



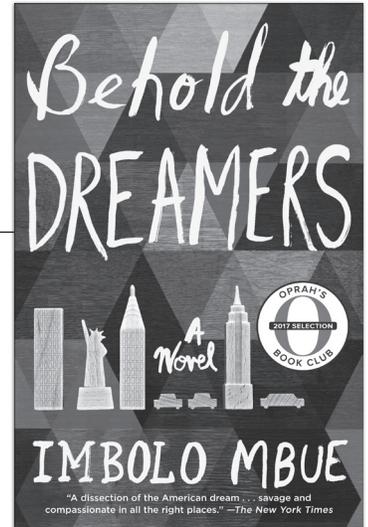
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Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

Behold the Dreamers

A Novel

by Imbolo Mbue



New York Times Bestseller • Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award
• An ALA Notable Book • Longlisted for the PEN/Open Book Award
Named One of the Best Books of the Year by NPR • *San Francisco Chronicle*
• *The New York Times Book Review* • *The Guardian*

Random House Trade Paperbacks | TR | 978-0-525-50971-4 | 416pp. | \$17.00

Also available as an E-Book

“A debut novel by a young woman from Cameroon that illuminates the immigrant experience in America with the tenderhearted wisdom so lacking in our political discourse . . . Mbue is a bright and captivating storyteller.” —*The Washington Post*

“[Mbue’s] book isn’t the first work of fiction to grapple with the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, but it’s surely one of the best. . . . It’s a novel that depicts a country both blessed and doomed, on top of the world, but always at risk of losing its balance. It is, in other words, quintessentially American.” —NPR

• about the book •

Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant living in Harlem, has come to the United States to provide a better life for himself, his wife, Neni, and their six-year-old son. In the fall of 2007, Jende can hardly believe his luck when he lands a job as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, a senior executive at Lehman Brothers. Clark demands punctuality, discretion, and loyalty—and Jende is eager to please. Clark’s wife, Cindy, even offers Neni temporary work at the Edwardses’ summer home in the Hamptons. With these opportunities, Jende and Neni can at last gain a foothold in America and imagine a brighter future.

However, the world of great power and privilege conceals troubling secrets, and soon Jende and Neni notice cracks in their employers’ façades.

When the financial world is rocked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the Jongas are desperate to keep Jende’s job—even as their marriage threatens to fall apart. As all four lives are dramatically upended, Jende and Neni are forced to make an impossible choice.

• about the author

IMBOLO MBUE is a native of the seaside town of Limbe, Cameroon. She holds a BS from Rutgers University and an MA from Columbia University. A resident of the United States for more than a decade, she lives in New York City.

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→ discussion questions

1. Who might be the “dreamers” referred to in the title of the book? To whom does the term “Dreamers” refer in current political dialogues about immigration, and how does this connect to Mbue’s book? Considered from an even broader perspective, who in the book might be referred to as a dreamer and why? What do these characters dream about? Are there any similarities among their dreams and hopes? If so, what might this suggest about human nature or the commonalities inherent in the human experience? How might these insights contribute to a more expansive dialogue about immigration, which is one of the book’s most central subjects?
2. Although there are many obvious differences between the Jonga family and the Edwards family, there are also many striking similarities between them. How are the two families alike? What elements and responsibilities of family life seem to transcend the boundaries of class, race, and background? What binds each family together? Alternatively, what common obstacles do both families face, and what causes them? How does “family” ultimately come to be defined within the novel?
3. Evaluate the book’s treatment of women. Who are some of the female characters, and what roles do they play in the story and within their respective lives? What do they care about, and what do they prioritize? What aspects of the female experience seem to transcend class and race, at least according to the book? Alternatively, despite the many similarities among their experiences, how does the book also expose cultural and societal differences in the treatment of women? For example, how do Fatou’s and Neni’s experiences of marriage differ from Cindy’s? Did anything about the depiction of women in the book surprise you?
4. The characters in *Behold the Dreamers* are rocked by a major financial crisis and the collapse of Clark’s employer, Lehman Brothers. What causes this crisis and what are some of its effects, both immediate and long-term? Why are the effects so widespread? Does the book suggest whether the crisis affected any one social class more than another? Explain your answer. How does the collapse personally affect each of the main characters?
5. The novel reveals an extensive dialogue about race. What stereotypes does the novel expose? Which of the characters perpetuate those racial stereotypes, and what seems to be the source of these stereotypes? What seems to cause these stereotypes to be perpetuated? Are any of these stereotypes effectively overturned? What does the novel suggest can facilitate this kind of shift in perspective, if anything?
6. Consider the treatment of class and economic issues in the novel. Can you pinpoint any examples of class division or prejudice in the novel? What questions does the book raise about class mobility? Recall, for instance, Cindy Edward’s unexpected background, Neni’s family history, and Jende’s struggle to transcend his class both in Cameroon and the United States. Based on these characters’ experiences, do you think class mobility is achievable, and if so, is it advisable? Explain your answer.
7. Discuss the book’s treatment of immigration. What does the book reveal about the immigration process? Why do Jende and Neni leave Cameroon for the United States? What is their experience of immigration like? What obstacles do they face, and are they able to overcome them? What does the book suggest about the ways in which immigration has changed over time? How does the dialogue generated in the book correspond to present-day conversations on this subject?
8. In one of the most shocking scenes in the book, Neni extorts money from Cindy Edwards despite her previous promise to keep Cindy’s secret. Were you surprised by Neni’s actions? Why or why not? What is Neni’s motivation for blackmailing Cindy? How does Jende respond when he finds out about what Neni has done? How does this scene extend into a dialogue around morality? For example, do you believe that Neni was justified, or that her actions were permissible, because of her motive? Discuss your answer.

