

Praise for

THE UPPER WORLD

'To have a book that marries real London life, time travel and relativity in an illuminating and entertaining way is stuff I used to dream about. I had *The Upper World* in my hands until I finished it.

So happy this exists.'
DANIEL KALUUYA

'Wow! *The Upper World* is a time-twisting, mind-bending thrill ride. I raced through the pages trying to keep up with Ezzo and Rhia – if I could read at the speed of light, I would have! This south London epic will stay with you long after the final page.'

HOLLY JACKSON

'A thrilling, electric book – so sharp and quick, so witty and wise it leaves you gasping.'

KATHERINE RUNDELL

'A rollercoaster of a story, like Patrice Lawrence's *Orangeboy* with an *Inception*-style twist. Exhilarating and exceptional!'

KAT ELLIS

'An audacious blend of quantum physics, Ancient Greek philosophy and south London gang culture, *The Upper World* is a blistering, ferocious science-fiction story that asks what we would change if we could, and what would happen if we couldn't. Make some room at the table, Doctor Who – there's a new time-travelling hero in town.'

MELINDA SALISBURY

'*The Upper World* is an astoundingly impressive debut. Thought-provoking, thrilling, funny, and brilliant in every sense of the word.'

KATHERINE WEBBER

'Truly mind-bending, fiendishly clever, original and stylish – I was blown away by this novel. Philosophy meets physics meets Peckham . . . No doubt about it, *The Upper World* is destined to stand the test of time.'

AMY MCCULLOCH

'[An] ambitious and highly addictive sci-fi thriller . . . The theory of relativity and time-travel science may drive the incredibly tense and compelling plot, but it is Fadugba's skill in weaving this around complex characters and a very powerful human story that makes *The Upper World* so special.'

FIONA NOBLE, *THE BOOKSELLER*

'A deeply unique, masterfully plotted time-travel adventure spanning generations. Accurate science combined with fun, vividly realistic characters – what's not to love?'

LAUREN JAMES

'What a ride . . . I loved it.'

SALLY GREEN

'*The Upper World* is brilliant and engrossing. Femi Fadugba debuts with an awesome and riveting thrill ride of a book. He's definitely one to watch.'

DAPO ADEOLA

'A mind-blowingly brilliant mash-up of physics, guns, philosophy, love, hate and time travel.'

ANDREINA CORDANI

'A truly epic sci-fi thriller that makes maths feel EXTREMELY cool . . . An outstanding book.'

RASHMI SIRDESHPANDE

'Such a stunning read!! I had to keep pausing just to catch my breath. Femi Fadugba is the real deal.'

TỌLÁ OKOGWU

**THE
MIRROR
WORLD**

Books by Femi Fadugba

THE UPPER WORLD
THE MIRROR WORLD

**THE
MIRROR
WORLD**

FEMI FADUGBA



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Dedicated to those who choose hope

The image features a central text block surrounded by a decorative border. The border is composed of numerous black lines of varying lengths and orientations, creating a jagged, organic shape that frames the text. The lines are most dense at the corners and become sparser towards the center.

**THE
MIRROR
WORLD**

I didn't want to start this story with such a clichéd line, but who am I kidding any more?

If you're reading this, it means I'm dead.

Like proper dead.

As in full-on, zero-breath and no-life dead.

As in an-infinite-abyss-under-a-perfect-vacuum-locked-inside-a-very-dark-void dead.

Gone. Forever.

And if you're reading this that also means you're about to learn the truth. I'll keep it brief, though, since I have to start from the beginning.

PART I: SUPERPOSITION

CHAPTER 34

VERITAS

As I turned on to the side road, the giant gates of Veritas College came into view, and for the first time since getting in I let the dream settle into reality: *I'm at the University of Oxford*. And not Oxford Brookes, mind you, as everyone (and I mean, literally, *everyone*) guessed when I told them I was going to Oxford. I meant *Oxford*, Oxford. The same uni where Schrödinger studied before finding his quantum cat. Where Penrose figured out that the secrets of consciousness were hidden in black holes.

And now *I* was here. Blessed with a fresh start and a chance to prove to myself, maybe even to the world, that I belonged here. No matter what had come before.

Carved on both sides of the sky-high door were decorated wooden shields, with a logo I recognized from the Veritas College prospectus that the admissions team had sent us a couple weeks back. I'd chosen Veritas over the other thirty-six colleges at Oxford, partly because it was one of the few that offered my course, but mostly – if I'm being real – for the look on my teachers' faces when they asked what college I was going to, and I got to reply in Latin.

'Can I help you, ma'am?' An older man in a matching jumper

and tie stuck his head out of a hole in the wall to my side. His eyebrows were so stringy and thick that they connected with his sideburns, and one of them began to bend as he looked me up and down from braids to boots.

‘Yes, please,’ I replied. Knowing I had no way to get to the other side of the stones that barricaded the college from the rest of Longwall Street without him, I secured my giant container of jollof in one hand, and with the other dragged my luggage along the pavement towards him. The back wheel had snapped clean off after hoisting it on to the escalator from Paddington tube station. And although I was grateful the wheel had even lasted this long, given all its years of moving my life from one yard to the next, I definitely looked like some crazy aunty carrying spicy food and a one-wheeled suitcase. But after shelling out for new pots and pans, a couple of fancy dresses for Oxford formals and a mattress protector there was no cash left for new luggage. And of course, I never found the matching lid for the only Tupperware big enough to hold all the rice my dad had cooked for me. So what else was I meant to do?

