

PRAISE FOR *WATER BABY*

“A brilliant, evocative read. In Okereke’s hands, Makoko is a world full of heart and beauty.”

—**Irenosen Okojie**

“A beautiful, evocative work. Her characters linger, and her writing glides like boats through the lagoon, releasing the angst, scent and sounds of Lagos. Sometimes you come across a phrase that captivates you so much with its sweetness that you have to stop to taste it over and over again. I hope *Water Baby* will touch your heart as it touched mine.”

—**Ola Awonubi**, Author of *A Nurse’s Tale*

“A beautiful story about the biggest floating settlement in the world. The writing was so rich that I could smell Makoko, I could taste the food and I could hear the characters. Chioma Okereke’s sharp humour made me smile even when reading the saddest scenes. She gave the people of Makoko dignity and highlighted the importance of community. *Water Baby* is a book that will leave readers rethinking the way they’ve looked at areas like Makoko, giving us all a different perspective about the way the media portrays different societies.”

—**Foluso Agbaje**, author of *The Parlour Wife*

“From the deep, dark lagoon of the Makoko slum where canoes steer through dirt and debris to the gentle blue lakes of Switzerland, water is at the heart of this beguiling

novel. Chioma Okereke has crafted a dynamic, memorable narrator in Yemoja, who sees herself as one pinprick on a map but whose youthful energy and curiosity lifts her on a wave towards new experiences. A captivating, surprising, beautifully structured narrative about grief and loss, but also strength, joy and the value of friendship.”

—**Gemma Seltzer**, author of *Ways of Living*

“It’s rare to read a book that makes you see the world with fresh eyes but, as a former Lagos resident, that’s exactly how I felt about *Water Baby*. Through a colourful cast of characters and her evocative portrayal of their floating environment, Chioma Okereke invites us into a dynamic and often overlooked community. Just like the people of Makoko, this novel simmers with beauty and potential and you can’t help but root for its heroine, Baby, as she earns her wings.”

—**Uju Asika**, author of *Raising Boys Who Do Better*, and *Bringing Up Race*

“Such a beautifully written novel, full of vibrant imagery and characters who leap off the page. I loved going on Baby’s journey with her. This book serves as a reminder that often what we dream of is right in front of us.”

—**Louise Hare**

“In gorgeous, sterling prose, Okereke gives us a moving story of loss, love, community and dreams. Okereke writes her characters with so much heart that we feel that these are people we know as intimately as they know themselves.”

—**Chika Unigwe**, author of *The Middle Daughter*

Water Baby

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

Also by Chioma Okereke

Bitter Leaf

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

Water

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS
Baby

A NOVEL

Chioma Okereke



MASOBE

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For Boo-boo

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When the food is properly done, it reaches the ant.

Igbo proverb

All water has a perfect memory and is trying to get back to where it was.

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Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

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This novel was deliberately written in “*Pidgin-lite*”.
My people: don’t come for me, abeg una!

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Water

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There's an old tale where we live, about throwing a newborn into the lagoon.

If the baby drowns, it is illegitimate and the mother must be banished from the community. But if it floats, the infant is embraced by all. They say fathers used to celebrate their child's birth with this test. It must have been a trick, though, as everybody knows that all babies float.

I was born in the water. That's what Papa says but it's a fiction. I wasn't born in a hospital or on land; most of us in my community weren't. We drew our first breaths on Adogbo, though according to Papa, my first moments were almost in the lagoon itself. Makoko is what the outsiders had originally called our settlement hundreds of years ago, due to its abundance of akoko leaves, and the name stuck for the community on the Lagos coast just across from the Third Mainland Bridge. To strangers, it's a slum, a metallic and wooden eyesore built over a stinking bed of ever-mounting sewage, spreading out across the smoke-filled horizon. For

the government, it's the impediment between even larger coffers for them and prime waterfront real estate. But to us who are from here, Makoko is simply *home*.

The Nigerian government likes to pretend that we don't exist, but we've been here for hundreds of years, our wooden houses resting proudly on their stilts above Lagos' charcoal coloured lagoon. We'll remain here for some time, no matter how many attempts they make to push us out.

Mama had plenty of babies in her belly before me, but only a few of us stayed. That's not only an issue with the women in our family, as she'd explained, but with life here on the lagoon. There's a high rate of maternal and infant death among those living on the water, which is strange considering that we all originally come from the womb having been surrounded by liquid. Still, many women lose their children—although there's plenty to go around—as there are very few doctors here to speak of.

So, Mama had some false starts before Dura came and then many other miscarriages before it was my turn nineteen years ago, followed by Charlie Boy five years later. I was fearless, Papa used to say. It's why I was able to be born.

Mama had been visiting her best friend when I announced my early arrival, pounding hard on her stomach and pelvic bone. Auntie Uche had protested that it was too late for her to leave. Having had more babies than Mama, Auntie knew I was well on my way into the world, but Mama had been insistent. She'd wanted to return home to have me in her own bed, so they'd stepped gingerly into a canoe for the short ride back. Papa wasn't even there but claimed Mama's