



### *Akata Witch*

Written by Nnedi Okorafor

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Blending fantasy with reality, this young adult novel tells the story of Sunny Nwazue, a Nigerian American girl who lives in Chicago until her family (parents and two older brothers) move back to Nigeria when she is nine. They live in a village in Southeastern Nigeria near the city of Aba in what is known as Igboland. The word “Akata” is a pejorative label used by Nigerians to refer to African Americans or other foreign-born blacks. In addition to being Akata, Sunny is albino. While very athletic and an excellent soccer player, she is limited by not being able to be in the sun for very long and

because she is a girl.

The story begins when Sunny is 11 and has a fight with Jibaku, a bully who taunts her for the way she looks. With several of her cohort, Jibaku beats Sunny until Orlu, a boy in their class, steps in. It is Jibaku who calls Sunny “Akata witch” because she is both African American and albino. Through Orlu, Sunny meets Chichi who lives in a seeming hovel near Sunny’s house. Through her friendship with Orlu and Chichi, she discovers that she is a Leopard Person with magical powers. Unlike Orlu and Chichi, however, whose families are also Leopard People, Sunny is a free agent. Together, the three go to Leopard Knocks, a place where the Leopard people can be together away from the Lambs (regular people) and learn about their magical gifts. It is here that Sunny first meets Anatov, a teacher who accepts her as one of his pupils along with Orlu and Chichi. They also meet Sasha who is also African American/Nigerian. The four become friends and rely on one another as they learn juju, the magical art that they each have an affinity for as Leopard people. As they continue to visit Leopard Knocks, Sunny has to use juju to keep her parents, especially her mother, from worrying about where she goes and what she is doing. Her father and brothers can’t be bothered with her at this point.

As the story unfolds, each of the four friends is chosen by a mentor and spends a great deal of time learning who they are and their individual gifts. The goal is to pass Ndibu, the third level, but few ever reach this level. Each of them receives a spirit face that they can call upon when appropriate. Sunny’s mentor is Sugar Cream, the librarian at Obi Library. Through their lessons and adventures with their mentors, the four friends have a variety of exhilarating and frightening experiences. The greatest challenge given to them is to track down the Black Hat, Otokoto, who has been terrorizing the village and kidnapping the children.

This book is fast paced and beautifully written. The characters are irresistible and make readers cheer and enter into the story. While there are many themes in the book, such as diversity, friendship, family, responsibility, love, honor, and trust, they are expertly woven into the story. Other books with similar themes include *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) by Madeleine L’Engle, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, and His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman.

Okorafor, who is Nigerian-American, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio to Nigerian immigrant parents. She resides in Buffalo, New York where she is a professor of creative writing at SUNY-Buffalo. She writes African-based novels for both young adults and adults and has won several fantasy awards for her books, including the World Fantasy Award. More about her can be found at: [www.nnedi.com](http://www.nnedi.com)

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