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'Behold the Dreamers' Raises Issues of Class, Immigration, and Color

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“For me, personally, the financial crisis laid bare a lot about the way in which the American dream is not that accessible to everybody . . .” Mbue says. The novel gave her a way to explore and express how the financial crisis affected her perspective on America.

ON LIMBE, CAMEROON, THE HOMETOWN
SHE SHARES WITH HER CHARACTERS

It’s a beautiful seaside town . . . in the south of Cameroon . . . about 80,000 people. Back when I was growing up it wasn’t a very fancy town—we didn’t have a public library, we didn’t have nice hotels, we probably had like one or two hotels. But now it’s fairly developed.

We have lots of nice hotels and nightclubs and a lot of tourists come to Cameroon to see Limbe because it has really beautiful black sand beaches. But it’s still a place where it’s very difficult to change your circumstances if you are born poor.

ON HOW SHE CAME TO THE U.S.

I had relatives who were very generous to sponsor me to come to America to have an education. So I came here to go to college—I went to Rutgers in New Jersey. And then after [college] I moved to New York City and I went to Columbia for my masters.

ON EXPECTATIONS OF AMERICA

What I’d seen about America on TV was, you know, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *The Cosby Show* and everything was so glamorous. And I didn’t really see much of the difficulty and challenges of being in America—the poverty, the racism—I didn’t see much of that.

I think it was the same for Jende and Neni—they had this idea of America being this really, really wonderful place—and it *is* a wonderful place, it’s a beautiful country—but there are challenges to being an immigrant here. . . .

[They] are struggling to get by as immigrants . . . even if there are opportunities, it’s still a challenge to move out of poverty. I’ve seen that in my life, too.

ON THE DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

They both believe in the American dream. So they had similar ideas, but like in any marriage, at some point people start changing and they start having different ideas of what America means to them. . . .

I think for Jende and Neni it was very much about the price they had to pay for this dream. . . . They both had to con-

sider: This is the price I have to pay to have the life I want in America and is this price worth it?

Elizabeth Toohey (review date 2016)

SOURCE: Toohey, Elizabeth. “Behold the Dreamers Raises Issues of Class, Immigration, and Color.” Review of *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue. *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Aug. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

[In the following review, Toohey praises Mbue’s handling of immigration, race, and the financial collapse but suggests that the novel is most effective in its exploration of class boundaries.]

Setting a novel in 2007 New York—with a protagonist who works for a Lehman Brothers executive—is like setting a story in Weimar Germany or October of 1929. Catastrophe looms: Lehman, the US’s fourth largest investment bank, will collapse within a year, setting off a global financial crisis from which the country has yet to fully recover. The question for readers of Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* is how these events will play out in the lives of her characters.

Behold the Dreamers follows the path of a Cameroonian family whose members, like many newcomers to America, harbor dreams of success unavailable to them back home. Undocumented immigration, the widening gulf between rich and poor, and the thinly veiled racism of an avowedly “post-racial” culture converge in this new generation of immigrants’ painful encounter with the American Dream.

But Mbue’s novel is also a distinctly New York story, and in her descriptions of the life of the city, the prose grows luminous. Of the Lehman tower, seen through the eyes of Jende Jonga, a chauffeur, she writes: “Its walls seemed to soar on forever, like an infinite spear, and though Jende sometimes pushed his head far back and squinted he couldn’t see beyond the sunlight banging against the polished glass.” Jende’s routine with his six-year-old son captures another corner of the city: “For dinners they went every other day to one of the African restaurants on 116th Street, where they ordered attiéké with grilled lamb, their favorite meal in all the restaurants there. Sometimes, after they were done eating, they bought ice cream at a shop on 115th Street and walked down Malcolm X Boulevard holding hands and licking ice cream.” Mbue will also no doubt be likened to the acclaimed Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for depicting the hurdles a certain class of American-Africans face, yet passages like these are

also reminiscent of Joseph O'Neill's "Netherland," another story of an immigrant's seduction by the glamor and peculiarities of New York.

