the new generation of Nigerian and African writers who are giving growing prominence to the field of African short fiction writing.

Chinelo Okparanta's engaging stories in this book, some set in Nigeria, some among Nigerian immigrants in the US, explore a wide range of topical subjects and concerns. Mostly told through the eyes of a first person

protagonist, she writes with confidence and sensitivity, her language is subtle, yet also lucid and powerful. Despite of the short fiction format, her characters are realistically drawn and we can comprehend the challenges of their various circumstances. While her stories are rooted in her Nigerian background (she moved with her parents from Nigeria to the US at the age of 10) she addresses such issues as love, longing and betrayal, faith and doubt, and inner-family and inter-generational tensions and violence in such a way that they move beyond the specific and become stories of human struggle and survival. Yes, there is happiness too - fleeting moments that need to be savoured, hope for a future where it can establish itself...

Do I have favourites among the stories? Maybe I do, but each reader will find those that feel closer to home or that affect us individually more deeply than others. Fortunately, I don't have to choose.

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### **Cheryl says**

When you're a child growing up in West Africa who has done something wrong and must be reprimanded, or say you need some advice, it's possible that your mother or father starts the lecture with a story, and in this story, the characters somehow embody your predicament. When you're an adult living in America and your career-driven African father calls to give you advice, it often starts with a parable or short story; and even a text can turn into flash fiction. Reading these stories from Okparanta, I was reminded of how the portrait of place and people can be distilled through story, how problems, questions and solutions are easily embedded in narrative.

These stories catch you unawares; you stroll casually through them and suddenly it is as if you've been yanked by the hair, pulled under the torment of humanity, and emerge to find the serenity of solution.

I'd sit on a bamboo mat, and she'd light a candle, allow its wax to drip onto the bottom of an empty can of evaporated milk, a naked can, without its paper coating. She'd stick the candle on the wax and allow it to harden in place. And then she'd begin the story.

In the dim candlelight, I'd observe the changes that took place on her face with each turn of her thought. Soft smiles turned to wrinkles in the forehead, then to distant, disturbed eyes which then refocused, becoming clear again like a smoggy glass window whose condensation had been dispelled suddenly by a waft of air.

When I first read her short story "Fairness" in 23 Great Stories, I knew I had to get Okparanta's collection. I knew that I wouldn't be let down by the poise of her prose and in fact, I've been dazzled (my only wish is that the collection didn't open with "On Ohaeto Street," because even though it is a story strong in form, it is not the strongest of her stories). Once I started reading the second story, "Wahala," about a couple pressured by community to have a child and a wife who must suffer the repercussions, I knew I would be easily allured by melancholic saga within this collection..

Speaking of saga, there is drama that dazzles in every story, and the pacing is enacted with storytelling grace ("Runs Girl," "America," "Shelter," "Grace," and "Designs" were some of my favorites). This central theme of cultural conformity that sometimes is the cause of someone being ostracized and brutalized, this theme which serves as an undercurrent of conflicts plaguing the continent of Africa, of conflicts plaguing the world, this theme serves as a backdrop for each of these stories. In each story, humanity is inspected through the

lens of lesbian love, marital rape and abuse, gender disparity, infidelity, and more. Yes, a microscope is taken to global women's issues, using Nigeria as a setting, and for those who can't see beyond the idea that this encompasses women and Africa, too bad - Chinelo, *M huru gin a anya*.

I loved August in America the same way that I loved it in Nigeria, the same way that I loved the rain, and the scent of millipedes, and the scent of snails. I loved August with the same intensity with which I would eventually despise the autumn, and especially the winter - that cold, dark season that brought me to the brink of despair.

A few days ago I read an interesting interview with 2009 Caine-prize-winner, novelist, and professor, E C Osondu, where he was asked if as an African writer seeking a global audience, he felt "constrained in terms of the subjects and themes" he writes about. He responded: "***I want to tell the best story that I can tell and in the most compelling way that it can be told. Faulkner wrote about his own small patch of the American south and found a global audience. Alice Munro continues to write about the politics of domestic life in small Canadian towns and most if not all of William Trevor's stories are set in Ireland and yet they have found global resonance.***"

Being a reader means being intrigued by the world, the familiar and unfamiliar, and as I read these stories, I was immediately intrigued by the "small patch" of her Nigeria (Port Harcourt and Lagos) that Okparanta sketches.

The realization is something like the movement of air, slow-forming, impalpable at first, then building and building until it is quite visible to my eyes, until the branches shake and quiver in the wind, until the leaves hop and skip about.

