



# On Black Sisters Street

*Chika Unigwe*

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*On Black Sisters Street* tells the haunting story of four very different women who have left their African homeland for the riches of Europe—and who are thrown together by bad luck and big dreams into a sisterhood that will change their lives.

Each night, Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce stand in the windows of Antwerp's red-light district, promising to make men's desires come true—if only for half an hour. Pledged to the fierce Madam and a mysterious pimp named Dele, the girls share an apartment but little else—they keep their heads down, knowing that one step out of line could cost them a week's wages. They open their bodies to strangers but their hearts to no one, each focused on earning enough to get herself free, to send money home or save up for her own future.

Then, suddenly, a murder shatters the still surface of their lives. Drawn together by tragedy and the loss of one of their own, the women realize that they must choose between their secrets and their safety. As they begin to tell their stories, their confessions reveal the face in Efe's hidden photograph, Ama's lifelong search for a father, Joyce's true name, and Sisi's deepest secrets—and all their tales of fear, displacement, and love, concluding in a chance meeting with a powerful, sinister stranger.

*On Black Sisters Street* marks the U.S. publication debut of Chika Unigwe, a brilliant new writer and a standout voice among contemporary African authors. Raw, vivid, unforgettable, and inspired by a powerful oral storytelling tradition, this novel illuminates the dream of the West—and that dream's illusion and annihilation—as seen through African eyes. It is a story of courage, unity, and hope, of women's friendships and of bonds that, once forged, cannot be broken.

## On Black Sisters Street Details

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# From Reader Review On Black Sisters Street for online ebook

## Adam says

This is the story of 4 black African girls living together in Antwerp (Belgium). Each of them owe an enormous amount of money to Dele, a Nigerian in Lagos, who has facilitated their arrival in Europe. To pay him off they must sell their bodies to the sex-starved men of Antwerp.

When I began reading the book I was a little confused, but after re-reading the first few pages a couple of times, I was rapidly sucked into this charming novel. Gradually, we learn about the lives and ambitions of the 4 women, and how and why they have ended up as prostitutes in a Belgian city. It is not only a compelling tale that makes one want to move from one page to the next as soon as possible, but also a revealing series of insights about life in 'black' Africa. Although there are several sad strands running through the book, I was not left feeling depressed, but oddly uplifted.

Chika Uniwe, the Nigerian author of this novel is like her compatriot Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie a good story-teller. She is able to conjure up vivid images in the reader's mind despite being extremely economical with her language. She creates a brilliant picture in few words. I look forward to reading more books by Ms Unigwe.

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## Ayanda Xaba says

This... absolutely amazing!

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## Yasmin says

On Black Sisters Street is the story of four African females, who for various reasons, end up prostitutes in Belgium's red light district. All are chasing the dream of a better life outside their native countries in Africa. For one of them the dream will end tragically. On Black Sisters Street is a raw, provocative and riveting novel from debut author Chika Unigwe. The beginning was a little juxtaposed for me, but once I got past the first couple of chapters and began to hear the voices of Ama, Joyce and Efe, against the backdrop of Sisi, it became a very engaging read for me and one that I didn't want to put down until I got to the very last page. Of course, I had to know what happened to Sisi and how she came to her demise. I recommend On Black Sisters Street to all who enjoy literary reads, storylines about women from the African diaspora, stories about female protagonists who despite life's circumstances still dare to dream. Get ready to care about these women and empathize with them and their situation. Get ready to be emotionally charged by these characters. I hope this author writes something else soon as I would definitely read another book by her.

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## Bernadette says

4.5 Stars **On Black Sisters Street** by Chika Unigwe is a difficult novel to read. The story centers around four women who are sex workers in Belgium. In an all too familiar story, the women leave their native

Africa for a "better life," only to end up in Belgium, working in the red light district. They will never be able to pay back their trafficker and must endure a life of violence, loneliness and rape. One of the women, Sisi, is murdered.

While the book is a work of fiction, one can only think of the women and children, world over and in our own backyards, who are being sex- and labor-trafficked. The book left me sad, angry and tired. Unigwe is a talented the writer and is even able to infuse some humor into the horrific story.

