

Dominant Themes in Afro-Centric Fiction

Eugen Bacon

With growing representation in international award nominations and winners, there's a rapid rise in Afro-centric fiction and a hungry readership ready to consume it. But what are writers from Africa and the diaspora writing about?



Art by Akintoba Kalejaye, courtesy of The Sauuti Collective

Futuristic themes in science fiction continue to be dominant—imaginings and creations of other worlds in lost and found planets. An intriguing world (in whose creation I am involved as a founding member) is the [Sauútiiverse](#), a secondary world with both humanoid and non-humanoid creatures living in a five-planet system. It's a world whose inhabitants have evolved from an older race, and stories explore the futuristic nature of sound as power, with focus on sound magic, music, language and histories.

The Sauútiiverse integrates a robust diversity of traditional African spirituality and cultural practices across the continent that hosts over 50 countries, 2000 languages and nearly 1.4 billion peoples. There's much to draw from Mother Africa socially, politically, linguistically and we haven't even got to the food: cassava, millet, sorghum, maize, yams, papaya, coconuts, mangoes, let alone cultural practices embracing birth, rites of passage, marriage and death.

Sauúti stories take into account beastly and worldly mutations from impacts of climate change, solar flares, transformations, preservations and advancements in technology across generations, and leverage on sound magic, the power of song, together with sound mining—alternative energy solutions offering vast trading options and triggering more possibilities in creation mythologies.

The Sauútiiverse has its own original story, the genesis of planets:

(INITIATING PHRASE) It is acquired (intake of breath). It is uttered (hum). It is released (whoosh out of air).

Our Mother.

Our Mother was all.

She, the only reality in a boundless sea of unreality.

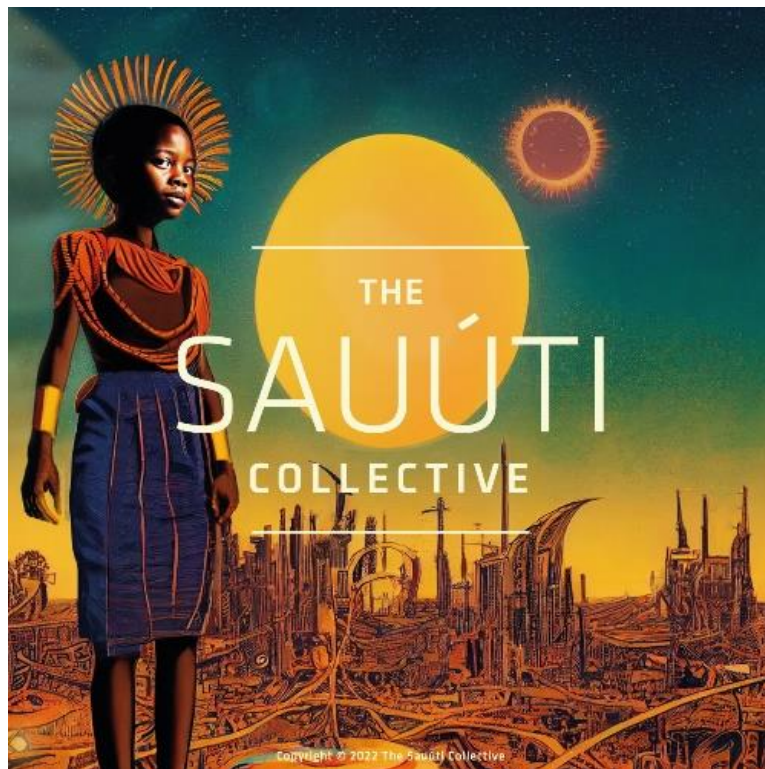
Our Mother was all there was.

There was no other to behold Her. Her light the only light. No other to receive Her light. No other to reflect Her light.

Our Mother stood alone in silence, radiant.

—‘Our Mother, Creator (The Sauúti Creation Myth)’ by Stephen Embleton and Wole Talabi

The Mother Creator goes on to speak the Word that undulates through Her body, ‘explosions of light and sound’ reverberating outwards through the darkness, piercing the silence and conceiving the five planets: Zezépfeni, Mahwé, Ekwukwe, Órino-Rin, Wiimb-ó.