The layered simplicity of the drama reminds me of Grace Paley's *Later the Same Day*. The more I read stories like these, the more I am saddened by the close-mindedness of African-lit-cynics. Too bad.

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### **Bonnie Brody says**

Chinelo Okparanta has written a stellar debut book of short stories. It is easy to see why Granta has named her one of 'six New Voices for 2012'. This book is peopled with Nigerians who yearn for something that they do not have and are sometimes afraid to go after what they want. Some of the characters reside in Nigeria and others are in the United States, attempting to make new lives for themselves. Each of the stories stand alone except for one that is linked to a second story.

'On Ohaeto Street' is the first story in the collection. It is about Eze, a Jehovah's witness with a good job as an engineer. He marries Chinwe with the condition that she become a witness. Eze is arrogant and a braggart. This is the story of their marriage and the night that they were robbed.

In 'Wahala', Ezinne suffers from a condition that causes very painful intercourse. This makes intimacy with her husband very difficult for both of them. Her husband, Chibuzo, desperately wants a child. Ezinne, Chibuzo, and Ezinne's mother go to a traditional healer for help.

'Fairness' explores the depths to which Nigerian women and teenagers will go in order to lighten their skin. They are willing to do things that cause irreparable harm to themselves.

'Story, Story!' reads like something out of Stephen King. It is about a woman who will go to any lengths in order to secure a child for herself. She will even try evil and poisoned potions on pregnant women with the hope that they will die and their child will survive so that she can steal it.

'Runs Girl' tells of a college student with a very sick mother. She prostitutes herself in order to raise money for her mother's medical care and bills. Her shame and her mother's shock at her actions make the situation at home even worse than it already is.

'America' is a very poignant love story about Gloria and Ada who fall in love in Nigeria where same-sex love is punishable by law. Gloria finds a good job in the United States and Ada makes every effort to follow her tree, trying for three years to get her Green Card.

'Shelter' is the first of two linked stories. A Nigerian woman and her child live in Massachusetts and suffer domestic violence and physical abuse. After months of preparing to seek help, the mother finds out that their particular type of student visas make them ineligible for residence in a safe house. 'Tumours and Butterflies' is the follow-up tale to 'Shelter'. In this story, the girl has grown up and is in college. Her father has continued to batter her mother and has abused the daughter physically and emotionally. Her father has banned her from their home and it has been ten years since she's visited except for sneak visits to her mother when they think the father is asleep. The daughter gets a call one day from her mother, asking her to come home and help care for her father who has been diagnosed with thyroid cancer and needs surgery and radiation treatment. He seems somewhat changed at first but the cycle of abuse continues and the daughter tries to find the strength to stand up to both her parents - her father because of his abuse, and her mother for putting her father ahead of her all the time.

A female professor and her female Nigerian student fall in love in 'Grace'. The student is supposed to enter into an arranged marriage shortly. Despite all the potential negative consequences of their love, they both feel committed to one another. When one asks the other if their love will make her happy, the response is "Happiness is like water. We're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers."

In 'Designs', a Nigerian man studying in the United States proposes to the woman he's been living with for a year, a woman he has known since childhood. Meanwhile, he's been carrying on an affair with someone else.

All of the stories are powerful and remain with me. They take a hard look at the Nigerian people and the difficult situations that they face in their country - poverty, oil spills and water contamination, the difficulty of arranged marriages, men's hold over women. Even the Nigerians who are ex-pats to the United States, come with their Nigerian values hard wired into them. I found the stories to be very well-written with excellent character development. They are emotionally rich and compelling. I see great things in store for Ms. Okparanta and look forward to reading her future work.

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## **David says**

Individually, each of these stories is excellent, as good as Adichie or Petina Gappah, but as a collection I found they lacked variety - too many variations on the same themes with too similar narrators. In that way it

reminds me a little of Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* which also featured several beautifully written but rather sameish stories. Still, I very much look forward to the novel that the author bio says she is currently writing.

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### **Nakia says**

This book made me love short stories again. Eloquent and quiet but riveting and stirring. I want to read so much more from Chinelo.

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### **Debbie says**

ssrqar

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### **Roger Brunyate says**

#### **Women Are Women, Everywhere**

Three facts about the cover: it begins with the word "Happiness"; it has a vaguely African design; and on the back it has the fresh, even eager face of its Nigerian author, Chinelo Okparanta. Two of these things are misleading, but constructively so; the third is absolutely true.

