

MADAME
SOSOSTRIS
& THE
FESTIVAL
FOR THE
BROKEN-
HEARTED

Also by Ben Okri

FICTION

Flowers and Shadows
The Landscapes Within
Incidents at the Shrine
Stars of the New Curfew
The Famished Road
Songs of Enchantment
Astonishing the Gods
Dangerous Love
Infinite Riches
In Arcadia
Starbook
The Comic Destiny
(previously *Tales of Freedom*)
The Age of Magic
The Magic Lamp
The Freedom Artist
Prayer for the Living
Every Leaf a Hallelujah
The Last Gift of the Master Artists
Tiger Work

ESSAYS

Birds of Heaven
A Way of Being Free
The Mystery Feast
A Time for New Dreams

POETRY

An African Elegy
Mental Fight
Wild
Rise Like Lions
(Anthology)
A Fire in My Head

PLAYS

The Outsider
Changing Destiny

MADAME
SOSOSTRIS
& THE
FESTIVAL
FOR THE
BROKEN-
HEARTED
BEN OKRI



An Apollo Book

First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Ben Okri, 2025

The moral right of Ben Okri to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted
in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means
of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the
publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation
of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights
holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception
as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

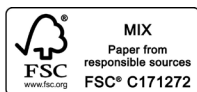
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781035910755

ISBN (E): 9781035910724

Cover design: Jessie Price | Head of Zeus

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YX



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books
visit www.headofzeus.com

For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

Are you sure that we are awake?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare

Whoever cannot seek the unforeseen sees

Nothing, for the known way is an impasse.

Heraclitus

For Judith Gurewich

Read slowly

BOOK ONE

1

THE ROAD TO unhappiness is predictable, but the paths to happiness are surprising.

Viv had the idea for the festival on the twentieth anniversary of the day her first husband abandoned her. She didn't know it was the anniversary at the time.

She had been at a friend's party in Hampstead and found herself talking to a nice woman, a stranger, about the impossibility of recovering from real heartbreak.

'There are organisations for people who grieve, for alcoholics and other kinds of addicts,' Viv said. 'But if you've been devastated by the love of your life walking out on you, where the hell do you go?'

'The million-dollar question,' said the stranger.

That was when Viv had her epiphany. She immediately saw shadowy people wandering about in a well-lit forest and had a fleeting impression of piano music.

‘Wouldn’t it be great,’ Viv said, ‘to hold a festival for people who’ve been smashed up by love?’

The stranger seemed fascinated by the idea.

‘You mean, people who’ve been dumped?’

‘Yes. Properly dumped.’

‘I’d go to that. Where would you have it?’

‘I don’t know. Somewhere unique.’

‘Did this idea just occur to you?’

‘Yes. I certainly didn’t have it when my first husband left me.’

‘How did you cope with that? What did you do?’

Then it poured out of Viv.

‘I didn’t know what to do,’ she said. ‘I drank a lot and had lots of boyfriends in quick succession and hurled myself into my work. The years passed, I met my current husband and forgot about my heartbreak, till today.’

‘Odd that you should remember it now.’

‘I know,’ said Viv. ‘But now that I think about it, this is the anniversary of the day he left.’

‘Is it? How strange. It must have really hurt for you to have forgotten it all this time and suddenly to remember it today.’

‘It is strange, when you think about it. But it did hurt. It still does.’

‘I love the idea of the festival.’

‘Do you?’ said Viv. ‘As soon as I told you about it, I felt a little shiver.’

‘Did you really?’

‘The festival would have to be somewhere fabulous. The Amalfi coast or the Côte d’Azur. A bit bucolic. Like a Watteau painting. Everyone in costume. Nobody appearing as themselves. Wouldn’t it be fun if no one recognised anybody else, even the people they came with, their partners or boyfriends? What mischief!’

She talked about the idea everywhere. It bewildered most people. They could make no sense of it.

2

SHE BROUGHT THE idea up with her great friend, Beatrice, who had come to visit one morning when Viv's husband Alan was away on business. Beatrice had retired from a career juggling portfolios and now sat on the boards of many charities. They were in Viv's house in Notting Hill Gate, drinking Amarone round the new kitchen island.

'Have I told you about this new passion of mine?'

'How very sly of you. Anyone I know?'

'Not a man, an idea.'

'A passion for an idea, not a man? Isn't that the wrong way round?'