The emigration of Jende and his wife Neni is not driven by war, famine, or poverty, but by the dearth of opportunities—financially, educationally, and professionally—in their hometown of Limbe. As a CUNY student, Neni is in the country legally, intent on mastering pre-calculus in hopes of becoming a pharmacist, while Jende, who has applied for asylum, drives a livery cab. Their big break comes when he lands a job as a driver for the Lehman executive Clark Edwards. The Jongas soon become imbricated with the Edwards family. While Jende serves Clark with unquestioning loyalty, Neni forges a more complex relationship with his wife, Cindy, who hires her to serve at parties in the Hamptons and care for their young son Mighty. It's a good set-up—offering a lucrative income, and bonuses like Cindy's castoff designer clothes, leftover shrimp from her parties, and paid vacation—that is, until it isn't. I'll hold my tongue about the ripple effects when Clark's and Cindy's world begins to crumble.

Mbue handles American's racial landscape deftly, as when Jende, during his interview, glimpses The Wall Street Journal headline, "White's Great Hope? Barack Obama and the Dream of a Color-Blind America," or later, when a white woman informs him that it's illegal for Liomi to sit in the front seat and Jende "graciously" responds "yes, it was, he knew, thank you so much madam." It's class that's foregrounded more starkly, both through the ebb and flow of Jende and Neni's possibilities for citizenship and financial stability, and the fate of peripheral characters, like Leah, Clark's secretary of 15 years, who is five years away from receiving Social Security when Lehman collapses. In other words, there's lots of collateral damage to go around.

That aspects of the Edwards family feel a bit stock is a slight weakness: He's a charming workaholic, she's a neglected trophy-wife, their elder son is rebellious, and young Mighty is a poor-little-rich-boy, starving for emotional connection. But the Jonga family is rich and engaging in the complexity of the characters, as they face moral compromises and strategic maneuvers on the road to citizenship. Simply representing the day-to-day life of a woman like Neni who spends evenings overseeing her son's homework, preparing dinner, and ironing her husband's clothes, before beginning her own studies at midnight, fueled by instant coffee, is poignant. Clark, by contrast, gets off easily, not just financially, but also with the characters who surround him, through a Gatsby-esque charm that has much to do with the privileges of being white and male, along with a dash of poetic aspiration.

"Why does everyone make it sound as if being in America is everything?" one character asks. The closest thing to an answer lies in a long passage in which Neni muses on what her children will gain and lose, should they be forced to leave. It is the impulse any parent has to make their children's lives as good and full of possibility as they can. The real question is whether America can still fulfill that promise.

FURTHER READING

Author Website

Imbolo Mbue. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Provides biographical information, news, links to reviews, events listings, and contact information.

Criticism

Al-Shawaf, Rayyan. Review of *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 Aug. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Calls *Behold the Dreamers* a "poignant and bittersweet debut novel" but notes that it "suffers from a dearth of action" and relies too heavily on dialog.

Henríquez, Cristina. "An Immigrant Family Encounter the 1 Percent in a Debut Novel." Review of *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue. *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Notes some flaws in Mbue's handling of the financial crisis but lauds the work as a "capacious, big-hearted novel."

Mbue, Imbolo. "Is the American Dream a Fantasy? Our Q&A with Author Imbolo Mbue." Interview by Elizabeth Kiefer. *Refinery 29*, 9 Sept. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Discusses Mbue's life story and provides background on *Behold the Dreamers*. Mbue notes that Jende and Neni's marriage "is inspired by marriages I grew up around in my culture, where even when the woman is strong and she's powerful, the man still owns the show."

Meyer, Amy Weiss. "Hope in the Rubble of the American Dream." Review of *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue, and *The Wangs vs. the World*, by Jade Chang. *The Atlantic Daily*, 4 Oct. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Suggests that, in response to the financial crisis, the families featured in Mbue's and Chang's novels "look back toward the homelands they were once so eager to escape, now armed with a measure of the hard-won clarity they've gained in the U.S."

Shaub, Michael. "Newly American 'Dreamers' Are Torn between Love and Disappointment." Review of *Behold the Dreamers*, by Imbolo Mbue. *National Public Radio*, 24 Aug. 2016. Accessed 17 May 2017.

Characterizes the novel as a "remarkable debut," observing that "there are no false notes here, no narrative shortcuts, and certainly no manufactured happy endings."

Additional information on Mbue's life and works is contained in the following source published by Gale: *Literature Resource Center*.