"Happiness is like water," one of Okparanta's characters says; "we're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers." There is at least a glimmer of happiness in this particular story, "Grace," the eighth of ten in this deeply moving collection. But happiness as a whole is in short supply. Before it is anything else, this is a book about women and the forces that limit their independence. Daughters can be manipulated by controlling parents, even when they say they are acting in the child's best interests. Escaping home, they may be trapped in marriages to insensitive or abusive husbands. Whether married or not, their lives may be warped by failure to fulfill their expected function as the bearers of children. And if they find their affections turning to others of their own sex, they have to keep their love a closely guarded secret. Feminist themes, all of them. But there is nothing strident or preachy about these stories, nor is a single one of them generic. All center around women—Chinwe, Ezinne, Nneoma, and six or seven others—who are achingly real. We read their stories as though each is unique, hopefully an exception to the general rule of life; it is only later that we perceive the pattern.

African, yes. Chinelo Okparanta, who has lived in this country for many years\* and attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, dedicates the collection "For Home." The first five stories are set in Nigeria, around Port Harcourt; the sixth is about obtaining a US visa; and the last four are set here in America. The African ones are brilliantly so, colored by those unusual names, by snatches of Igbo, by foods such as garri and jollof rice. But I am also aware that they are the author's creations—sharp biting anecdotes often with a twist at the end—and somewhat removed from the life she is living now. You would not read the book to find out about social or political conditions, though this is clearly the same country that older writers like Helon Habila or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have described. Okparanta presents a Nigeria where male domination, arranged marriages, and the limitation of roles for women are still par for the course, and her emigrants (even many of the women) still retain these expectations when they arrive on these shores. But her emphasis is less on the

problems than on the individual young women of her own generation affected by them. Women are women everywhere. This is not a local book, nor even global, but universal.

Which brings me to that photo of Chinelo Okparanta herself. The smile on her face and optimistic glint in her eyes are surely genuine. How else can I explain the fact that a collection of ten stories about women's tragedies should leave me so energized and upbeat? There is an honesty and directness to her writing that reminds me of the early stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, and is much more refreshing than the gargantuan structures of Adichie's *Americanah*, which chronicles a similar transatlantic trajectory. Unlike some other books of this kind, Okparanta's writing does not lose steam when the action moves to America, and she avoids almost entirely the typical immigrant tropes of wonder and confusion at conditions in the new country. Instead, the stories become achingly personal. Two of them, "Shelter" and "Tumours and Butterflies," seem to share the same characters, making me wonder in turn how much of this is autobiographical; it is difficult to read either or them, or the amazing "Grace," and not want to cry. With writing like this, Chinelo Okparanta might not be African at all—simply a fellow member of the human race.

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Chinelo Okparanta was brought over to America as a child. She grew up in a Nigerian family, of course, and has presumably been back many times. But I sensed that all the earlier stories were anecdotes about the country—powerful ones, no doubt—while the American stories were scenes from her ongoing life, transferred to quasi-fictional characters, but still achingly real on quite a different level. I am still wondering whether the older mentor who plays such an important role in "Grace" is a covert portrait of Marilynne Robinson.

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### **Beverly says**

This was a 3.5 rating for me but rounded up because of the beauty of the words.

If Okparanta's exquisitely written debut short story collection has a theme – it is about mothers and how their hopes and dreams affect their daughters struggle for their own hope and dreams. I found the stories to be graceful and profound and breathtaking in the fluidity of the language to evoke emotions with quiet subtly.

In "Fairness", the daughter is constantly reminded of her dark skin while the lighter skinned mother reads her American magazines with their concept of beauty. After hearing of success of lightning skin using bleach, the daughter experiments on a household servant rather than herself because her class status permits this. Favorites of mine was "On Ohaeto Street" because in the end the daughter was able to find her happiness by following her own heart, and was elated when in "Tumours and Butterflies", the daughter finally acknowledged she was no longer going to feel her mother's guilt to share her pain for her mother's life decision.

I thought all stories were beautifully rendered and I hope the author considers writing a novel. I recommend this book for both readers of short story collections and books about mother/daughter relationships.

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## **Jill says**

Let's start out by saying that if you're looking for stories about happiness, you won't find them in this short story collection. The author tips her hand in the titled quote: "Happiness is like water...We're always trying to grab onto it, but it's always slipping between our fingers."

