

FIRST-YEAR DIALOGUE 2018

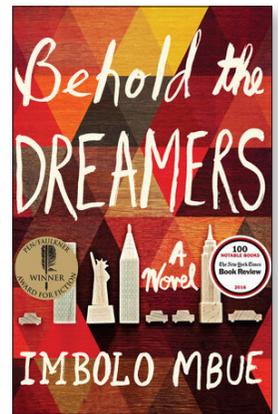
Imbolo Mbue's 2016 debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, is the story of a young Cameroonian couple pursuing their dream of a better life in the United States. The protagonist, Jende, works as a chauffeur—and occasional confidant—for Lehman Brothers executive Clark Edwards, while his wife Neni is hired as the nanny of the Edwards family. Through the eyes of Jende and Neni, the reader catches a glimpse into the lives of their employers: the wealth and glamor, as well as their strains and struggles, hidden behind the closed doors of limousines and luxury homes.

At first, it seems that the Jongas are on their way to “making it” in the land of opportunity. The book opens with Jende’s securing a job as a chauffeur. This change is regarded as a significant promotion from his previous job as a taxi driver. At the same time, Neni continues

to balance her duties as a mother, wife, and student, with dreams of becoming a pharmacist. With their promising jobs, the Jongas plan to save their earnings and move into a beautiful home of their own.

“*Let America be the dream
the dreamers dreamed.*
—Langston Hughes

This arrangement evokes the promise of a classical tale about immigrants aspiring toward the American Dream, but, of course, not everything goes according to plan.



Throughout *Behold the Dreamers*, Mbue whisks us through her narrative arc in a series of short, dialogue-driven chapters. Formally, this novel is “plain spoken” and easy to read. However, Mbue covers a lot of ground by illustrating systemic issues such as immigration policies, access to affordable housing, and banking from the perspectives of affected individuals. Similarly, the lives of the ultra-rich—the “1%”—are presented through the relative passivity of those heavily affected by their choices: their employees.



Imbolo Mbue

The Economy and Immigration

Behold the Dreamers has two major narrative themes: the economy and the immigrant experience in America. As immigrants struggling to secure the necessary paperwork to work legally and climb the economic ladder, Jende and Neni intertwine these two themes. The novel is thus a story that depicts real people negotiating their way through systems stacked against them, and what happens when those systems win.

In interviews, Mbue has spoken about her own disillusionment with the American Dream when she lost her job in 2008 and struggled to find work. The same global financial crisis of 2007-2008 that impacted Mbue serves as a major backdrop to the novel. This economic crisis, termed the “Great Recession,” was hastened by risky lending practices by institutions like Lehman Brothers, which left families and their purchased properties vulnerable to foreclosure if they couldn’t make ends meet. Like Mbue, millions of Americans lost their jobs and homes in the years that followed.

Although Clark is presented in a somewhat sympathetic light—doing whatever he can to avoid the crisis—it is no accident that he works for Lehman Brothers. Just as America’s fate was historically tied to Lehman, in Mbue’s novel, Jende’s is tied to Clark’s. The firm, the fourth largest in the world at the time, declared bankruptcy in 2008.

Mbue captures the early stages of this collapse. In the process, she leaves the reader to consider the enormous economic repercussions this collapse would have around the world.

In the earlier stages of the book, Clark is the one under pressure—the extent of Lehman’s exposure was not yet publicly known—and Jende is blissfully unaware of the impending consequences. However, the novel is essentially about how the people most affected by these high-level decisions reside at the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. The 1% has both the economic and social capital to survive; those living on the lower rungs do not. Clark gets a similar job immediately afterwards; Jende gets a job washing dishes. Clark thus represents the elite 1% of Americans who possess a disproportionate amount of wealth and control the levers of power. In this dynamic, the rich stay rich, and the poor stay poor.



