

# Books by the Stack



## **Binti by Nnedi Okorafor**

Her name is Binti, and she is the first of the Himba people ever to be offered a place at Oomza University, the finest institution of higher learning in the galaxy. But to accept the offer will mean giving up her place in her family to travel between the stars among strangers who do not share her ways or respect her customs.

**Why you'll like it:** *African American fiction. Space opera. Strong female character.*

**About the Author:** Nnedi Okorafor was born in 1974 in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is a graduate of Clarion Writers Workshop in Lansing, Michigan and earned her PhD in English from the University of Illinois. Currently she is an associate professor of creative writing and literature at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). Her awards include a 2001 Hurston-Wright literary award, The Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa, the Carl Brandon Parallax Award, the 2007-08 winner of the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa, the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, and her science fiction novella Binti won the 2016 Nebula Award (Best Novella) and the 2016 Hugo Awards for Best Novella. (Bowker Author Biography)

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?
2. Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reason to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?
3. When she secretly leaves her family and Himba homeland to attend Oomza University, Binti gives up on the possibility of a “normal” life, including marriage (p.13). At the same time, she proudly continues her people’s traditions, including wearing *otjize*, a mixture of flower oil and clay, on her hair and skin. Thinking about Binti’s choices, which do you think takes more courage: leaving behind a comfortable social situation where you have a set place in the world or staying true to your roots in a totally new environment? What surprising protection do her culture and homeland give Binti? How does she use these to create a new kind of identity for herself?
4. By the end of the novel, Binti helps negotiation between the Meduse and the professors at Oomza University. She and the Meduse youth Okwu even become friends. But as part of her work as a “harmonizer,” Binti also changes physically: where she used to have hair, she grows *okuoko*, the tentacles that all Meduse have. How can taking on some the physical characteristics of the Meduse help Binti serve as a bridge between them and humans? How does it separate her from her own people even more.? Do you think that heroes should have to understand the experiences of the other side before they act, or is this an unrealistic expectation? Can heroes truly fit in with their own societies, or are they outsiders in some way?

5. *Binti* has been called an example of Afrofuturist writing: a kind of fiction that brings together history and experiences of American and African-descended people with fantasy and science fiction in order to imagine alternative futures and life possibilities for black individuals and communities. For instance, the Himba are a real people who live in Namibia and Angola who use *otjize*, but in *Binti* they are master creators of hyper-advanced technologies. What is the effect of combining “traditional” ideas about African peoples with technologies and ideas that we usually associate with the future, like cutting-edge computers and space travel? How is this connected to who we imagine as having power to shape the future?

6. The author, Nnedi Okorafor, also likes to harmoniously combine plant-based life with sophisticated technology. Does this feel surprising to you? Why or why not? What does your group’s reaction tell you about the kind of relationships we expect between the environment and scientific advances?

*(Questions provided by the American Library Association)*



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