9. Evaluate the theme of the “American Dream.” As newcomers to the United States, how do Jende and Neni define the American Dream? Do they have a united vision of the Dream? Explain. How does their experience in the United States change the way they come to define the American Dream? How is the American Dream ultimately defined—or redefined—by the end of the novel? Is the American Dream truly attainable by everybody? Does it still exist today? Explain your answer.
10. Secrets and dishonesty are motifs throughout the book. What are some of the secrets that the characters keep from others? Why do they keep these secrets? Do they remain secret? If not, what happens when these secrets are exposed? Likewise, what lies are told by the characters, and what motivates them to withhold the truth?
11. How do honor and integrity come to be defined through the story of the Edwards family and the Jonga family? To whom or to what is it most important to be loyal, according to the book?
12. Was the book’s conclusion surprising to you? Why or why not? What was your response to Jende’s decision to return to Limbe? Do you believe that the Jonga family’s return to Cameroon is an admission of defeat, or do you believe it is somehow a greater victory than if they had remained in the United States? How will their new life in Cameroon compare to the life they had in that country before they immigrated to the United States?
13. Many of the characters in *Behold the Dreamers* can be described as ambitious. What seems to be at the root of their ambition? Within the context of the book, would you say that ambition is primarily a positive quality? What are some of the negative consequences that result from the characters’ ambitions? Do the characters achieve what they work so hard for? Is their ambition rewarded?
14. The book offers a complex portrait of modern marriage in contemporary society. What are some of the challenges or obstacles the characters face as couples? Are they able to overcome them? Why or why not? What does the novel ultimately reveal about marriage and partnership? Are there ways in which the institution of marriage seems to be outdated? Discuss your answer.
15. Many of the characters reveal that they feel a strong sense of responsibility toward others. For example, both Jende and Clark speak about being motivated by an obligation to take care of their families. What else do the characters feel responsibility for? Are they able to adequately take care of those perceived responsibilities? Where do their notions of what they should be responsible for originate?
16. At one point in the book, Neni reflects, “Maybe I’m becoming another person.” Consider the theme of identity. How is identity defined in the novel? What forms or contributes to one’s identity? Is identity something that is consistent and fixed or something that changes and evolves over time? Do you think that Neni has become another person? Why or why not?
17. What happens when the characters stop seeking or chasing after their initial dreams? Or, what does the book suggest about the role and value of possibility and alternative perspectives in life? Does the book suggest that we are ultimately responsible for our own happiness? Defend your answer.
18. Consider how the depiction of the immigrant experience in *Behold the Dreamers* compares to depictions of the immigrant experience in other works of world literature. What common themes emerge across these examples of immigration in literature? What defines the immigrant experience? Was there anything about the view of immigration and the immigrant experience in *Behold the Dreamers* that surprised you or challenged your beliefs? Discuss.
19. Evaluate the corresponding themes of independence and interdependence as they play out in the book. How independent are the characters in *Behold the Dreamers*? What inhibits their independence? How are the characters in the book interdependent? Although Jende relied on Winston to help him immigrate to the United States, why does he refuse Winston’s help at the conclusion of the book?

20. Throughout the book, Vince is the proponent for an alternative, unconventional way of living, but is his decision to leave home and travel to India to seek truth (as he puts it) hypocritical? Given the circumstances that Vince is trying to escape, why is it notable that he has chosen India as his destination? Do you believe that his journey will confirm his beliefs about capitalism and the purpose of life or challenge them? Explain your answer.
21. Acceptance emerges as a major theme over the course of the novel. Many of the characters in the book are striving for acceptance from others: for example, Jende strives to blend in at his new job among the upper class, Neni tries to fit in at school and in New York City society, and even Cindy Edwards—a woman who, by outward appearances, seems to have it all—worryes about being accepted. Why do you think that the characters are so driven by a desire for acceptance, and how are they affected by this pursuit? Do they ultimately receive the acceptance they are longing for? What would you say the book suggests about the related subjects of self-acceptance and acceptance of one's circumstances or limitations? What seems to be the most important form of acceptance?
22. Some might argue that no matter what one dreams of, one is ultimately dreaming of finding or securing happiness. What does *Behold the Dreamers* reveal about the pursuit of happiness? Does the book reveal how happiness is achieved and the correct path to take in finding it? Finally, is the pursuit of happiness (famously referenced in the Declaration of Independence) actually accessible to everyone? If not, does the book suggest how any obstacles could be eliminated in order to ensure that everyone can exercise this basic human right?

— about this guide's writer

JE BANACH is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Conference. She has written for *PEN*, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a longtime contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than sixty literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.



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