



How Beautiful We Were

By Imbolo Mbue

About the Author

IMBOLO MBUE is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller **BEHOLD THE DREAMERS**, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was an Oprah’s Book Club selection. The novel has been adapted into an opera and a stage play, and optioned for a miniseries.

Her second novel, **HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE**, is about a fictional African village’s fight against an American oil company, it was named by the *New York Times* as “One of the 10 Best Books” of 2021.

Her works have been translated into eighteen languages and published in dozens of countries.

A native of Limbe, Cameroon, and a graduate of Rutgers and Columbia Universities, Mbue lives in New York.

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A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

All my life, I've been fascinated by people who fight back. People who refuse to accept the status quo. People who look at the injustice around them and say: No More. We know them by many names. Revolutionaries. Dissidents. Activists. Protesters. They are men and women. Of every race. Of every creed. They fight unfairness privately and publicly. Sometimes we celebrate them. Other times we punish them. Many of them live and die in obscurity, but their work lives on for posterity. My new novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, was inspired by them all. It is the story of what happens when the residents of a fictional African village named Kosawa decide to rise up and fight back against an American oil company that has been polluting their land.

Spanning forty years, it follows a generation of children growing up in this village and what happens to them as they watch their parents fight the oil company, and as they themselves take up the fight. One of these children, a girl named Thula, is at the center of the story and ultimately becomes the leader of the movement to bring the oil company to justice.

Recently, someone said to me, "I know how this story ends—the oil company wins, right?" The statement made me laugh. I understand the allure of thinking along such lines—the world abounds in stories of communities that were decimated by powerful corporations—but what the person failed to understand is that even those who might seem powerless have their own powers. There are wins and losses on both sides in this novel, but I wanted to go beyond that and share the story of this fearless resistance movement and the humans behind it. In my writing, I looked at movements like the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, the civil right movement, the BP oil spill protests; as well as recent examples like the Standing Rock protests, Black Lives Matter, and the Women's March. I began writing the novel in 2002 and didn't finish it until 2019, a seventeen-year period. During that time, I wrote and published my debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, but this story never left me. It haunted me unceasingly. I'm so grateful for the incredible support and kindness you showed me with *Behold the Dreamers* and would be delighted to hear what you think of *How Beautiful We Were*.

With gratitude,

Imbolo

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Discussion Questions

1. Throughout this novel, the author immerses us completely into the village of Kosawa --- the people's beliefs, hierarchies, customs and rituals. What resonated most with you?
2. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from multiple points of view? How did this impact your reading experience and connection to the characters?
3. The stakes in this novel are high, and the fear and defiance of the characters are personal. What are the parallels between the environmental degradation in the novel and the socio-economic challenges our country is currently going through?
4. When Konga rallies the village to take the Pexton representatives hostage, how did you feel? Were you glad some action was taken, did you feel a sense of foreboding, or both? Could you understand the characters' desperation?
5. What do you think is responsible for the conditions in Kosawa? Pexton, His Excellency and the country's government, the legacy of colonialism, or a combination of all of these things? Explain your choice/s.
6. How would you describe Woja Beki in one word? Why do you think he chose to work for Pexton? Was it a choice? Do you know anybody in real life who behaves in a similar way?
7. *It takes a village to raise a child* is an African proverb. How do you think it relates to Kosawa and its people? What about the United States and the rest of the world?
8. What do you think was the catalyst for Thula's transformation from student to revolutionary?
9. When Thula arrives in the United States she observes: *This is a place where people stand in lines for every thing, those who arrive first standing in the front, no one paying any attention to who is oldest or neediest. And: There's a great deal of speed over here, everyone seems to need to be somewhere sooner than possible.* What does this say about America?
10. Do you think there's an ideal way a U.S. oil company could work with another country and its citizens? What guidelines would you set for such an arrangement?
11. What role does the American media play in Kosawa's battle with Big Oil? Do you think it helped or hurt the people's cause? What more, if anything, could the media have done?

12. The front cover of this novel is striking. What does this image mean to you, and how do you think it relates to the themes of the novel?

