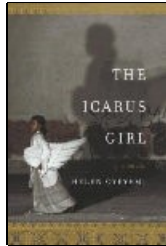


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Book Review
The Icarus Girl
by [Helen Oyeyemi](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: February 16, 2006

The main character of *The Icarus Girl* is eight years old, going on nine. The author finished writing this, her first novel, shortly before her nineteenth birthday. The New York Public Library files the book under Young Adult. But don't get the wrong idea from all this. *The Icarus Girl* is not for kids. This novel is genuinely frightening, and I would think twice before giving to any child under age twelve or so.

Jessamy Harrison is an intense, intelligent, and solitary girl, the daughter of a Yoruba mother and an English father. While visiting the compound of her mother's people in Nigeria, she sees lantern light in the upper window of an abandoned building. When she investigates, she finds a message to herself written on the top of a dusty table.

Jess first sees Titiola soon afterwards, when she opens her eyes after lying in the sun at the bottom of a flight of stairs. (Was she sleeping? Just daydreaming? Could she have fallen down the stairs and stunned herself?) The African girl seems strangely proportioned at first, but Jess decides quickly she is just an ordinary child. But there is something odd after all, something a little mechanical in the way the girl repeats Jess's words before reluctantly giving her name. It is as if Titiola has just come into being at that moment, or just come into this world from elsewhere.

Titiola, or TillyTilly as Jess calls her, is soon Jess's friend. The friendship seems doomed to end when Jess returns to England, but Jess promises to find her there, and does. Even as Jess and TillyTilly get closer, the African girl is shy of meeting Jess's family or other friends, and evasive about her own connections.

Is TillyTilly an imaginary friend, born out of too much reading and solitude? Is she a kind of projection of Jess's suppressed darker impulses? Is the twin sister who died when Jess was born? Each of these explanations is a little too simple, and one of the scary pleasures of this book is the way the author teases out the mystery, a mystery that Jess wants to solve and to guard at the same time. Jess is simultaneously fascinated, frightened, and protective of her increasingly dangerous friend.

About the Reviewer

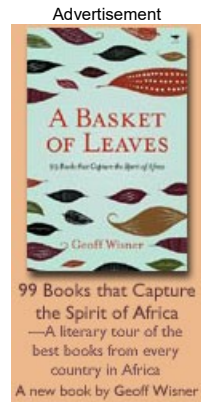
[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

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