Art by Akintoba Kalejaye, courtesy of The Sauuti Collective

Jude Umeh, a Sauúti author says, ‘I am working on a couple of stories that culminate in the Sauúti Boamariri—an annual worlds summit-gathering on the planet of Zezépfeni. This topic of a coming together is important to me because it brings to life the diversity of peoples and cultures across the Sauútiiverse and makes the perfect setting for my Kalabashing trilogy!’

South African born Stephen Embleton, now a resident in Oxford, and the 2022 James Currey Fellow at the African Studies Centre, speaks to his penchant as an African writer:

While researching and formulating a writing workshop I held at the University of Oxford in 2022, I focused the first session on the African Writers Series. I noticed a dominance of

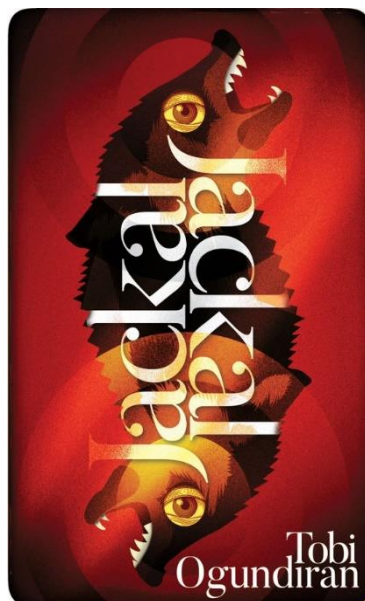
folklore, fantasy, magic and traditional beliefs in the ‘classics’ of African literature. A novel that’s stood out for a long time is Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*—Nwapa was the first woman published in the series, and the first African woman novelist to be published in the English language.

Efuru features the Lake Goddess, Ogbuide, of the Oguta region and is a powerful story on many levels, including themes on traditional beliefs, folklore and the role of women in society at the time. I delved into Nwapa’s work (many of them hard to find) and came across the ebook version of *The Lake Goddess*. I loved it! I am now working with Flora Nwapa’s own publishing company, Tana Press, that mostly publishes in Nigeria, together with her three children—Ejine Nzeribe, Amede Nzeribe, and Uzoma Nwakuche—to resurrect Nwapa’s posthumous novel to life. *The Lake Goddess* is a fantastical story that borrows from the Oguta region of Nigeria. It will reach a global audience through Abibiman Publishing, with a launch event at the Oxford Literary Festival in 2023.

Award-winning Embleton is himself the author of the YA fantasy novel, *Bones & Runes* (2022), and its interest in the Zulu afterlife realm of Abaphansi, a fantastical adventure of beings and deities, a protagonist’s quest to retrieve a stolen heirloom.

Storytelling has increasingly morphed itself into a critical artistic canvas for writers in African and the diaspora to channel their longing and memory, connection and belonging. Writers in the diaspora, in particular, or those currently living outside Africa, continue to find linkages to the heritage of Mother Africa, and her customary strengths and harms—arising from colonialism, the slave trade, poverty, patriarchal norms that disempower girls and women, devastating impacts of climate change, corruption, bad leadership and more.

Stories sometimes take the form of new wine into old skins, adopting fairy tale in adaptations. An example is in Tobi Ogundiran’s ‘[Deep in the Gardener’s Barrow](#)’ (2021) that’s an African adaptation of the Brothers Grimm ‘Hansel and Gretel’. Ogundiran, a Shirley Jackson award-nominated author, has an upcoming collection named *Jackal Jackal: Tales of the Dark and Fantastic*, and it’s rife with magic, and more recrafting of tales, including ‘Pinocchio’.



While dark or cautionary stories like the one in my novel *Mage of Fools* (2022) by Meerkat Press adopt the dystopian approach of a broken world that’s both a warning and an empowerment of women through a strong female cast shaping the world’s destiny, other

stories embrace technological advancements to introduce a new Africa of the future, a liberated continent with its own innovative solutions to its inherent problems. One such example of storytelling that offers a new gaze at African knowledge systems is Ugandan Dilman Dila's televised world of Yat Madit and its direct democracy through AI. Yat Madit is an artificial intelligence system that allows eight thousand local council chairpersons to jointly run the country, as they commune under a tree in post-war Northern Uganda—where the term 'yat madit' means 'a big tree'.