‘I’m Rhia,’ I announced, standing tall. ‘Rhia Adenon.’ I swapped the bags in each arm, knowing I’d only have a few steps before my trailing shoulder got knackered and I’d have to swap again. ‘First year. Physics.’

A whisk of suspicion smeared his face, and without saying a word he disappeared inside. If last year’s college numbers were anything to go by, nearly two hundred freshers were moving into halls today, meaning he might be gone a while. But then again, assuming the student list he was scrolling through was ordered by surnames, Adenon was likely to be on the first page.

As the giant golden clock above ticked away, I looked further along the road at a parrot chipping at an apple core, with feathers so red they could have been tie-dyed. Kids at my secondary school always used to ask me why I was so into birds, and although I'd never had any answers that made sense to them, I was pretty sure it was the same reason I was so into physics.

See, physics is all about writing down (in maths language) the unbreakable laws that rule the universe. For example, when you drop an apple, it falls to the ground, not because it feels like it, but because it has to follow the same law of gravity as the rest of us: what goes up must come down. But all it takes is one glance at a bird above, as it glides piss-takingly through the sky, to notice there's a loophole somewhere in that law. And then, because you're a weirdo physicist with very few friends like me, you start investigating that one loophole. But it turns out that the more you tug on that single loose thread to try and patch your laws back together into a single logical rule again, the more *all* your laws start to unravel. And, before you know it, it's 4 a.m, you haven't left the flat all weekend, and when you look around your room you realize all the laws of physics you'd lived by up to that point are scattered across the carpet in shreds. But then, because you still don't have (many) friends, you keep trying to fix it. And after a week or so of hating life, you come back to your room one morning with fresh eyes and see that, by some miracle, there's *just* enough string to create a brand-new mosaic of laws to explain life. And this new set of laws are not only more beautiful, but more unbreakable too. Well, until the next bird flies over.

Laws and loopholes: to me, that's what physics is all about. That's why I love it. And hate it.

My extended reality lenses picked up on my continuing gaze, zoomed in, then shared some extra deets on the creature ahead:

- ***Eclectus parrot***
- **Famous for their dimorphism as a bird species, with the crimson-coloured females so different in appearance to their bright-green male counterparts that they were once thought to be different species**
- **Native to New Guinea**

New Guinea? Isn't that near New Zealand? How the hell did he get here, then? Before I could slide deeper into the meta-net hole to start learning about avian migrations, the porter reappeared with a stack of papers in hand.

'There's no one by the name of Adenon here.'

I gulped. 'That's weird. It's spelt: A-D-E-N-O-N.'

He shook his head as he skimmed through the pile again.

It's going to be OK, I reminded myself. *It's all gonna work out*. It was all I could say to put the growing panic to bed. 'You sure?'

'I might not have actually studied at Oxford when I was a young un like the rest of you clever clogs, but I can manage a six-letter word, love.'

'Of course.' I exhaled, anger rising from deep in my belly to the top of my throat. I'd emailed both the college registrar and the accommodation lady, asking them to *please* update the surname on all my stuff before I arrived. How could they have let something this important slip?

Unballing my free hand, I put my polite face on again. It wasn't

this man's fault, after all. I'd just have to email them again. 'Can you check for a Rhianna *Black*, then?'

After a moment, his face brightened and he said, 'Why didn't you just say that from the start?'

He handed over the pack of name badges we'd be wearing for all of freshers' week, each with the old surname on it. Then he handed me my BOD card, the sacred piece of plastic they'd warned us not to lose in every piece of correspondence for the past couple months, going back as far as late July. It was mad to me that here, in 2039, people were still using physical ID. But I took a second to check the photo one more time, anyway. It had taken hours to get it right: first, evening out the extra dark spots on my cheeks; next, playing with the colour palette till there was just enough red to the tone; and, finally, lengthening my round face as much as I could without it looking bait.

'Thanks, sir.' Realizing I was about to lose him to his hidden hole again, I followed: 'Also, d'you know how I can get to my room on staircase fourteen, please?'

'Well, I wouldn't be terribly good at my job if I didn't.' He smirked, rolling up his sleeves one measured fold at a time. I still couldn't quite get over those eyebrows. They were wasted on him. 'So, darling . . . what you wanna do is just carry on through the main doors here and keep to the right of that cobbled path cos it'll split in two once you hit the tarmac. The first path'll take you to Lincoln Quad on the left. But don't take that one, love. Instead, grab the one on the right and follow it past the water fountain, and all the way to the far end of North Quad. Go round the grass and onwards into the car park, where you might see some other students, and at the

end you'll spot some lovely Oxford-blue gates to the side . . . But don't pass through 'em!' His sudden lift in volume almost knocked me off the pavement edge. 'Instead, look for the pair of sycamore trees on the short side, and about twenty metres beyond those is a Roman cove. Go just past that, and there's a door with a latchkey. Open it, head up to the third floor and your room's the second one on the left. I hope you caught all that?' He raised his flawless brow at me again and waited.

Deep breath. 'So, first I go through the main doors. Then the path on the right. Through North Quad. Don't go through the blue gates, instead carry on twenty metres past the sycamore trees and the Roman cove and up to an old school door. Take the stairs up to floor three, and my room's the second door on the left?'

'Very good,' he answered. Next came a nod so slight I'd have missed it if I'd blinked. But I hadn't. 'Very good.'

And, for the first time, a smile divided my face.

First test at Oxford: smashed.

Then, with one tap of my BOD card against the keypad, the entrance to a brand-new world opened before me.