



# Flowers for Algernon

A Short Story by Daniel Keyes

***Flowers for Algernon*** is a science fiction short story and subsequent novel written by Daniel Keyes. The short story, written in 1958 and first published in the April 1959 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1960. The novel was published in 1966 and was joint winner of that year's Nebula Award for Best Novel (with Babel-17). Algernon is a laboratory mouse who has undergone surgery to increase his intelligence by artificial means. The story is told as a series of progress reports written by Charlie, the first human test subject for the surgery, and touches upon many different ethical and moral themes such as the treatment of the mentally disabled. Although the book has often been challenged for removal from libraries in the US and Canada, sometimes successfully, it is regularly taught in schools around the world and has been adapted numerous times for television, theatre, radio and as the Academy Award winning film Charly.

## Background Information

The ideas for *Flowers for Algernon* developed over a period of 14 years and were inspired by numerous events in Keyes's life, starting in 1945 with Keyes's personal conflict with his parents who were pushing him through a pre-medical education in spite of his own desire to pursue a writing career. Keyes felt that his education was driving a wedge between him and his parents and this led him to wonder what would happen if it were possible to increase a person's intelligence. Another important moment came in 1957, while Keyes was teaching English to students with special needs; one student asked him if it would be possible to be put into a regular class if he worked hard and became smart.

Different characters in the book were also based on events and people in Keyes's life. The character of Algernon was inspired by a university dissection class, while the name came from that of the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Nemur and Strauss, the scientists who develop the intelligence enhancing surgery in the story, were based on professors Keyes met while studying psychoanalysis in graduate school.

In 1958, Keyes was approached by Galaxy Science Fiction magazine to write a story, at which point the different elements of *Flowers for Algernon* fell into place. On submitting the finished story to *Galaxy*, however, the editor suggested changing the ending so that Charlie retained his intelligence, married Alice, and lived happily ever after. Keyes refused to make the change and sold the story to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* instead.

Keyes worked on the expanded novel between 1962 and 1965 and first tried to sell it to Doubleday, but they also wanted to change the ending. Again, Keyes refused and gave Doubleday back their advance. Five different publishers rejected the story over the course of a year until it was taken on and published by Harcourt in 1966.

## Idea Behind the Story

Charlie Gordon is a man with low mental ability. A kind teacher recommends that he undergo an operation that has already tripled the intelligence of a white mouse. Charlie's doctors ask Charlie to write progress reports that would show the changes in his intelligence.

**Preview**

The story is told through a series of journal entries written by the story's protagonist, Charlie Gordon, a man with an IQ of 68 (average IQ is 100) who works a menial job. He is selected to undergo an experimental surgical technique to increase his intelligence. The technique has already been successfully tested on Algernon, a laboratory mouse. The surgery on Charlie is also a success and his IQ triples.

Charlie falls in love with his former teacher, Miss Kinnian, but as his intelligence increases, he surpasses her intellectually and they become unable to relate to each other. Also, his new intelligence scares his co-workers at his job; they start a petition to have him fired and, when Charlie finds out about it, he quits.

As Charlie's intelligence peaks, Algernon suddenly declines — losing his increased intelligence and dying shortly afterward. Charlie discovers that his intelligence increase is also only temporary. Unable to do anything to prevent the change, Charlie ultimately reverts to his original mental state in a swift reversal of his original growth. He tries to return to his original life and job but cannot stand everyone feeling sorry for him so he decides to move away. His last wish before he leaves is that someone put flowers on Algernon's grave.

## Synopsis

Important themes in *Flowers for Algernon* include:

- 1) The treatment of the mentally disabled
- 2) The conflict between intellect and emotion or happiness
- 3) How events in the past can influence a person later in life.

**Themes**

Both the novel and the short story are written in an epistolary style (literary device that is constructed in the form of a series of letters or journal entries), collecting together Charlie's personal "progress reports" from a few days before the operation until his final regression. Initially, the reports are full of spelling errors and awkwardly constructed sentences. Following the operation, however, the first signs of Charlie's increased intelligence are his improved accuracy in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and his word choice. Charlie's regression is conveyed by the loss of these skills.

## Style