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## **R K says**

3.75

Taking place in Belgium, *On Black Sisters Street* tells the story of 4 women who are in the prostitution business.

At the beginning of the book you are told of a murder. Someone the women know has died and it's the death of this person that draws the women together for the first time in years. Slowly with anger and exhaustion they reveal their stories, their upbringings and what eventually lead them to the red light district.

It was a very dark book. There isn't a bit of light thrown in but that the conditions that many people grow up in. The women have all grown up in Africa and have had to deal with a lot of the issues going on during their respective timelines and countries. They each have a stubborn hold on creating a better life for themselves no matter the cost and with push and pull find themselves agreeing to becoming a prostitute if it means freedom. Years later they are still bound to the prostitution business yet they haven't given up their dreams.

Unigwe has done a marvelous job in telling this story. The writing was charming. Not poetic but very much like a storyteller. I was hooked and wanted to know how it ended. It was very realistic. Nothing felt over the top or happily ever after. I liked how she didn't spend too much time going through the present lives of the women. It's prostitution. You know what occurs, they know what occurs; So there is no need to go into detail about it. It's interesting because although I was sympathetic towards each women it really hit me when Unigwe told at the end in her acknowledgement that she had interviewed women in the red light district. So although these 4 women are fictional, their stories are the biographies of someone. Some unknown person whom you and I will most likely never know. It's their lives being told in this book.

However, there were some issues that I had.

Other than feeling sorry for the women and frustrated by the complexities of the red-light district, I didn't get much out of it. Nothing was told that I didn't already know. Nothing shocked me or showed something in a new light. This book is literally the stories of 4 women and that's it. I felt Unigwe should have gone more into the complexities of the red-light district. Talked more about the wounds physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically that these women must carry with them for life. Almost all of them have been through some harrowing event yet it's kind of brushed off through anger or just put as something that occurred in the past but it felt very lacking. Very hollow. The women, the business, the world needed to be fleshed out a lot more. Some of the actions of the characters do not make a lot of sense considering their situation or personalities.

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## **Ojo says**

Reading this book made me reflect on a lot of things about Nigeria: the diversity, the peoples, the hardships and the choices and sufferings of said peoples.

The story is about the lives of four different African women, forced to trade their bodies for a better life far away from their own country, in Belgium. The sudden death of one of the women finds the other women in shock, and in the spur of the moment, they find themselves exchanging previously untold secrets and chilling, grim tales of the experiences that culminated in them becoming flesh traders in a foreign land.

Each of the women has experiences that are both unique in their grimness and horrifying in nature. Each of these experiences closely mirrors the realities of early 21st century Nigeria. The prevailing societal vices of the day, as well as a number of the more horrifying atrocities committed by people on a daily basis, and how they affect the lives of five women is the epicentre of the story.

The story is an expository into how lives are shaped by specific experiences. In the story, all of the four women experience sexual abuse of varying degrees. Coupled with the hardship in the country, and the pressures of religion, society and culture, the women are forced to make a choice... whether to persevere with no end in sight to their sufferings, or to trade their female dignity for European baubles.

The story is told in the form of a flashback. The effect is an increased depth in the intensity of the experiences shared in the story, and the drawing of the attention of readers to a number of common underlying factors in each experience.

The characters are revealed with all the attention and intricacy of a highly skilled artist: A gradual unravelling of the nature, and then the experiences that shape each character. The result is a tale that is incredibly accurate in its portrayal of lower-class Nigerian society. Each character is portrayed in all the glory of abuses suffered, dashed hopes, false prophecies, and all of the vices that infest human society.

A must read!

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## **Siyamthanda Skota says**

- Armed with a vagina and the will to survive, she knew that destitution would never lay claim to her"

- Whoever said that money couldn't buy happiness had never experienced the relief that came from having money to spend on whatever you wanted

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## **Minakshi says**

Black Sisters Street is Zwarte Zusterstraat, in the middle of Belgium's red-light district, home to four African women who have left their homeland in the naïve hope of betterment. The story begins when one of the women, Sisi, is found murdered. As her remaining co-workers and house mates, Ama, Efe and Joyce come to terms with her death, each relives their painful journey from Nigeria to Belgium to become sex workers, and how they have been brought together by Dele, a Nigerian pimp, and by "the trump card that God has

wedged in between their legs".

