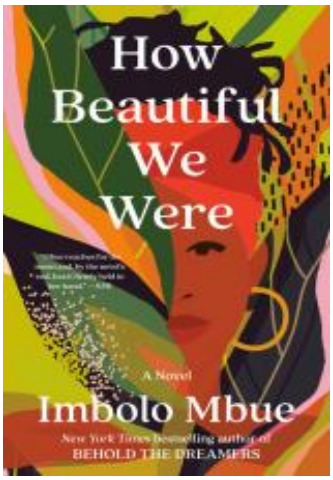
How Beautiful We Were

by Imbolo Mbue



About the Book

From the celebrated author of the *New York Times* bestseller BEHOLD THE DREAMERS comes a sweeping, wrenching story about the collision of a small African village and an American oil company.

We should have known the end was near. So begins Imbolo Mbue?s powerful second novel, HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE. Set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, it tells of a people living in fear amid environmental degradation wrought by an American oil company. Pipeline spills have rendered farmlands infertile. Children are dying from drinking toxic water. Promises of cleanup and financial reparations to the villagers are made --- and ignored. The country?s government, led by a brazen dictator, exists to serve its own interests. Left with few choices, the people of Kosawa decide to fight back. Their struggle will last for decades and come at a steep price.

Told from the perspective of a generation of children and the family of a girl named Thula who grows up to become a revolutionary, HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE is a masterful exploration of what happens when the reckless drive for profit, coupled with the ghost of colonialism, comes up against one community?s determination to hold on to its ancestral land and a young woman?s willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of her people?s freedom.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Imbolo Mbue is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller BEHOLD THE DREAMERS, which PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and Oprah's Book Collection. Her novel, BEAUTIFUL WE ARE about an African village?s plan to oil company, was the *New York Times* as ?One of the 10 Best Books? of 2021. Her third and latest novel is EVERY STORY IS A LOVE STORY. A native of Limbe, Ca

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