CSU Professor Wins Africa’s Top Literary Prize

CHICAGO (NOVEMBER 12, 2008) — A Chicago State University professor has won Africa’s top literary prize for her novel “Zahrah the Windseeker.” Nnedi Okoroafor, a faculty member in CSU’s Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing, is the winner of the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa, presented in Nigeria. The award, named for the continent’s first Nobel Laureate in literature, is considered Africa’s Nobel Prize.

The prize was established by the Lumina Foundation in 2005 and is awarded every two years. Ms. Okoroafor received a $20,000 prize during the awards ceremony in Lagos, Nigeria.

“The Wole Soyinka Prize is my first award for a published novel. It is extra sweet that it is an African award that I accepted in Africa,” said Ms. Okoroafor. “Nigeria—and the greater Africa—is my muse. My siblings and I have always adamantly claimed and embraced our American- and Nigerian-ness.”

Born in the United States to Nigerian parents, Okoroafor uses her Nigerian heritage as her inspiration. Yet, she is also influenced by films ranging from “Lord of the Rings,” to “Harry Potter” to “The Matrix.” “Zahrah the Windseeker,” her first novel, combines elements of science fiction, African folklore, exotic creatures, and children with superhuman powers—all seen through the eyes of a 13-year-old girl.

“When I first wrote ‘Zahrah the Windseeker,’ I had this idea of little Nigeria girls sneaking away from their never-ending chores to read about Zahrah and her audacious adventure,” said Ms. Okoroafor. “It was one of the many vivid things I remember from my trips to Nigeria over the years.”

Because she grew up wanting to be an entomologist—and even after becoming a writer, maintained a love of insects and nature—Ms. Okoroafor’s work is always filled with startlingly vivid flora and fauna. Her second novel, “The Shadow Speaker,” is a futuristic fantasy set in Niger, West Africa in 2070.

The author earned a bachelor’s degree in rhetoric from the University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana; a master’s in journalism from Michigan State University; and a master’s and doctorate in English from the University of Illinois, Chicago. She is also a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer’s Workshop.