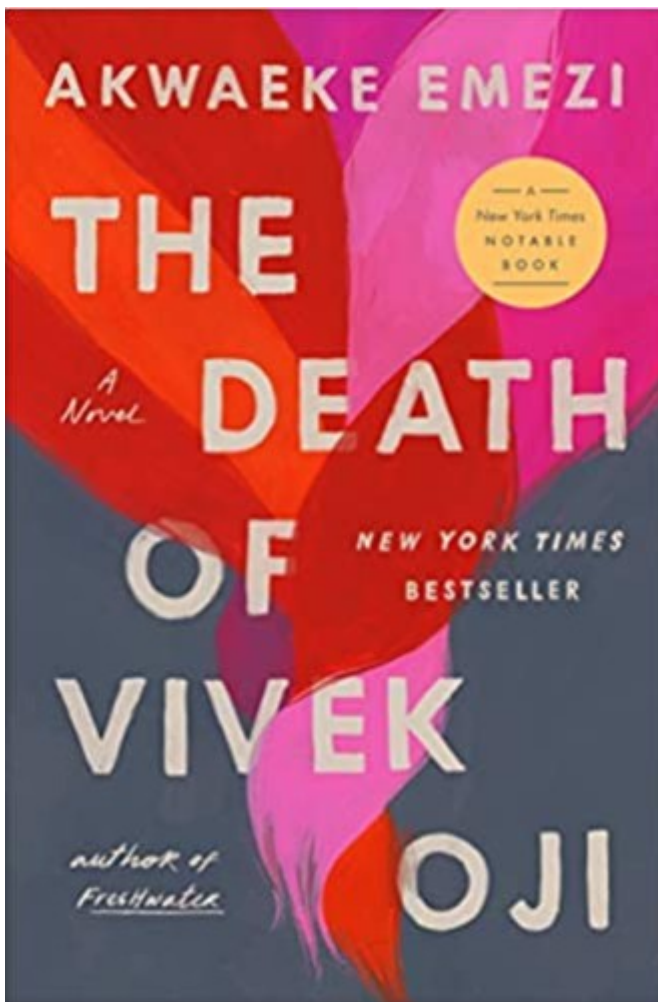


The Death of Vivek Oji shows us what we are afraid of

Akwaeke Emezi's stunning novel will leave you broken. It will also let the air back into your lungs.

by [Oluwatomisin Oredein](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Death of Vivek Oji

A Novel

by Akwaeke Emezi

Riverhead Books

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It is difficult to know how to speak of “unknowing.” Novelist Akwaeke Emezi thrusts this reality into the room, holding nothing back, signaling the obvious: humanity is not well versed in recognizing its complexity. We do not know the shape of our living. This feels like a problem as *The Death of Vivek Oji* unfolds, and it even hurts. But it is important to accept Emezi’s invitation into this aching realization, especially through the book’s gender-nonbinary Indian-Nigerian protagonist, Vivek.

Dear reader, I must warn you: Emezi’s masterpiece will leave you broken, in painful ways but also in critical ways, ways that let back into your lungs the air that you didn’t know was slowly seeping out in the first place. The stories of Vivek’s family—their parents Chika and Kavita, their uncle Ekene, their aunt Mary—will show you that what you’ve been doing is more akin to gasping than breathing. But the loving and lovely relationships between Vivek and their friends—Osita, Juju, Elizabeth, Somto, and Olunne—will remind you to breathe in the air of this complicated life, not to ignore its hazy texture or pretend it is either clear or opaque.

We must breathe in the muddiness. Neither our air nor our formations are clear. Vivek and their friends-turned-family teach us to take in the air given us; it will become what we need. Our body will take what it needs. Though we may not understand every prognostic breath, breathing will sustain our lives. This is the legacy of Vivek Oji: taking the air around us and converting it to what we need to breathe, to be.

Even as the rest of society pores over their confusion concerning the shape of Vivek’s life, Vivek finds Vivek. Vivek breathes. In this way, Vivek’s beautifully tragic story of self-determined wellness, peculiar belonging, communal acceptance, and pursuing what one wants from love is—whether we know it or not—the air we breathe. We would die without it; many *have* been dying without it, and this is tragic.

The tragedy is in the places death lurks: in social assignments, cultural expectations, and the narrow narratives Emezi’s characters fight so hard to align themselves with

and follow—and then, for those refusing a dead life, ultimately to bend and break away from.

Breaking is common in these pages. But cracks and fissures, we learn early on, are only lamentable if they emerge under social pressure. Brokenness, otherwise, presents a curious opportunity. Vivek's life proves that humans do not necessarily die from our brokenness; we die from not breathing.

Vivek decides to breathe—and they have help. Oddly enough, it is in Vivek's room, eating cupcakes with new friends Somto and Olunne, where they inhale and exhale, where kindness and casual acceptance break them open, invite exposure and disclosure, and welcome the truth. Being broken, in the best way, forces us to focus on each breath.

To call *The Death of Vivek Oji* a coming-of-age story does not quite do justice to the function of time in the novel. Readers are invited to sit with time—not only to meet the characters within time but to think of time as itself a major character.

Throughout Vivek's story, time and tradition tussle. The irony is that they are not supposed to: ancestral reverence in West African culture has ideologies in place where time and tradition are supposed to dance, not war.

Emezi shows how many have forgotten this. *The Death of Vivek Oji* touches on notions of the ancestral and on reincarnated love and living. These notions only seem out of place in a world that's unaware of how time and self meet, how they have always met. This novel outs African cultural failure and society's unpreparedness to know its own time-stamped traditions. It exposes the painful, egregious refusal to welcome ancestors back.

While Vivek's heart-wrenching story is front and center, in the background is the sinister tale of social and cultural misrecognition. The ancestors are dishonored: they are gossiped about, beaten in church, called demonic, rejected, and treated as if they never were. They are ignored by those who claimed to have loved them the most.

Sure, Emezi presents a number of narrative dynamics to consider: immigration accounts, multicultural identities, gender debates, cultural kinship patterns, aesthetic expectations, and social pressures. But all of these realities are filtered through the time-tested debates of honor and tradition. Their warring haunts every page. An aura of dishonor overshadows this story of self-love, community, and

friendship.

Vivek's story is not a new story. It is the entanglement of ancient ways of being in a world that calls itself modern but would be more truthful if it called itself scared. It fears it does not recognize itself, its ancestors, and how they approached this life. It is haunted by the realities that there is not one way for the world to work, to exist in its fullness. Fullness is both a challenge and a gift. *The Death of Vivek Oji* shows us that many of us are quite frightened that fullness is still arriving.

Like time, I am not sure if "the unknown" is a protagonist or antagonist in *The Death of Vivek Oji*. What I do know is that every character is entrenched in the unknown. They each do what they know to deal with it. Some fare better than others.

Emezi's brilliant novel makes clear that the power and influence of the unknown cannot be underestimated. Like the Yoruba god Esu, this book is a liminal force that determines, in its own tricky way, the path to a life worth knowing. The question becomes, Is the world ready to know herself?