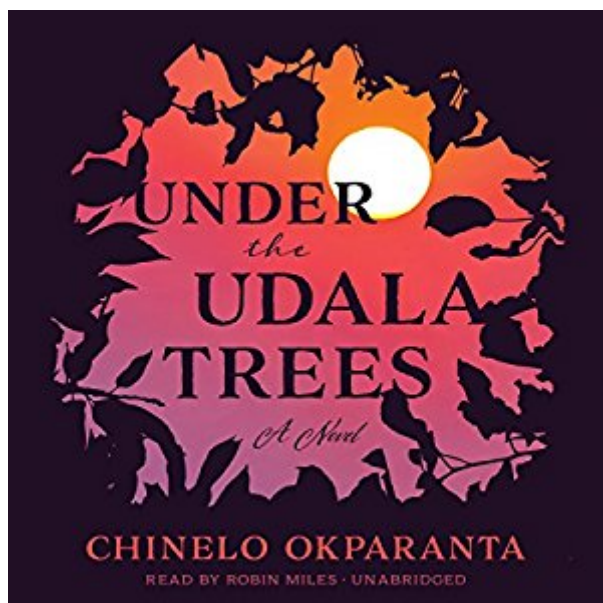


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Under The Udala Trees



Synopsis

Inspired by Nigeria's folktales and war, *Under the Udala Trees* is a deeply searching, powerful debut about the dangers of living and loving openly. Ijeoma comes of age as her nation does; born before independence, she is 11 when civil war breaks out in the young republic of Nigeria. Sent away to safety, she meets another displaced child, and the star-crossed pair fall in love. They are from different ethnic communities. They are also both girls. When their love is discovered, Ijeoma learns that she will have to hide this part of herself. But there is a cost to living inside a lie. As Edwidge Danticat has made personal the legacy of Haiti's political coming of age, Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* uses one woman's lifetime to examine the ways in which Nigerians continue to struggle toward selfhood. Even as their nation contends with and recovers from the effects of war and division, Nigerian lives are wrecked and lost from taboo and prejudice. But this story offers a glimmer of hope - a future where a woman might just be able to shape her life around truth and love.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I don't recall how I came across this book, but it was on my Kindle and I had just completed reading another novel and so started this one. In general I have enjoyed Nigerian authors and this book did not disappoint. The story takes place in the late 1960's and I would call it a coming of age\personal discovery story. The pace was good. The characters were nicely developed, the background of the times was laid out well. The social struggle with change during the time matches some of the same level of conflict you see in the US today. I suppose the changes are universal across many nations

and societies. I would recommend this book to Seniors in High School, College level and book clubs as a good read where one can discuss the impact of social change, religion and its changing role and the general struggle of people to just fully be themselves without fear. I also felt that the author did an excellent job humanizing the characters. They were real on so many levels and their behavior, while at some times disappointing it was expected. Social change and how we look at and treat people is a slow process.

Under the Udala Trees tracks the life and loves of Ijeoma, a Nigerian girl who discovers at a young age that she loves women and not men. Beginning with her experience of the war between Biafra and the Nigerian government, we follow Ijeoma when she is sent to another village to be a housegirl, where she meets her first love. As she journeys through a life of heartbreak and secrecy, whether at an all-girls boarding school or at an underground lesbian dance-club, we are exposed to the rawness of her mother's attempt to cleanse her soul, the joy in her forbidden loves, and her fear and anguish when the unbending laws of the local culture tarnish her desires. "Happiness was what she called it. But I knew that happiness was a word like madness, like sickness, like confusion, like loss, like death. Even like beautiful or pure or angelic or God. Happiness was a word that represented some deeper, unexplainable, heavy idea, the kind of idea that goes back and forth between two different worlds." Okparanta is one of those rare writers who can truly harness the power of simplicity to let the potency of the narrative shine through. Modest, unhurried language and a plot that meanders without dramatic twists and turns leave readers of *Under the Udala Trees* in a rare and fortunate place—one in which there is nothing left to consider but the bare truths of having a self that is forbidden. The simplicity of the prose makes it impossible to hide from the power and strength of the narrative, and although the plot is not necessarily unexpected, I found myself carried away in the treacherous and secretive lives of the Nigerian lesbian community. The book features wonderfully relatable female leads and reveals the power that a community can hold over those within it. We are shown how shame is engendered as thoroughly as a sense of belonging, and how this tension creates immense uncertainty for women (and men) who don't quite fit the mold. Despite the masterful austere essence of the prose, sometimes I found myself wishing that Okparanta would go deeper. The simplicity made sense when the story was being told from the point of view of a child, but as Ijeoma aged the narrative style did not. For such an incredibly emotional and complex issue, it was disappointing to sense that there was so much being held back from the story. While I appreciate authors who allow the reader to complicate and intuit the deeper meaning of things,

I am not confident that this was Okparanta's intent, and therefore find myself wishing that she had tackled these issues with a bit more grit. Given the fact that in 2014 all homosexual relationships became illegal in Nigeria, subject to at least 14 years in prison, I think this is an important book to read, and one that probably needed to be told years or decades ago. It's easy to read but not easy to stomach elements which I think make it a good narrative to make a wide range of people confront an issue they may know nothing about. Elise Hadden, Under the Heather Books (www.undertheheatherbooks.com)

Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* tells the story of Ijeoma with the girl's voice and perspective. We meet her at age 11 in the midst of Nigeria's civil war. Her father soon dead, Ijeoma tells us about war from a civilian point of view, a female point of view, the point of view of a girl who sees headless bodies along the road as common as flowers or mud. Privation and danger are everywhere, but when her mother sends her away to "safety," she falls in love with another girl, and this forbidden love puts her in as much danger as the war. As the novel develops, we are swept into a world of myth and legend, a world of religion, where love is narrowly defined and verses used to punish and thwart, not inspire or reward, a world of rapid change, both personal and nation-wide. Ijeoma must learn to protect her love, hide it, and understand it without guidance from elders or scripture. Not only is this a war story and a love story, it is a coming of age story, the strands of which are woven tightly and the colors blended to form complex images of the deepest human complexity. From student to store clerk to running wild to marriage and finally to setting off on her own dangerous but loving path, Ijeoma becomes a brave woman, as free as she can be, and a loving soul. The novel does all this with a realistic style and details tinged with the magic of folk tales. The novel reminds me of Richard Wright's masterful autobiography, *Black Boy*, insightful in society's violent injustices, brave in its truth and love of life, and daring in its revelations.

It's always good to have a fresh and intimate voice from a new writer. In this case, Okparanta is not only Nigerian, but also has a mission to write explicitly about being a lesbian in a repressive political climate where punishment is absurdly harsh for same sex coupling. Because she is Nigerian, she has the authority to write about this situation. What's more, she lives in the states and has studied at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is a talented writer with the mission. What could be a better combination?

This book was better than I expected it to be- much more stunning in its scope, covering not just the protagonist's thorny adolescent years but her entire life living as a lesbian in a hostile environment. It was written with compassion, presenting views on fully developed characters that acknowledged that people are complex and that there's room for nuance. Narratively, the plot was well-paced and the prose was beautiful. I didn't want to put it down. More than anything, *Under the Udala Trees* is a call to action, a reminder that LGBTQ+ rights are still under threat in so many parts of the world, and we must be ever vigilant in our fight for equality.

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