

## **The Kids Aren't Alright: Exploring the Effects of Age in *Who Fears Death***

By Benjamin Kuxmann

Stereotypes about different generations of people exist within modern society. One of main stereotypes revolves around the belief that individuals who occupy the older population of society maintain beliefs that no longer hold up to modern standards. Many people can think of times where they wish grandma or grandpa had not said something that would be viewed as politically incorrect or immoral in the modern age but was perfectly acceptable when they themselves were the younger. On the other hand, younger generations are generally viewed as more progressive thinkers on societal and social issues. In Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death*, she explores this dynamic by having younger and older characters constantly interacting with one another, allowing readers to evaluate how each group of people react to different issues within in the novel. Characters within the novel that are older and hold more power within their respective societies are less willing to alter their views than younger generations of people, leading to a generational conflict and mistrust between the two groups of people.

To give an example of a topic in which readers can see the generational differences in opinions, one should examine how the topic of race is handled is within the novel. The world of *Who Fears Death* is divided across racial lines between the Okeke and the Nuru and then again between the two groups and Ewu children, who are the offspring of a Nuru and an Okeke parent, usually from the raping of an Okeke women by a Nuru man. This leads to individuals harboring negative feelings for people outside of their own group of people. It is ingrained within their culture and affects everyone within it without exception. These types of belief systems are not developed out of thin air. In the society's religious text, the Great Book, it describes why the world is as it is. It states, "For it was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the

Nuru... It is written in the Great Book” (Okorafor 17). Based on this element of world building by the author, it is clear to see that there are clear inherited prejudices within the world of the novel. These internal biases are not only instilled within every group of people, as many members of both the Nuru and Okeke people accept this racial division, but characters of all ages. Once Diti returns to school after having gone through the Eleventh Year Rite, Onye notices some peculiar behavior. She notes, “Her eyes flicked toward me, then away, and I instantly understood that her parents didn’t like me being in her daughter’s rite group” (Okorafor 52). Whether or not it is Diti’s conscious decision to view Onye differently based on her race, she is still subjected to the beliefs of her society. This even goes as far as the adolescents who have not had time in their lives to develop any sort of reason for despising a particular group of people. Harboring these internal ideologies is damaging to the psychology of all members of society. Professor of English Lois Tyson explains, “Internalized racism is very damaging to self-esteem: it is difficult to maintain a positive self-image when one has been programmed to believe that one is inferior simply because of one’s race” (212). Understanding the damaging affects of this internalized bias towards a particular group of people puts into perspective what the younger characters in the novel are able to accomplish. Despite having an upbringing that leaves people such as Onye feeling like less than person the young adults are able to alter their views in order to form friendships and pursue the common good. Making this change is not easy, but they manage to do so despite the damages of internalized racism and other internal prejudices.

While the younger characters within the novel are just as guilty for holding internal prejudices against certain groups of people, they also change their views and actions much more often than that of older characters. This can be seen throughout the course of the novel, such as Mwitia becoming more accepting of women, Luyu, Binta, and Diti learning to fully accept what it

means to be Ewu, and Onye coming to understanding that the conflict between the Nuru and Okeke is not as simple as a battle between good and evil. However, one great example of this occurring comes after Onye, Luyu, Binta, and Diti all go through their Eleventh Year Rites together, they begin to share a deeper bond despite their internal hesitation to accept Onye. Okorafor writes, “None of them told anyone. That was the first sign that our Eleventh Year Rite bond was true. And thus, when I returned to school a week later, no one harassed me. All people knew was that I was both adult and child... They had to at least give me that respect” (50). Despite them not initially accepting Onye and even continuing to struggle later in the novel with accepting her differences, this interaction shows a willingness to change one’s view on the world. The change in attitude not only applied to the girls that went through the Eleventh Year Rite with Onye, but the other children their age as well, implying that is a generational custom to accept change that drastically opposes one’s prior beliefs. It shows that the younger members of a given society are able to make complex decision about what they believe about the world. The age of 11 is also an interesting part of a person’s life. That child is still very dependent on their parents for most aspects of their lives, yet they are beginning to form individualism and make decisions such as befriending an Ewu. At the time of the Eleventh Year Rite, readers also hear little mention of the parents of the other girls at the rite, showing that the girls are indeed thinking separately from their older parents.