'You won't think so once you've heard my idea. Sometimes an idea is the best thing to fall in love with when men are so disappointing.'

'Disappointed with Alan already?'

'I never said that. I was speaking theoretically.'

‘I find,’ said Beatrice, ‘that when people speak theoretically they’re speaking personally.’

‘We’re not all like you,’ said Viv tartly. ‘For you everything is autobiographical. Even the weather.’

‘But, Viv, what we say about the weather reveals a lot. Nothing could be more revealing.’

‘To get back to the point, there’s absolutely nothing the matter with me and Alan. We are, as they say, safe as houses.’

‘An odd metaphor for a relationship. Makes it sound speculative, like a bond.’

‘A relationship is a bond.’

‘Not a government bond, I hope. Those tend to fluctuate wildly.’

‘Beatrice, I think you’ll like my idea. What do you think causes the greatest unhappiness in people?’

‘Money.’

‘More fundamental than that.’

‘Climate change?’

‘Too frightening to be the cause of everyday unhappiness.’

‘You’re right there. I can’t contemplate the enormity of it. Much easier to have another gin and tonic.’

‘How environmentally irresponsible of you,’ said Viv. ‘My god-daughter says the root of climate change is in human history. It’s caused by our greed, our desire for more than we need, for dominating

others. She says humanity is doomed because we in the West will never give up our advantages.'

'She sounds terrifying.'

'She is. But so's the world we find ourselves in right now.'

'That's why I reach for a cocktail.'

'You said a gin and tonic a minute ago.'

'A stronger drink for a stronger avoidance.'

'So you do know you're avoiding the issue?'

'Isn't everyone?'

'Everyone except my god-daughter. What was the original question?'

'I've forgotten. You distracted me.'

'What's the greatest obstacle to human happiness?'

'Poverty?'

'The happiest people I know are the poorest.'

'Powerlessness?'

'Only a sociopath needs power to be happy.'

'I give up. What then?'

'The loss of love.'

'Where's this leading?'

'To a festival for people who have had their hearts cracked.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'I'm thinking of a festival where people lose their inhibitions and reveal themselves. Get over their heartbreak and start to love all over again. Wouldn't

it be great if we could free ourselves from our pasts and become new people, change our lives and find true happiness?’

‘That’s a lot to take in. It’s a bit mad. Have you told Alan about it yet?’

‘No.’

‘I thought you told him everything?’

‘I do and I don’t. He already disapproves of my interest in yoga. What he calls New Age Stuff. Not sure I can take another suppressed sneer just yet.’

‘Surely he’d support you.’

‘Publicly, yes.’

‘Not privately?’

‘He wouldn’t be exactly scathing, but he’d have that look he puts on when he’s not saying what he really thinks. That’s enough to finish the idea off. I’ll nurse it first and when it’s ready break it to him gently.’

‘You should have more faith in him.’

‘You’re right, I should. Faith is a tricky thing. Self-interest is more dependable.’

‘Appeal to his self-interest then. I’m sure he can find a way to make money from the festival.’

‘You’re right. And we haven’t worked together on a project for a long time. Used to do that a lot. It’s what brought us together, you know.’

‘Was it? I thought you’d been together since birth.’

‘It just feels that way. We were both raising money to restore the stained-glass windows in the village church. We met at the fête. He was funny and considerate back then. That was before I was in the House of Lords.’

‘You make it sound as if you being in the House of Lords has made him less funny and considerate.’

‘Maybe the House has that effect.’

‘Then maybe this project is what you two need. I’m sure it’ll cheer up all kinds of people. Let me know if it goes anywhere. Stephen’s expecting me for lunch. You know how impatient he gets.’

‘Does he? I never notice. He’s always patient with me. How’s the magazine doing these days?’

Beatrice got up from her seat.

‘Stephen just mutters about it. It would take a magician to work out what’s going on in his mind. He gets more folded as he gets older.’

‘Not literally folded?’

‘That would be easier to deal with. I mean his mind is folded. I can’t read him.’

‘Maybe you two need a project as well.’

‘A project would finish us off. What we need is distraction. That’s why I think this festival is such a good idea. We all need distraction. Something we can feel good about. Anyway, must dash. Stephen is never more caustic than when I’m late.’

She encompassed Viv in a hug, pulled on her gloves, and rushed away, leaving Viv to the silence of the house.