NTV poster

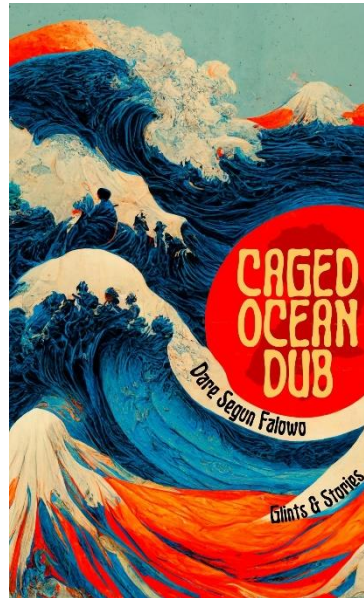
Other writers continue to borrow from the Afro-centric angle, for example award-winning author Wole Talabi, who says, 'In most of my work, including my short story collection *Incomplete Solutions* by Luna Press Publishing (2019), and my forthcoming novel *Shigidi and the Brass Head of Obalufon* by DAW books (2023), I try to tell global stories that focus on universal human themes while centring them in, and telling them from, a uniquely African perspective that is often absent in popular media.'

Talabi's [Shigidi](#) explores the story of a disgruntled nightmare god in a mythical story of demons, magic, gods, revenge, secrets, and more, set across Lagos, Singapore, even London.

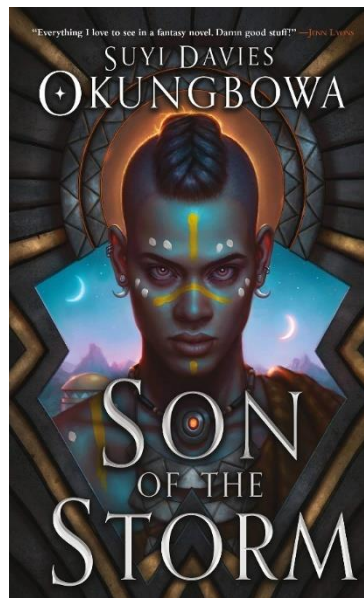
On the horror scope, British-Nigerian author Nuzo Onoh focuses on toxic African spirituality—rogue witch doctors invoking bad spirits from the worlds of the dead, as in her newest novel *A Dance for the Dead* (2022) by Stygian Median Sky.



Another similarly exploratory writer is Dare Segun Falowo whose upcoming short story collection, *Caged Ocean Dub* by Android Press, leans towards African spirituality with ritual, chant, sacrifice, shrines and spirits. The work borrows from the African language in naming, worldbuilding, tradition and hauntings, inviting a global audience to both understand and relish the traditional cast and their stories.



Increasingly, revolutionary black speculative fiction with its black protagonists is seeking to subvert Africa's patriarchal hierarchy, as in Suyi Davies Okunbowa's *Son of the Storm* (2021) that heroes women, like Esheme, and their influential positions of authority.



In closing, dominant themes by writers from Africa and the diaspora appear to be interrogations of the self and identity, belonging and the role of girls and women in society. They are also tales curious about African spirituality and what Afro-centred futurism might look like, but sometimes they're simply stories that mirror our everyday from the perspective of a migrant, someone in the diaspora, or a person living in Africa.

Through these authors and their encouragement by enabling publishers, curious editors and avid readers, a decolonised Mother Africa and her language of reinvention is roaring out loud her new dreams and destiny.

Word count: 1,350

First appeared in *Aurealis* #158, March 2023

The Author: Eugen Bacon

Eugen Bacon is an African Australian author of several novels and collections. She's a British Fantasy Award winner, a Foreword Indies Award winner, a twice World Fantasy Award finalist, and a finalist in other awards. Eugen was announced in the honor list of the Otherwise Fellowships for 'doing exciting work in gender and speculative fiction'. *Danged Black Thing* made the Otherwise Award Honor List as a 'sharp collection of Afro-Surrealist work', and was a 2024 Philip K Dick Award nominee. Eugen's creative work has appeared worldwide, including in *Apex Magazine*, *Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Fantasy, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Year's Best African Speculative Fiction*. Visit her at eugenbacon.com.