Okorafor’s portrayal of younger characters in her novel is also reflective of the real world. Through Onye’s journey along with her friends, readers experience plenty of examples of younger generations challenging the status quo of the world around them and attempting to alter it. Adolescent development researcher Wim Meeus explores how adolescents that oppose the political system in place tend to align their own political and social ideologies. He argues,

“Adolescents, both those with high-level and those with low-level educations, endorsing political rebellion, were found to prefer left-wing political parties” (429). This trend can also be seen in the world of *Who Fears Death*. The main adolescent characters in the novel clearly show signs of rebellion towards the current political systems in place as they embark on a quest to attempt and end the racial oppression of the Nuru. They also hold beliefs and act in ways that are reflective of many left-wing adolescents in the real world such as being supporters of feminism and the acceptance of women’s sexual nature. Luyu, Diti, and Onye hold little to no reservations in exploring their sexuality outside of marriage and see no issue in doing so. Furthermore, Onye herself is an avid feminist who often speaks out when she feels as though sexism is present. Okorafor provides readers with a compelling example of how political activism on the part of adolescents can influence the culture of the world around them, all stemming from the willingness to question the world around them and adapt as they see fit.

The manner in which Onye and her friends are able to change their opinions and viewpoints and also been seen in real young adults. The Pew Research explored the frequencies in which older and younger people change their opinions based on what they on social media. They found that, “Around three-in-ten men ages 18 to 29 (29%) say their views on a political or social issue changed in the past year due to social media. This is roughly twice the share saying this among all Americans and more than double the shares among men and women ages 30 and older” (Bialik). While Onye may not be using Instagram and Twitter in *Who Fears Death*, these statistics offer another example of the difference between the generations and their abilities to change their minds. In a modern political age defined by partisanship and the division between opposing social factions, it is interesting to see that younger generations of people are still open to changing their ideologies, a characteristic far less present in older generations of people.

Much like in the real world, Okorafor portrays her older characters in the novel as being more stubborn and closed minded than younger individuals. Characters such as Luyu and Binta are able to partially put aside their biases towards Ewu and other things in order to form friendships and embark on their quest. Even though these characters struggle at times, their effort to adjust their mindsets is definitely present. Conversely, while the older characters can slightly adjust their views at times, they largely stay within their biased mindsets. This can be seen in each of the three sorcerers as none of them truly accept a woman as their equal or in Daib who never learns to accept the Okeke people. Looking more specifically at Aro, a good example of his stubbornness is seen when Onye goes to Aro in an attempt to convince him to teach her the Great Mystic points, he makes it very clear he has no interest in teaching her. He states, “I won’t teach you.’ He motioned with his hand up and down, in reference to my body. ‘Your father was Nuru, a foul dirty people. The Great Mystic Points are an Okeke art only for the pure spirit’” (Okorafor 71). Not only does Aro harbor a racist mindset to the Nuru, a group of people that commits acts of violence against his own, but also to anything they have created. Onye herself has in no way harmed Aro, leaving his hatred towards all things Nuru (add towards women) as lacking context when interacting with Onye. Aro also uses this bias as a justification for not initially teaching Onye the Great Mystic Points. This is an interesting decision on his part because it is clear that Onye has potential to become a great sorceress, as she can already shape-shift and fade into the wilderness. Aro has reason to put aside his prejudices towards Ewu children and women but chooses to keep his beliefs as they are.

Another instance of an older character harboring several biased views comes in the form of Sola. When he visits Onye’s cohort and the Vah people, Sola makes a strong comment in reference to the Nuru and Okeke peoples. He declares, “Nuru and Okeke are so like their

ancestors. If I could wipe this land of you all and let the Red People roam and multiply, I would” (Okorafor 340). As this man is attempting to be helpful towards a group of young adults that are on a mission to fix the race war occurring in their nation, commenting that he would rather see them all exterminated is out of place in the context of the conversation. He has provided aid to Onye, who is both Nuru and Okeke, previously in the novel, which would imply that he has some semblance of hope that the world can be changed. Despite this action, Sola still sees the two groups as overly flawed. This quote is also a great example of how power influences the mindsets of these older characters. Instead of being fully committed to helping Onye and company accomplish their noble quest, Sola allows his own powers to cloud his judgment towards the situation. Even though he admits wiping out both races are outside of his powers, that pride he has in his abilities is altering how he might otherwise evaluate the situation.

