

From Nigeria to America and back

"There was a time in my life when I devoured Christian literature," says novelist Chigozie Obioma.

interview by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue



Chigozie Obioma. Photo by Craig Chandler/[University Communication/University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#).

Read the [main article on Chigozie Obioma and Jowhor Ile's debut novels](#).

Chigozie Obioma was born in 1986 in Akure, Nigeria. He was encouraged to write by his father, who as a child had worked in the home of the celebrated Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara. Obioma's first novel, The Fishermen, portrays a family in the midst of Nigerian politics, faith, mystery, and mythology. Obioma teaches writing at the University of Nebraska.

How did you decide to write *The Fishermen*?

I set off to write the novel after my dad mentioned a growing closeness between my two oldest brothers, who'd had a very serious rivalry growing up. I started to think about what it means to love your brother. What if my brothers' time of closeness had never come? That reflection brought me to the idea of a close-knit family whose closeness is destroyed.

I had been reading Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*, and something he said stood out: "A great civilization cannot be destroyed from the outside; it has to come from within." What could destroy this family? I ultimately came upon prophecy as the most potent tool to disrupt the group's unity. The prophecy would be handed over by someone who remains benign, not knowing the extent to which he has damaged the people.

That prophecy comes from a character called Abulu, whom the boys call a "madman." What role do people like Abulu play in Nigerian life?

A lot of mentally challenged people like Abulu roamed the streets of Akure when I was growing up. But I never encountered any prophesying madmen. Abulu is in the novel because I needed a character who could test the unity of the family. I thought I would invest such power into a character like Abulu—someone without authority. He is not a pastor and not a psychic.

Yet Abulu has a political dimension. *The Fishermen* is about a disrupted civilization. One of the book's epigraphs, a poem by Mazisi Kunene, says, "The madman has entered our house with violence / Defiling our sacred grounds / Claiming the single truth of the universe." This is how Western colonialists came into West Africa. Their claims—that there was only one God, and that a woman could be queen—were extremely strange to the Africans at the time. The Africans laughed at them. But at the end of the day, the madman with his one God and his woman king destroyed the civilization.

Who are your greatest religious influences?

I don't have religious influences the way I have literary influences, like Vladimir Nabokov and Chinua Achebe. But I used to read books by Watchman Nee. *The Spiritual Man* was one of my favorites. I read many books by A. W. Tozer, who is an American. Smith Wigglesworth and Perry Stone—these were popular authors among Nigerian Pentecostals. In Nigeria, we don't really care for fiction. We read mostly religious books—the Bible or the Qur'an—and motivational books.

Tell me about the relationship between religious and literary language in your work.

I grew up reading a lot of scripture, and there was a time in my life when I devoured Christian literature. My aesthetics have been shaped by this ancient way of telling stories. As critics have noted, *The Fishermen* is deeply biblical. The story of Cain and Abel with its rift between two brothers is an important part of the novel. There are other things lifted directly from the Bible, like when Ikenna says to his brothers, "Come with me. I will make you fishermen."

Nigeria is extremely religious. I grew up going to a church similar to the one in the book. It was an important part of our lives: the Sunday school, the music. The act of going to church itself is a ceremony in Africa. Sundays are a big deal. So a religious setting naturally seeps into the everyday lives of the boys in the novel. After the demise of two of the boys, it's the pastor who drives the van back and forth, and who visits the family. He is the one who pronounces the boys the "fishermen."

How would you compare and contrast Christianity in Nigeria and Christianity in the United States, now that you've lived here a while?

They are radically different. If you go to a church in Nigeria, you may not recognize the religion that is practiced there. A good example is the practice of revering pastors. In Nigeria they walk on a red carpet; their egos can be so inflated. In traditional West African religion, priests were revered. If they were coming to a town, they needed harbingers to warn women and children to stay indoors. That sense of power was imported into Christianity. When Nigerians hear that in Christian theology the pastor should be a servant, washing the church members' feet, they can't make sense of that.

Nigerians mix traditional ways of living with Western ideas and structures. In university admissions, for example, young people who are not qualified finish high school and their families make a phone call: somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody will get their name in. This is cronyism, and it's a major problem in Nigeria.

But it's rooted in cultural values. Prior to the coming of the British, there was no direct negotiation of any sort among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria. It was considered disrespectful to go directly to the source. If you wanted to have a girlfriend, you couldn't go to the girl and say, "I love you." You had to know somebody who knew

the parents and could arrange a conversation for you. Otherwise, the girl would be insulted. This process doesn't work well within a Western system, where it's considered corruption.

What do you see as your calling in Nigeria?

I am going on a massive, earth-scorching endeavor to teach Western ethics—at least to the children. I don't think it's advisable to dismantle everything and go back to the African way. A technologically driven, Western civilization is now the norm globally. Therefore, we need to understand and practice Western ethics to the letter. I want to set up an institute that will train children going to primary school. My idea—which is shared by those working with me—is to reorient the people.

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