

The Icarus Girl (Helen Oyeyemi)

This is a nice little ghost story. The theme of possession by witchcraft is strong in Nigerian culture.

The tactic of leaving the reader unsure, initially, as to whether we have here a genuine case of the supernatural or a psychotic child is hardly novel, but that does not matter. The issue is resolved by certain facts that would be unknowable without supernatural intervention (the existence, and name, of Fern; that Colleen had a knicker-wetting habit; that Shivs was able to detect TillyTilly's presence). In terms of the characterisation, that the supernatural explanation was the intended one is clear from both Grandfather Gbenga and Dr McKenzie. The latter clearly opts for the psychological explanation, but it would hardly be dramatically consistent that he should be correct given that he is presented as a bit of a dork. In contrast, Grandfather Gbenga is the quiet, rock-like character who is the shoe-in to get the diagnosis bang-on.

Ibeji statue and all, it's a ghost story all right - and a pretty impressive feat for a girl still at school. I suppose it's too obvious to point out the autobiographical aspect, Oyeyemi being both black of Nigerian descent and clearly very academically precocious. But why did she make Jess's father white? This would be to make him unaware of, and hence vulnerable to, possession (his depression). As a consequence the 'saviour' figure had to devolve to the black grandfather. The structure and pace of the story is well controlled, but the writing shows immaturity in parts, e.g., "Suddenly the telephone rang". Aargh!

Score 60010