The inability for older characters within Okorafor’s novel to alter their world views is more than prevalent. What’s interesting to explore is why this is, and how it is reflected in the real world. It is a common stereotype that older generations of people tend to keep their cultural views the as the world around them continues to evolve. In an article for *Russian Education and Society*, two authors give an explanation as to why older generations seem out of touch with the modern world. They argue “As people grow older, their ability to adapt diminishes; adults do not accept and assimilate new things as quickly as young people do. Older people are characterized by a constant withdrawal from a pace of life that is growing faster” (Gavriliuk and Trikoz 10). This quote can give a reader a further understanding as to why the characters within *Who Fears Death* act as they do as well as explaining an important aspect of the real world. As seen in the novel, the younger characters are quick to accepting different groups of people such as women and Ewu than are the older characters such as Aro and Sola. While they do slightly adjust their

views as the novel goes on by assisting Onye, they do so at a much slower pace than Onye's friends do. Her friends had the capacity to adjust to the world around them in a way the older characters simply cannot and do not replicate and make no effort to do so.

Not only do older generations tend to lack the ability and willpower to change their views as younger generations do. An argument can be made that at times the changes being ushered in by younger generations is a negative thing. Another possible explanation is that older generations simply grow to despise change, and those bringing about the most change, younger generations, would then be the target of their ire. In the *British Journal of Sociology*, sociologist Bryan Turner describes why it is older generations can grow to dislike the rhetoric of younger generations. He states, "Anti-youth sentiment emerges from this contest of aspirations, especially among declining social groups who resent the threat of youth with their alternative attitudes and aspirations. As a general rule, old people are anti-youth for the simple reason that 'old age is also a social decline'" (302). Upon reaching old age, any person that has achieved something they deem valuable, they are unlikely to want to see it dwindle away at the hands of new generations of people. They have built a world where they are able to succeed within, and challenges or changes to this order are not likely to persuade older generations of people to change anything. This is why the older people within *Who Fears Death* that hold levels of power are so unwilling to change their opinions. If Aro has to teach women the Great Mystic Points, then he becomes less valuable in society as more and more people would have the capacity to become just as powerful. This influences his sexist ideologies throughout the novel and further contributes to his hesitation to alter his opinions.

As a result of older generations attempting to maintain the level of power they hold in society both in *Who Fears Death* and the real world, it leads to them viewing younger generations of people as other. Lois Tyson defines othering as “judging those who are different as inferior, as somehow less than human” (248). Older generations look down on younger generations as if their thoughts and opinions are less valuable or intelligent than those coming from older people. The power they hold leads to the attitude that younger people are not equal in importance to older members of society. As a result of this thinking, the gap in respect between the two groups of people widens as younger people wish to have their input valued within society, and older people do not wish to accept ideologies that challenge the establishments that have created to prop themselves up.

With older and younger generations failing to understand or accept the motives each group has for their actions; it is easy to see how conflict arises with the novel and the real world. Because of this difference in the ideological approach of younger generations, who are more willing to change their opinions, and the more steadfast mentality of older generations, one can see the mistrust arising in one another. In an article written for TIME magazine, writer Charlotte Alter explores the divide between the baby-boomer and millennials/gen-z based on research done by Harvard University. She argues, “Young voters — mostly millennials and Gen Z’ers — have grown suspicious of the Baby Boomer generation. Only 16% said they thought Boomer elected officials... cared about people like them, while 18% said they thought Boomer voters cared. Meanwhile, roughly four in ten said they didn’t think Boomer voters or officials had young voters’ best interests at heart” (Alter). This data shows that there is a major gap in the trust that these people share for each other. This is especially problematic because older generations generally hold most of the power in any given society as they make up the ruling body of people.



The ideologies of the two groups varies to the point where they begin to lose respect for one another. The parallel can be drawn to *Who Fears Death* as the younger characters are often skeptical of the older ones, as can be seen in Onye's constant struggle with Aro to reach a place where they can be civil with the other's opinions. Through this, Okorafor shows readers how this generational conflict molds the relationships between younger and older characters, often into ones that yield argumentative and distrust.

Nnedi Okorafor constructs a world of characters that behave very much like the people in the real world. She also managed to accurately replicate generational differences and how these differences manifest themselves into conflict between characters and people. Understanding how these discrepancies lead to a greater divide in mistrust and acceptance between the generations will help readers learn how to manage this problem and work towards solutions. As seen in *Who Fears Death*, younger characters such as Onye and older characters like Aro learn to work together to accomplish a common goal. Okorafor uses her novel as cultural commentary on generational conflict but offers hope that these groups of people can work together within society once they work towards acceptance of one another.

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