Unigwe's prose is clear and calm - although some terrible things take place in the book, the reader doesn't feel weighed down by it. Unigwe is also skilled at introducing into the narrative issues that are typical to Nigerian society like polygamy, sexism, belief in superstitions, tribal divisions and so on, using just a single reference or a passing comment, leaving the reader with a fleeting but precious sort of cultural snapshot.

I won an advanced copy of this book on Goodreads First Reads giveaways and highly recommend it, but be warned: this novel leaves a strong aftertaste.

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### **Amal Bedhyefi says**

This was not an enjoyable read . As a matter of fact , it was not written to please , but to disturb .

Reading about prostitution and the stories behind different prostitutes started ever since I discovered *Eleven Minutes* by Paulo Coelho .

However , this book is different . The message behind this story is different.

This time , I was left with a lot of unanswered questions and I was filled with both confusion and agony.

Is there really an escape for prostitution or are they bound to do this job their whole life ?

The ending left me absolutely furious because I feel that there is neither a proper justification for its reasons nor for its motives ( I'm trying so hard not to spoil ) .

It was as if Chika , deliberately , left her readers on a cliffhanger .

Why would Sisi's life end up like that ? Didn't she deserve to live the life that she chose ? Didn't she at least deserve to have control over her life and make her own decisions ?

This is heart-breaking .

& knowing that this story is based upon real stories of real Nigerian women living through this hell in Belgium is really sickening .

You should definitely add this book to your TBRs if you love reading African Literature that deal with issues which I would say are under-represented in literature.

PS : There are multiple detailed scenes of sexual assault and it also contains other distressing and violent scenes. If you're going to read this book, be aware of that.

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### **Jennifer says**

2.5-stars, really.

*"There were worse things to become, she reminded herself. She was not a robber, not a cheat, not a 419er sending deceitful e-mails to gullible Westerners. She would make her money honestly. Every cent of it would be earned by her sweat. She did not need to enjoy her job, but she would do it well."*

i am having trouble rating this novel. the issues unigwe highlights are very important, and telling these stories is important. we are given four women who have been trafficked from lagos, nigeria to antwerp, belgium, in order to work as prostitutes. three of the women are nigerian. one is sudanese. they are saddled with a nearly insurmountable debt (\$30,000 euros) they must repay and it seems a vicious cycle from which

they will never escape. three of the four women go into the agreement aware of what is expected of them. the fourth woman believes she will be working as a nanny. of course the reality of their lives in antwerp is horrible. but as we are given the women's backstories, their realities at home were incredibly hard. atrocious. these women - sisi, ama, efe, and alek - are survivors. the dreams each of these women had was powerful. their desires to get to europe or north america so strong. so when given an offer from dele - the man running the operation in lagos - each woman grabs for the escape, and then endures the work as prostitutes. i feel as though the question of what makes a victim is a large part of this story. sisi, ama, efe, and alek (aka joyce) seem to refuse to characterize themselves as such, no matter how tragic the circumstances that pushed them to choose life as a prostitute. (and, of course, the question of choice for these women is also an interesting idea for discussion and consideration.)

i found, though, that unigwe was not consistent in her storytelling. some moments we are given quite deep looks into the lives of the characters. but at other times ideas, places, or characters, are just barely skimmed. and i found the writing could be quite thin at moments, then weirdly overwritten at other moments - the use of language, from the very simple (precise, straightforward), to the dialects - was interesting to me. but every now and then a \$20 word would stick out like a sore thumb. so i felt like there was a bit of a struggle for voice going on with the author. by the end of the book, i felt like unigwe had presented stories of four interesting women.... but she didn't really give us the women - if that makes sense? in their strength and defiance we have some pretty fierce (in a good way) female characters. but they never developed, for me, to their full potential. and the men of the book served as a huge fault for me. they are so contemptible and they come off as stereotypes. they are pimps, johns, drunks, rapists, adulterers, murderers, and one (white) jealous saviour.

i read that unigwe did a lot of research with women working in antwerp's red-light district. and i am glad that she was compelled to fictionalize these lives and situations. it's an unsettling novel she's given readers - and it should be! but it is not a story devoid of hope. that, in itself, is a rather remarkable achievement. i just wish i felt the writing to be stronger.

