Our June choice - The Icarus Girl by Helen Oyeyemi

A quick synopsis of The Icarus Girl:

Jessamy “Jess” Harrison is eight years old – a twin though she doesn`t know it. Sensitive, whimsical, possessed of an extraordinary and powerful imagination, she spends hours writing haiku verses, reading Shakespeare, or simply hiding in the dark warmth of the airing cupboard. As the child of an English father and a Nigerian mother, Jess can’t shake off the feeling of being alone wherever she goes. The other children in her class are wary of her occasional screaming fits. Believing that a change from her English environment might be the perfect antidote to Jess’s alarming mood swings, her parents whisk her off to Nigeria for the first time where she meets her mother’s family—including her formidable but loving grandfather.

Jess’s adjustment to Nigeria is only beginning when she encounters Titiola, or TillyTilly, a ragged little girl her own age. To Jess, it seems that, at last, she has found someone who will understand her. But gradually, TillyTilly’s visits become more disturbing, as Jess comes to realise that she doesn’t know who TillyTilly is at all.

Helen Oyeyemi draws on Nigerian mythology to present a strikingly original variation on a classic literary theme: the existence of "doubles," both real and spiritual, who play havoc with our perceptions and our lives. The Icarus Girl is a story of twins and ghosts, of a little girl growing up between cultures and colours. A very curious little girl, who like Icarus, wants to explore and flies so high she puts herself in danger.

The Icarus Girl is unconventional and can be read in many different ways. Is it

- A fairy tale in which anything is possible?
- Gothic horror with an African influence?
- Folklore mixed with reality?
- Multicultural magical realism?
- Spiritual realism?
- A mystical adventure?

Helen Oyeyemi writes about childhood as if she were not inventing but truly remembering it, not through the distorting lens of time, but as scary and magical as it really was. She wrote The Icarus Girl when she was seventeen and still at school – a remarkable achievement. The cruel world of the playground and childish fantasy are still close to her heart. Born in Nigeria but raised in London, she understands the difficulties of moving between two cultures and not fully belonging in either.
Our response to The Icarus Girl was mixed – ranging from really loving the book to hating it. On balance, readers were disappointed. One or two found it so boring or alienating that they didn’t finish reading it. First the negative responses:

“I felt suffocated and confused and also a little jealous of such a talented seventeen year old writer!”

“I disliked it so much I stopped reading after page 80. It was such a mish mash of common Freudian psychology and Nigerian mythology. It seemed banal.”

“I didn’t look forward to reading it every evening. The characters were too confusing-it was too far fetched for my taste.”

“The last 100 pages really dragged. But I enjoyed the earlier part-especially the description of the Nigerian grandfather’s home.”

“I thought it would be interesting because of the exploration of two cultures but I found it rather stereotyped. Nevertheless, there were tremendous references to the problems of bringing up an African child in Britain.”

“I didn’t like it. Although it was interesting to see the world from an eight year old’s perspective - it was really frightening at some points.”

“I asked myself - what is this author trying to do? I wasn’t in the mood for a teenager’s fantasies.”

“I was very disappointed. I’d wanted a good read and I didn’t find it. It was naïve and a bit immature. It could have been illuminating about Nigerian culture but it failed for me. Had she been eating too many mushroom sandwiches and hallucinating?”

“I was waiting for a fantastic twist at the end. I was reminded of the kind of stories we all wrote at school – which ended with…and then I woke up.”

“At first I thought it was humorous – black or white? Nigerian or English? I don’t believe in supernatural things and so it was a bit much for me. I’m too rational and I’ve been trained to be that way.”

“If you subtracted Tilly Tilly from the plot, there would only be about forty pages left. The plot was too narrow and drifted too much.”

But many responded positively to the book:
“I couldn’t put it down. I love the Gothic horror style and I felt like a Victorian lady-indulging in the twists and turns of the plot.”

“I found it quite captivating at first - I was impressed by the portrayal of a precocious eight year old - I couldn’t stop reading it but then came the second part and I began to lose interest. The plot meandered all over the place.”

“For me it was very real. Tilly Tilly is an energy - an entity - a forgotten, lost twin. Oyeyemi is describing something I know to be a reality. She captures the spiritual dimension perfectly.”

“I was very open to it. I was aware of how young the writer is and was amazed at the accurate portrayal of an eight year old’s mind and way of thinking, at her coping strategies and the creation of her fantasy world – her power of imagination.”