These are stories where urgent needs of the characters are often unmet and where emotional survival is often precarious. These are also uniquely Nigerian stories; as readers, we get to see the culture and mores of this fascinating country up close and personal. But most of all, these are strong stories – intimate, accessible, authentic, and gracefully written.

The anthologized story, *America*, focuses on a narrator named Nnenna, a science teacher, who is appealing for a visa to join her gay lover, Gloria, in America. The timing is right: America has just suffered a well-publicized oil spill. Yet is the need for a less-complicated life a betrayal of sorts since Nigeria also needs its talents? Nneena reflects, "Now the mangroves are dead, and there is no birdsong at all. And of course, there are no fish, no shrimp, and no crab to be caught. Instead, oil shoots up in the air like a fountain of black water, and fisherman lament that rather than coming out of the water, they are instead harvesting Shell oil on their bodies."

Ms. Okparanta's stories are peopled with those in trauma: in *Wahala!*, a barren young wife is forced to go to a dibia to remove a "curse by the enchanted" and then to endure a painful act of sex in order to conceive a child so that her husband will retain community respect. In *Runs Girl*, a young student whose mother can't afford proper medical help is coerced into an act of prostitution. We find women and children seeking refuge and shelter from abusive husbands, gay lovers who must forego love because one is acquiescing to an arranged marriage, and barren spinsters who will cross moral boundaries to have a child.

Yet despite the dark material, these stories are so darn good. Chinelo Okparanta has a wonderful voice and power of description, and her portrait of Nigerian life shines through. In the past few months, I've read fabulous books by Nigerians Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, A. Igoni Barrett, and now Chinelo Okparanta. The country is rich with talent.

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## **Michael says**

*"I stare at the drifting leaves, allow myself to be hypnotized by them, but it's a melancholic sort of hypnosis, the kind where you find yourself reliving all the things you wish you never had to live at all."*

This is a wonderful collection of short stories by Chinelo Okparanta, author of the novel *Under the Udala Trees*. Saying they are wonderful does not mean they make you feel wonderful. They are a wonderful exploration of character, with poetic and illuminating descriptions and imagery, with stories that are almost parables. But Ms. Okparanta is plumbing some frustrating truths about power and relationships here, so there are not a lot of uplifting moments among these pages.

These were all 4 or 5 stars for me, except for one that just turned my stomach. Sometimes with collections like these I will give the overall book 5 stars. For some reason, I didn't quite feel that way about this collection, despite the evocative, lyrical writing, and the rich, compelling characterizations. It helped me to

compare my experience reading this with my experience reading The Twelve Tribes of Hattie. That book I did give 5 stars, because there was something touching or passionate in the latter's stories that kept me from despair, or numbness. In Happiness, Like Water on the other hand, I found myself turning off my emotions because some of this is just too depressing and hopeless. There are some brutal topics being discussed here (trigger warning) (view spoiler), and so it is a juggling act to keep readers from being discouraged.

I think part of the overall takeaway for me was the helpless feeling you get when the people you care about destroy you and you have no backup plan. Maybe only half of the stories were like that, but it was enough to take some of the wind out of me. At the same time, these are true stories, in the sense that the truth of them is so clear you can almost feel it against your skin. So they are important stories to tell, I just wish some of them focused a little more on the sunrises, or the crinkles around someone's smile.

*"... I relent in her arms and think of how good it feels - how nice her skin feels on mine. And I continue to taste her lips, plump and sweet. And I breathe in her scent, flowery and light, something like lavender."*

Here are the contents, and my individual ratings:

On Ohaeto Street, 20 pp - 4 stars, a good opener; an ironic, dramatic slice of life  
Wahala!, 14 pp - 5 stars, grim, poignant state of affairs  
Fairness, 12 pp - 5 stars, horrific, visceral critique of social pressures  
Story, Story!, 20 pp - 4 stars, a disturbing narration, almost a horror story  
Runs Girl, 18 pp - 2 stars, social critique, but with the wrong conclusion (trigger warning) (view spoiler)  
America, 24 pp - 5 stars, social critique, with some surprising subtlety, an unexpected assessment  
Shelter, 14 pp - 4 stars, eloquent and touching, but depressing  
Grace, 30 pp - 4 stars, I thought the way she did this in Under the Udala Trees was better; the writing was good, but I did not understand the relationship  
Designs, 16 pp - 4 stars, poetic, grim, what goes around comes around  
Tumours and Butterflies, 30 pp - 5 stars, just brilliant, shows the depths of heartbreak and helplessness inherent in abusive relationships, I thought the nuggets of clarity were radiant

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