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## **Wanda says**

Wow. I don't even know how to begin describing how amazing this book was. I'm a person who is very interested in other's backgrounds and Chika Unigwe gave me a enlightening glimpse into the past of 4 Nigerian prostitutes and what brought them all together in one of Belgium's red light districts. Their stories broke my heart, and even though this book is fiction, their's are the stories of not just African women, but stories all women can relate to regardless of our differences. Not only that, but it gave a name, face, and voice to the women working as sex slaves and that they are more than just a body standing in a window enticing men; they are human beings who have lives, dreams, hopes, aspirations, and what they are doing is just a means to get them where they want to go because due to life's circumstance, it was the only card they were allotted.

The book takes place in 2000's, but for some reason the ideas and thoughts of the characters kept making me think it was written in the 1950s. It's difficult to imagine that even in the new millenium, people still face fear of genocide, people are tortured by the military, baby's out of wedlock are frowned upon, and men have all the power over a woman's body, but this is still the case in modern day Africa. This book educated and opened my eyes to the horrors women still face daily in some parts of Africa.

I would definitely recommend this book to any and everyone because it is a reminder of how resilient the human spirit really is.

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### **Cheryl says**

I've wanted to read this book since Chika Unigwe won the coveted \$100k Nigerian literature prize. This book is entertaining indeed, in some places unfolding just like the popular and highly entertaining Nigerian dramas. One thing that Unigwe did well here was the rich dialogue: you could envision yourself in the middle of the conversation. And the strategic sprinkle of dialect: just enough to be authentic, not too much to overwhelm.

The story is about African women with traumatic childhoods who escape from Nigeria to Belgium in order to better their lives. What they must do in Belgium however, is also traumatic. So how do they go from trial to triumph? That was the problem for me with this book. I didn't see that. I couldn't stay with one character for too long because I got a lot from their childhoods, but not a lot from their adulthood. I yearned to see more of their personalities in their adult jobs, get taken behind the scenes with them more.

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### **Abeer Hoque says**

“That first experience [of sex] was so painful in its ordinariness that she had spent days wanting to cry.”

On *Black Sisters Street* by Chika Unigwe is a novel about four African sex workers who by distinct and tragic means travel from their home countries to work in the red light district of Antwerp, Belgium. The story begins with Sisi, perhaps the most complicated character, who turns to prostitution because of a failure of all the options in her life, perhaps most stunningly, education - the holy grail that has been held up by her own thwarted parents to be their saviour. “A prophecy that would rinse her life in a Technicolor glow” ends up failing them all. It is a testament to Ms. Unigwe’s understanding of the economies of mega cities and the politics of those societies, in particular Lagos, that we can see how Sisi’s ambitions burn out inexorably, one by one.

“Count your teeth with your tongue, welu ile gi guo eze gi no, and tell me what you come up with.”

Sisi’s apparent murder at the beginning of the book draws her three housemates together in a series of confessions revealing their own rich backstories and ambitions. Ama hails from Enugu, in southeastern Nigeria (where Ms. Unigwe and I were both born), an angry tempestuous woman with violence and oppression marking her past. Efe is from Lagos, a young mother abandoned by the father of her child and now seeking a better or at least more monied life to support her son and siblings. And Joyce is from war torn Sudan, perhaps the most beautiful of the four, and the most desperately alone.

“He laughed. A laughter that stretched itself into a square that kept him safe.”

Ms. Unigwe never stoops to cliché nor self pity. Some of the reviews of *OBSS* have mentioned the stereotypical male characters (who are unilaterally awful human beings), but honestly, that particular critique means little to me. Those men are all based on real people - we know them or of them - and I was more interested in how well the female characters are realized. Each of the four main female characters is fully and



distinctly drawn and the writing, like their lives, is sometimes plain, sometimes glorious.

“She went in and bought a sandwich, with lettuce spilling out the sides, ruffled and moist.”

