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Nalo Hopkinson

*Sister Mine*

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320 pages

\$15.00

Review by Laura K. Wallace

*Sister Mine*, the most recent novel by the queer Black Caribbean-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson begins when the protagonist, Makeda, decides to escape her codependent, judgmental family by moving out of her twin sister's house. As readers familiar with Hopkinson's Afro-futurist science fiction and fantasy might expect, this story has a twist. *Sister Mine*, which won the 2013 Andre Norton Nebula Award, draws the reader into a contemporary Toronto populated by ancient gods, sea monsters, flying carpets, magical cats, and a biker who is also the spirit of Jimi Hendrix's guitar. On the second page, Makeda identifies herself as an "artists's hanger-on who liked to tinker" and a "crippled deity half-breed... with no mojo of my own." Makeda's parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are "celestials," who some readers will immediately recognize as Yoruba West African *orishas*, deities who also manifest in syncretic Caribbean religious traditions such as Santería and Vodou. Makeda's attempted escape from her family has everything to do with her liminal position among them, her envy of their spectacular powers, and the feeling that she might belong more in the "claypicken" world, where mortals are largely ignorant of the celestial forces at work in their lives. Makeda's in-between experience echoes the culture shock Hopkinson herself describes when she talks about her own move, at sixteen, from Guyana to Toronto.

*Sister Mine* is structured around epigraphs from Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862). Both texts focus on two sisters, one lured away from the other by the world outside, both texts foreground the sisters' slippery, enmeshed identities. For *Sister Mine*'s Makeda and Abby, this enmeshment is quite literal, since they were born conjoined. Severed soon after birth, in an operation that leaves Abby with a limp, but gifts her with musical celestial mojo and Makeda with seemingly no supernatural powers.

Although she lacks mojo, Makeda has nevertheless always been capable of seeing the "Shine" on objects that have "rubbed up against the ineffable for a long time," like the mysterious warehouse called Cheerful Rest, where she makes her new home. As soon as Makeda realizes her plan to move out on her own, she learns that her father—or at least the claypicken body that houses his soul—is dying. In the wake of her father's death, Makeda experiences strange symptoms, and must defend herself against increasing attacks by the hideous "haint" that has followed her for as long as she can remember, while her sister Abby grieves Makeda's absence. However the twins maintain a spiritual connection, and a close, at times, sexual relationship which occasionally leaves Makeda feeling claustrophobic. Ultimately they both must make sacrifices in order to save each other's lives, and to find a balance between individuality and family bonds, between freedom and responsibility.

Hopkinson evocatively renders the intersection of human and celestial experience through the voice and perspective of Makeda, who, at the beginning of the *Sister Mine*, understands herself to be a dull, un-Shiny mortal who happens to have access to the world of *orishas*. In a visit to the court of the gods during a Santería ritual, Makeda viscerally describes a synesthetic and interdimensional experience, as her relatives shift shape and possess worshippers. "You know those drawings of the superhero the Flash when he's running? Multiple iterations of him, all spread out in a wavy line? That's how the whole family looked to me..." Makeda's sardonic sense of humor and sense of her own humanity ground the narrative, keeping such descriptions from being overly precious or fantastical. As jarring as such celestial experiences are for Makeda, they are also part of her ordinary life, and the book's language reflects this. The Afro-Caribbean vernacular spoken by the characters incorporates words that take on specific meanings in their celestial culture (celestial, claypicken,

haint, Shine), but Hopkinson doesn't labor to explain the nuance to readers, or emphasize a stark separation between the claypicken and celestial worlds. Rather, the reader experiences the celestial as ordinary, the way Makeda does, organically acclimating to the world Hopkinson builds.

*Sister Mine* will appeal to readers looking for a funny, poignant, non-Eurocentric fantasy novel (Rossetti allusions notwithstanding), and will be a generative text for those interested in speculative fiction, contemporary representations of African Traditional Religions, or Black Canadian literature.