“I liked it from the beginning. The ending is brilliantly done - we’re transported into the spiritual world.”

“As a child of mixed parents, Jessamy is searching for her roots – her Nigerian soul. She has the ability to look behind what the adults wanted. I identified with my own grandchildren.”

“The mother/daughter relationship is complex. Jessamy describes her mother like a black shadow – a disturbing but strong image.”

“I found it very hard to read but it was worthwhile. I found the development of Jessamy’s personality very convincing - and particularly her ways of coping with her isolation. Her split personality was very well drawn.”

“For me, the power of the story lies in the mistake of keeping secrets from children. A strong and valuable message to parents.”

“The mystical atmosphere drew me in. I’m fascinated by magical realism and very aware of the danger of being too rational. I have vivid childhood memories of strange experiences – were they in my imagination? I’m still not sure.”

“I loved how Jessamy takes revenge on her bullying classmate. I like to get my own back too – so this part pleased me a lot!”

“I applauded Jessamy wanting to change the fate of Beth in Little Women – it has always seemed unjust that the kindest, sweetest March daughter had to die. But I guess Beth’s death is more realistic.”
“If we were lucky as children, our elders told us stories -- fairy tales and heroic journeys, or family lore passed from one generation to the next. But sadly the folk tradition in Germany has generally been lost due to the association with the Nazi past.”

“The healing process is only just beginning. And it will take another fifty years to recover from the horrors of the DDR. The evil of the Nazi period has left its deep scars. We are only just beginning to recover as a nation.”

“The British are perceived as an eccentric nation. A country full of ghosts and superstition.”

“There are just as many ghosts in Germany!”

“The connection Jessamy feels with her Nigerian grandfather is touching.”

*She felt as if she were a little piece of him that had crumbled off, which he was examining for flaws and broken bits before deciding whether it was worth taking it to be reattached.*

*He smiled, and although his smile was bumpy because some of his teeth were jagged and broken, it was a warming, infectious smile that was reflected in his eyes. It made her smile widely in return. She felt as if the room had been lit up.*

We talked about the close links often found between grandchildren and grandparents. Some of us had (and still have) an easier relationship with our grandparents than our parents. We often resemble our grandparents more than our parents. We also looked at the genetic reoccurrence of twins in families.

“There is an African tradition that twins are very blessed and live in three worlds.”

*Jess lives in three worlds. She lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She’s abiku, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things. Fern tells her things. We should have done ibeji carving for her!*

Twins are a blessing but if one twin dies an ibeji carving must be made to protect the remaining twin. If not, misfortune falls on the family as the spirits seek the life of the remaining twin. Jessamy has not even been told that she had a twin sister but she senses something is missing.

We discussed our own experiences of twins – especially ones we knew who had lost their twin. It was chilling that the remaining twins had been strange or disturbed for most of their lives. My own dear cousin (his twin sister had only lived a few days)
had suffered with depression and eventually committed suicide. Is this a coincidence or not? Maybe there is some reality in the African myth.

It is fascinating that more twins are born in Nigeria than in any other country in the world. Among the Yoruba there is a very high birth rate of twins-45 sets to every 1000 births. Twins play an important part in Nigerian culture

26a by Diana Evans, which we read two years ago, is also by a young Nigerian British writer and focuses on the theme of twins. In many ways it is a more accessible book and less confusing than The Icarus Girl. Oyeyemi may even have been inspired (influenced?) by it.

Although The Icarus Girl is undoubtedly an achievement for such a young writer, we noted examples of the immaturity in the writing. Characterisation is sketchy and we are often left frustrated at not being given enough information.

- How has Jessamy’s father recovered so quickly?
- Has Jessamy definitely survived the accident?
- What has happened to Siobhan?

There are loose ends left trailing throughout the novel. In the opening chapter, we are given glimpses of Jessamy’s British family. The picture of her life in London is brief, some felt too brief, before we are whisked off to Nigeria.

The strength of the novel lies in the heartbreaking descriptions of a young mixed race child not only grappling with cultural differences but with the problems of growing up and self-identity in a complicated world. Helen Oyeyemi has drawn on her own experiences. She tried to commit suicide herself when she was a teenager. No doubt the book has been cathartic for her. It is convincing because it rings true. But it is not a comfortable read – more of a painful adolescent experience. Most of us are grateful to have put adolescence behind us!