“...here were drunks with eyes like quarter moons and throats full of stories.”

I love the Igbo interspersed with the English, sometimes translated, often not, as well as the pidgin that some of them speak. Here are three lovely examples:

“I liked the look of the woman. Ugly. Ojoka, but in a very attractive way.”

“I saw this with my own koro-koro eyes.”

“With my height, if I no wear heels, I go be like full stop on the ground.”

The women are reaching for “the life of the rich and the arrived” and their end goals and ambitions are as varied as their personalities. But it is their particular histories that tie this clear-spoken heartbreaking book together, how very different people can come together, and move on.

“...the Udi Hills surrounding Enugu, rolling and folding into one another like an enormous piece of green cloth...”

Ms. Unigwe’s first two novels were written in Dutch (making her the first Flemish writer of African origin) and her next two have been in English. This kind of language proficiency is just marvelous, let alone how challenging it seems to me to write a book about sex workers that has the ring of resonance and truth all around. I’m much looking forward to reading her other work, those written and those to come.

“The road is far, uzo eteka.”

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## **Canadian Reader says**

Four young African women—Sisi, Efre, Ama, and Joyce—the “black sisters” of the title have been trafficked to Antwerp, Belgium, by Dele, a wealthy, corpulent Nigerian. Three of these young women believe that they were the ones who made the choice (no one coerced them!) and that work in the sex trade is the route to a better life. One of the four is actually university educated, but even this had provided no advantage when it came to finding work in Lagos. For all of the girls, their bodies are their last resource.

Once they’re installed in a house in Belgium--run by a Nigerian madame with skill in placing the “spicy” and exotic black flesh (so craved by bored white Belgians) where it can be seen to the best advantage--the girls must turn over their passports to her. They’re told they’ll get the passports back when their debts are paid. They make monthly payments by wire to Dele in Nigeria (for their costly and troublesome passage to Europe), and they also owe the madame rent for the red-light district window spaces from which they show their wares. The girls quickly learn that it's hard to realize your dreams when you’re so busy paying off the people who are exploiting you.

Quite early in this relatively short and fast-paced novel, the Madame reports to three of the girls that the fourth, Sisi, has been found murdered. The reader is less certain she is dead, however, since her story is still unfolding in intermittent chapters over the course of the novel. These chapters make clear that Sisi has been contemplating an escape from prostitution after having formed a relationship with a Belgian man. As her three housemates grieve Sisi, each tells the never-before spoken story of how she came to this place in

Belgium. These stories, increasingly horrifying and harrowing, are related in far more detail than are the particulars of the girls' "work". About the latter, it should be noted that what is told is as sordid as one would expect, and probably more than enough.

The reader must wait to the end to find out Sisi's fate. Through it, the author makes clear that any agency the girls may have felt upon entering the sex trade is entirely illusory.

Unigwe's storytelling and characterization are solid and affecting. Initially, I had difficulty telling the four women apart, but I found that it got much easier once the backstories started. I also struggled with the Nigerian Pidgin dialogue, often having to reread or read aloud passages to get their gist. While the conclusion of the novel is certainly credible enough given the details Unigwe provides about those who manage this particular sex-trade business, the immediate events that lead up to it—specifically, those that concern Sisi's Belgian boyfriend—did not entirely convince.

Thank you to my Goodreads friend, Mandy, for alerting me to this unusual and well-written novel.

Rating: 3.5

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### **Carolyn Moncel says**

Living in Switzerland, stopping human trafficking is a goal for many Int'l agencies here. It's a very interesting book because the topic, though fictional, is very real. It's not just a problem in Belgium, as depicted in the story, but all across Europe, Asia, and yes, North America. The stories and circumstances for which the women find themselves are believable and very sad. The author does a good job in providing some insights into the backgrounds of these characters. If I have any criticism, it is only in the way the book ends - it rushes too quickly to a conclusion. Also, I didn't care for the way in which the main character, Sisi, was revealed. Overall I found myself invested in these characters from the beginning. At times despite their dire circumstances, I still wanted to strangle them for making such dangerous choices. I look forward to reading more work from this author. Very well done.

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