

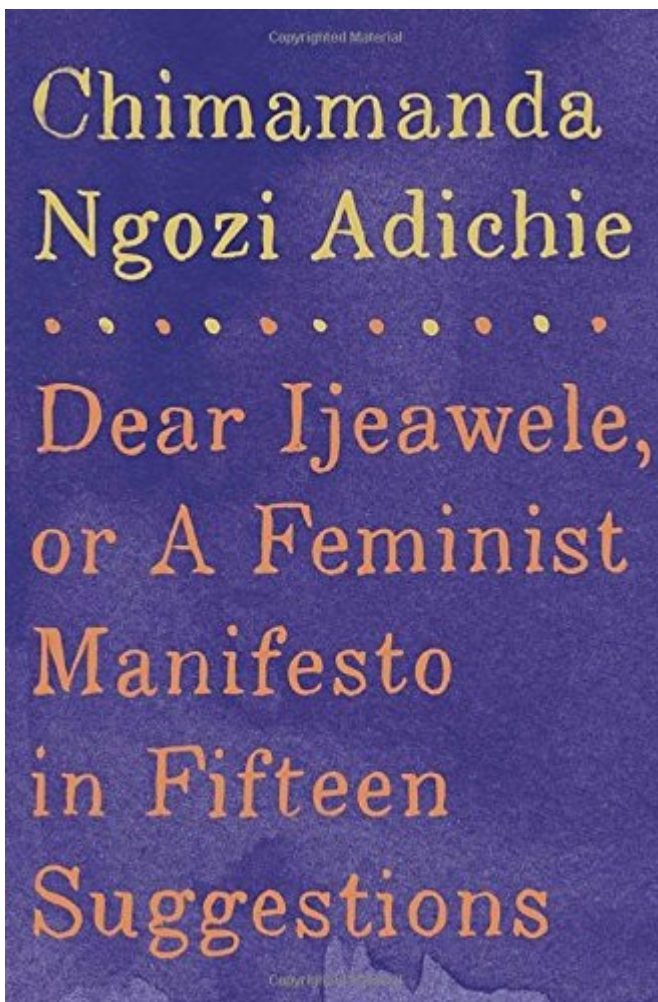
Creating a feminist world

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie captures the complexity of gender—and suggests simple ways to negotiate it.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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In Review



Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions

by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Knopf

One of my daughters is adventuresome, athletic, and unyielding in her independence. She's also obsessed with princesses and refuses to wear anything except a "big" (i.e., puffy) dress. My other daughter is sensitive, emotional, and attached to me at the hip (often literally). She sleeps with a fire truck and builds snakes out of her Legos. In other words, children negotiate and fulfill gender stereotypes in complex ways.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes about this reality in a lovely volume of letters that she originally wrote to her childhood friend Ijeawele, a new mother who wondered how to raise her daughter as a feminist while negotiating race, gender expectations, and cultural norms. "Teach her that the idea of 'gender roles' is absolute nonsense," Adichie counsels her friend. "The knowledge of cooking does not come pre-installed in a vagina." She then tells about observing a Nigerian mother in a U.S. shopping mall who refused to buy her daughter a toy helicopter because the daughter already had dolls to play with. "I wonder now, wistfully, if the little girl would have turned out to be a revolutionary engineer, had she been given a chance to explore that helicopter." Adichie concludes with this advice: "Teach her to try to fix physical things when they break. We are quick to assume girls can't do many things. Let her try. She may not fully succeed, but let her try. Buy her toys like blocks and trains—and dolls, too, if you want to."

The tone of the book is at once gentle and fierce. It is, as the subtitle claims, both a manifesto and a set of suggestions. But the juxtaposition isn't jarring: it simply embodies what frank conversation between good friends looks like at its best. Challenge and generosity. Law and gospel. "Teach her to reject likeability," Adichie suggests in one letter, and in another: "teach her to love books."

Adichie is a MacArthur Genius Grant winner who became widely known outside of literary circles after giving a [TED talk](#) in November 2012 entitled "We should all be feminists," which later turned into a [book](#) of the same name. (The day I was reading this book on my train ride home from the office, I glanced at the man sitting across the aisle and noticed that he was reading Adichie's novel [Americanah](#)). This new book is, like her other writings, wry and deeply honest. The advice she gives

Ijeawele is partially rooted in the particularities of Igbo culture, which the two of them share, and partially informed by larger conversations about sexual politics and gender roles.

While the book doesn't speak much about religion, it carries an ethical impulse that people of faith will find familiar. "Teach her to reject likeability" is followed by this: "Her job is not to make herself likeable, her job is to be her full self, a self that is honest and aware of the equal humanity of other people." That's a statement about the difficulty of vocation, and it's more nuanced than what I hear in the typical sermon. On self-sacrifice, Adichie writes:

Teach her that to love is not only to give but also to take. This is important because we give girls subtle clues about their lives—we teach girls that a large component of their ability to love is their ability to sacrifice their selves. We do not teach this to boys. Teach her that to love she must give of herself emotionally but she must also expect to be given.

I once wrote a 20-page paper in graduate school that said pretty much exactly what Adichie says in those four sentences.

"Teach her to question language," Adichie writes in another letter. "Language is the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions. But to teach her that, you will have to question your own language." The idea that the world is discursively constructed makes sense to me from a Christian perspective—"God said 'let light be' and light was" (Gen 1:3), and "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). Now it also makes sense to me from a feminist perspective. The world that Adichie is creating with her own thoughtful use of language is one that I want my daughters to inhabit as they grow up.