[T]he sense of failure at living in poverty can be very acute, especially for immigrants who purposely came here searching for a better life.
—Imbolo Mbue

In addition to the economy, *Behold the Dreamers* explores the topical issue of immigration. The terror Jende feels during his initial job interview with Clark due to his immigration status draws our attention to the African immigrants often overlooked in this discourse, with families like the Jongas being pulled apart regularly across the country.

Mbue avoids simplistic black and white depictions of the immigrant experience. Jende and Neni are economic migrants, intent on making a better life for themselves in New York. Jende, however, applies for asylum. He claims that his father-in-law will kill him if he returns to Cameroon, and this is his only chance at acquiring a visa. The Jongas, through their somewhat corrupt lawyer, Bubakar, are attempting to deceive the system. In reality, the Jongas are neither the villains portrayed in certain media circles, nor are they the passive victims of an oppressive system; they are active agents, with means and a motive, who are using their wiles to navigate their circumstances.



Although set in 2008, the book was published eight years later, when immigration had become a particularly salient political issue in the United States. There are hints in the book at things to come, such as the threats of ICE lawyers. The title of the book itself also evokes the related immigrant experience of the so-called DREAMers:

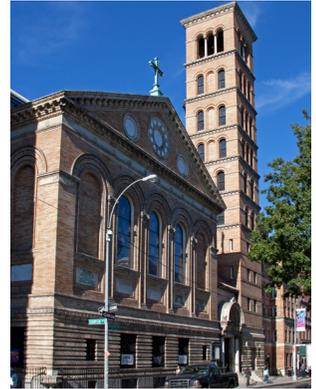
undocumented immigrants who had been brought to the United States as children, and whose immigration status in the only country they know is now under threat. Is it a coincidence that the word “dreamers” is capitalized on the book cover?

Nonetheless, while one might read this as an editorial choice made in response to subsequent political issues, Mbue’s original title for the novel was actually *The Longings of Jende Jonga*. The dreamers of the title are just that: a young couple who come to America with a very particular dream of material success. Pursuit of this dream draws them from their homes and families; the prospect of losing the dream sees individuals act out of character, lash out, and self-destruct.

Home versus the Dream

Many of the events of the novel are situated in the tension between the hopes and ambitions of the various characters (the *dream*) and the need for family, safety, and love (*home*). The Jongas leave behind their family in Cameroon, a country in which they see little opportunity to grow. Jende bitterly remembers it as a country in which “decent young men” were “thrown into prison for minor crimes” (p. 245). By contrast, movies and television have convinced the Jongas that the United States is a country of fairness and opportunity. For two years they work multiple jobs to pay for their family’s plane tickets, and then leave behind the only home they have ever known.

The Jongas settle in Harlem and begin to make a new home for themselves. New York contains the largest percentage of African immigrants in the United States. The Jongas' interactions with friends and family such as Winston, Betty, Fatou, and others helps draw a map of an alternative city to the "playground of the rich" inhabited by the Edwards family. As the Jongas traverse New York City, Mbue sets out the geography of New York as an immigrant African city, enlivened by small cultural touches such as the cooking of *chin-chin* and prayers to Yemaya.



Judson Memorial Church

The issue of race is not always foregrounded, but it is present throughout the novel. Jende's cousin Winston is a successful lawyer who demonstrates a familiarity and ease with middle-class white Americans that Neni never achieves. Simultaneously, Neni struggles to understand African Americans. Throughout the novel, Neni and Jende remain outsiders looking in when it comes to issues of race, culture, immigration status, and wealth in the United States. The home they build is, in a sense, a small island in an unfamiliar ocean.

“*How does the Jongas' racial identity impact their experiences in the novel?*”

The Jongas' dreams are upended when the economic bubble bursts. Ironically, part of the complex practices that led to the financial crisis were unscrupulous lenders that preyed upon people who wanted to own a home, but who were excluded from other lending opportunities, such as immigrants, the poor, and people of color. We hear from Jende's friends, Arkamo and Sapeur, who “could afford to get high-interest loans that would take thirty or more years to pay off because they were green card holders.” Jende and Neni are enchanted by the possibility of having their own spacious home, with the dream being to exchange what they have for a vision of something else.



While Jende dreams of material success and providing for his family, Neni dreams of becoming a pharmacist until the day she is told by a dean at her college that this is not achievable. The decks seem to have been stacked against Neni all along. The belief that with dedication and hard work anything is possible can be intoxicating; its loss, however, can be crushing.

We see this when the loss of Jende and Neni's respective dreams provoke startling out-of-character responses from each: both become angry, Jende even violent. When their deteriorating financial circumstances threaten their future, Neni blackmails Cindy and extorts \$10,000. However, it is not just Jende and Neni who are in thrall to their dream—it is everyone.

Mbue threads the idea of the dream throughout, with references to the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. His election as the first African American President of the United States forms the political background of *Behold the Dreamers*. We see his likeness in newspaper articles and in conversations among her characters, inspiring bystanders with his platform of “hope.” When Jende first meets Clark, and glimpses a newspaper article with the headline “Whites’ Great Hope? Barack Obama and the Dream of a Color-blind America,” we sense optimism. Later, Neni overhears two men on a bus describing the “miracle” that was Obama’s inauguration—the idea that even race was no longer a barrier to reaching the pinnacle of the American dream.

But Obama’s success also sparked racist and xenophobic questions about who is allowed to be an American president. Debates unfolded about whether or not Obama was a natural-born citizen, and opponents focused on his “foreign” identity in an attempt to undermine his legitimacy, demanding to see his birth certificate. There was a backlash to the dream.

The American Ideal

Behold the Dreamers offers the view that the United States is as much an idea as it is a place for outsiders. The idea of the “American dream” predates the formation of the country and is enshrined in America’s self-image. It has also long been a significant trope in American literature, a canon into which Mbue deliberately inserts us. “I dream, too, bébé,” Jende proudly tells Neni during their first days together in New York City. “Day and night I dream all kinds of dreams” (p. 13).

The political struggles of today illustrate a split in the American consciousness. There is a hostility towards immigrants that influences aspects of the legal system. Jende’s lawyer, Bubakar, reassures him that “there’s just too many people the government wants to deport and not enough judges eager to deport them.” As



the Jongas anxiously assemble their own birth certificates, cards, and other letters as evidence of belonging, we wonder how the possession of these documents defines whom we treat as aliens, and what is the “proof” needed to call this country home. Mbue encourages us to question how race, nationality, and class impact one’s access to the dream. Who is allowed to call this country home? What makes it home?

We learn much about these issues through characters like the Edwardses. Despite the wealth disparities, there is empathy in the way the author portrays the struggles of the Edwards family. Clark is often kind and generous to Jende, and his infidelity is presented as a reaction to the immense pressures of work. In turn, Cindy’s struggles with opioid addiction are shown to be a reaction to both Clark’s infidelity, and the stresses of maintaining the appearance of a certain

lifestyle. “Mighty” Clark, despite being saddled with a name implying a certain weight of expectation, is just an ordinary child who wants to spend time with Jende and Neni, and eat *puff-puff*.

The highest state of dreaming, for a person or for a nation, is not that we will get something, but that we will become something.
—Marianne Williamson



own telling), we see that their lives are no happier than the Jongas'. Indeed, their son Vincent, born into privilege, seeks to renounce his wealth and search for meaning elsewhere. While this may seem to capture the obliviousness of privilege—and can appear insensitive, given the financial difficulties facing the Jongas—is this perhaps a clue that Jende’s dream of material success and wealth as the route to happiness is inevitably doomed to fail?

Mbue has resisted any attempts to derive a single reading from *Behold the Dreamers*. “I’ll leave that to the reader to decide,” she said. “My goal was to tell a story. If it’s political, or critical of the American dream or just about love and New York City, I don’t know. I don’t think it’s my place to label it so much.”

What do *you* think?

The Edwardses themselves are a perversion of the trope of the American Dream. Having dragged themselves from working-class obscurity to the top of the socio-economic pyramid (at least, by their



Ellis Island, New York City