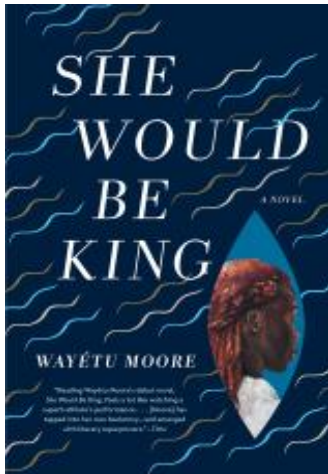


# She Would Be King

by Wayétu Moore

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## About the Book

**A novel of exhilarating range, magical realism and history --- a dazzling retelling of Liberia's formation**

Wayétu Moore's powerful debut novel, *SHE WOULD BE KING*, reimagines the dramatic story of Liberia's early years through three unforgettable characters who share an uncommon bond. Gbessa, exiled from the West African village of Lai, is starved, bitten by a viper and left for dead, but still she survives. June Dey, raised on a plantation in Virginia, hides his unusual strength until a confrontation with the overseer forces him to flee. Norman Aragon, the child of a white British colonizer and a Maroon slave from Jamaica, can fade from sight when the earth calls him. When the three meet in the settlement of Monrovia, their gifts help them salvage the tense relationship between the African American settlers and the indigenous tribes, as a new nation forms around them.

Moore's intermingling of history and magical realism finds voice not just in these three characters but also in the fleeting spirit of the wind, who embodies an ancient wisdom. "If she was not a woman," the wind says of Gbessa, "she would be king." In this vibrant story of the African diaspora, Moore, a talented storyteller and a daring writer, illuminates with radiant and exacting prose the tumultuous roots of a country inextricably bound to the United States. *SHE WOULD BE KING* is a novel of profound depth set against a vast canvas and a transcendent debut from a major new author.

## Discussion Guide

1. Gbessa, June Dey and Norman Aragon come together from very different locations --- Liberia, Virginia and Jamaica. How do their experiences differ? How are they similar?

2. SHE WOULD BE KING is a work of fiction that incorporates historical events. What did you know about Liberia before reading the book? What new questions do you have?
3. In what ways does SHE WOULD BE KING trace the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade?
4. The narrating presence of the wind both cautions and comforts the characters in the novel. On pages 60-61 we're given a clue about where the voice in the wind comes from. How does this presence change the way the entire novel is read?
5. Where do the special powers of the three main protagonists originate? How do their abilities align with their experiences, personalities and cultures?
6. How does the magical realism employed in SHE WOULD BE KING relate to recent pop culture representations of African superheroes, such as Black Panther?
7. What does SHE WOULD BE KING have to say about the power of storytelling?
8. How are Gbessa's life and experiences shaped by the treatment she receives simply for being a woman? How does that relate to how women are treated today?
9. Gbessa's relationship to her Vai heritage changes when she joins the settlement in Monrovia. What are the tensions between the cultures, and how does she balance them in her life?
10. How is the relationship between Gbessa and Safua complicated by social status? Name three other relationship dynamics that make SHE WOULD BE KING a love story.
11. What role does motherhood play in the novel? How do the various characters experience kinship and lineage?
12. In her author note at the beginning of the book, Wayétu Moore talks about a story that inspired the writing of her novel. In what ways does this seed of inspiration take root in the narrative? Is there anything in SHE WOULD BE KING that similarly inspires you to tell your own story?

## Author Bio

Wayétu Moore is the author of the novel SHE WOULD BE KING and the memoir THE DRAGONS, THE GIANT, THE WOMEN. She is the recipient of the 2019 Lannan Literary Fellowship for Fiction.

SHE WOULD BE KING was named a best book of 2018 by *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Entertainment Weekly* & BuzzFeed. The novel was a Sarah Jessica Parker Book Club selection, a BEA Buzz Panel Book, a #1 Indie Next Pick and a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Award.

Moore is the founder of One Moore Book, a non-profit organization that creates and distributes culturally relevant books

for underrepresented readers. Her first bookstore opened in Monrovia, Liberia, in 2015. Her writing can be found in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Frieze Magazine*, *Guernica*, *The Atlantic Magazine* and other publications. She has been featured in *The Economist Magazine*, NPR and *Vogue Magazine*, among others, for her work in advocacy for diverse children's literature.

She's a graduate of Howard University, University of Southern California and Columbia University.

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## **She Would Be King**

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