Retrieved from: [How Beautiful We Were by Imbolo Mbue | Book Club Discussion Questions | ReadingGroupGuides.com](#)

Author Interview

Imbolo Mbue has been working on her latest novel, “How Beautiful We Were,” for some time.

She began writing it 17 years ago, long before her debut, “Behold the Dreamers,” sold to Random House for a seven-figure advance. She returned to it in 2016, when the U.S. presidential election, the water crisis in Flint, Mich., and other alarming news consumed each day.

“I just hid in the story. It brought me so much peace and solace,” Mbue said in an interview. “There were months when I didn’t read the news, didn’t watch any TV. I told my friends, please don’t tell me about what is going on. Everything that I was feeling — the pain, the confusion, the frustration about the state of the country — I looked for ways to channel it so that I could honestly tell the story.”

More recently, “How Beautiful We Were,” about the fictional African village of Kosawa, whose residents fight back against a foreign oil company whose work is poisoning their land, air, rivers and children, was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Previously scheduled to come out last June, it was one of many 2020 books whose publication dates shifted.

Although the book is fiction, its subject matter is close to Mbue. She was born in Cameroon and grew up in the coastal town of Limbe, reading the work of major African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Camara Laye, Elechi Amadi and Chinua Achebe. The area was rich in oil, but Mbue saw that local residents couldn’t get jobs at the refinery, that oil brought wealth but not to the people who lived on the land above it. With “Behold the Dreamers,” she sought to tell the story with some distance and no agenda, and she took the same approach with “How Beautiful We Were,” but she often cried while writing it.

“It was an incredibly difficult book to write, because it’s very personal,” she said. “How can the degradation of the environment for the sake of profit not be personal?”

The linguistic split in Cameroon has sparked years of political turmoil, calls for secession and violence. Patrice Nganang, a Cameroonian writer who has been arrested and detained for criticizing the government in his work, said there is no book that examines the plight of Anglophone people in the country.

Mbue, he said, “comes from a place where the story has been so stifled, so killed, so destroyed, that I really always marveled that she could find the craft to put herself together, first of all, to tell the tale.”

While she worked on the book, Mbue researched the anti-apartheid and American civil rights movements as well as the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and other political and environmental actions. Her main character, Thula, is a child, but she contains aspects of Nelson Mandela, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders, Mbue said, a nod to the news stories about social uprisings that she as a girl would listen to on the radio.

“I would think to myself, why do some people rise up and fight while others do nothing?” she said. “Are people justified in doing anything and everything possible for the sake of justice? How do we balance our desire to fight for change against our desire to protect the ones we love? These are questions the characters have to deal with. I do not have answers — I much prefer to ask questions.”

Yet Mbue also explores the lives of some of the oil workers in her book, including ones who need the work but struggle with the knowledge that it is harming Kosawa. “Their wives and children were afar, waiting for money for sustenance, praying to their ancestors to make the men as prosperous as those who had worked at the oil field decades before and returned to build brick houses,” she writes.

It was an effort to recognize that we are all complicit in modern-day life, she said, something she was reminded of during a walk in Central Park last year, when she thought about the opportunities she gained as an immigrant because of what Native Americans lost.

“One might be tempted to think that because my novel is about characters fighting a multinational, it is a story of good guys versus bad guys,” Mbue said. “But what’s the point in looking at life through such a narrow lens? There are those who are committing atrocities in their pursuit of justice and there are folks who work at corporations who are fighting for equality.”

When she came to the United States to study at Rutgers, then Columbia, Mbue was struck initially by how easy it was to communicate — Limbe is an English-speaking region in a predominantly Francophone country — and then by how freely Americans spoke about their political leaders, even making fun of them on TV.

“I said to myself, wait, is this for real? It had never occurred to me that people could publicly criticize their president and not go to prison,” she said. “I am an American citizen now. I know how flawed this country is, but that doesn’t take away my admiration for American democracy.”

Retrieved from: [Imbolo Mbue Has Been Working Toward This Moment - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/us/politics/mbue-criticism.html)

Other Links and Resources:

[HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE Book Club Kit by PRH Library - Issuu](#)

Book Review: ['How Beautiful We Were,' by Imbolo Mbue book review - The Washington Post](#)

Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: