Behold the Dreamers

by Imbolo Mbue · Language: EN

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Overview

Behold the Dreamers" by Imbolo Mbue tells the story of Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant living in Harlem, New York, who secures a coveted job as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, a wealthy Lehman Brothers executive, just before the 2008 financial crisis. The novel intricately weaves together the lives of two families from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds: the Jongas, striving for the American Dream with their limited resources and precarious immigration status, and the Edwards, grappling with the pressures of immense wealth, corporate scandal, and marital strife. Jende and his wife, Neni, believe this job is their ticket to a better life, allowing Neni to pursue her nursing degree and eventually bring their son, who remains in Cameroon, to America.

As the financial crisis unfolds, the seemingly stable world of the Edwards family begins to unravel, exposing the cracks beneath their polished facade. Jende and Neni become increasingly entangled in the Edwards' personal and professional dramas, witnessing firsthand the moral compromises and emotional toll of their employers' lives. The novel explores themes of immigration, class disparity, the elusive nature of the American Dream, and the sacrifices people make in pursuit of a better future. It highlights the stark contrast between the immigrants' desperate hope and the disillusionment of the privileged, forcing both families to confront their definitions of success, happiness, and belonging.

The book matters because it offers a poignant and timely examination of the immigrant experience in America, particularly during a period of economic upheaval. It challenges conventional notions of success and failure, demonstrating how external circumstances and internal desires shape individual destinies. Mbue's narrative provides a powerful commentary on the systemic inequalities that persist, even as it celebrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, making it a resonant story about aspiration, identity, and the search for home.

Key Takeaways

- The American Dream is often a complex and elusive concept, experienced differently by immigrants and native-born citizens.
- Economic stability can be fragile, and even the most privileged lives can be upended by unforeseen crises.

• Immigrants often face immense pressure to succeed, carrying the hopes and burdens of their families both in America and back home.

• Wealth does not guarantee happiness or moral integrity, and can sometimes bring its own set of unique challenges and compromises.

• The pursuit of a better life often involves significant personal sacrifices and difficult ethical choices.

• Cultural differences and class disparities can create profound misunderstandings and tensions between people.

• Resilience and adaptability are crucial for navigating life's unexpected turns and setbacks.

Chapter Summaries

Arrival and Opportunity

Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant, arrives in New York with the dream of a better life. After struggling to find stable work, he secures a coveted job as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, a high-ranking executive at Lehman Brothers. This opportunity ignites hope for Jende and his wife, Neni, who plans to pursue a nursing degree, believing this job is their pathway to a secure future and bringing their son to America.

Worlds Collide

As Jende begins his work for the Edwards family, the stark contrast between his humble immigrant life and their opulent world becomes evident. Neni, meanwhile, navigates the challenges of assimilation and her demanding nursing studies. The novel explores the initial interactions and observations as the two families' vastly different realities begin to intertwine, revealing both fascination and underlying tensions.

Unveiling Secrets

Jende spends more time with the Edwards, particularly driving Cindy, Clark's wife. He gradually observes the cracks beneath their polished facade, noticing Cindy's unhappiness, her reliance on alcohol, and the marital tensions within the seemingly perfect wealthy family. Jende becomes an unwitting witness to their personal struggles and secrets, which complicates his perception of the American Dream.

The Looming Crisis

Subtle signs of the impending 2008 financial crisis begin to emerge, casting a shadow over the Edwards' stable world. Clark's work becomes more stressful, and the economic uncertainty creates anxiety for Jende, whose job security is directly tied to Clark's fortunes. Neni also faces increasing pressure in her studies and part-time work, sensing the precariousness of their situation.

Lehman's Fall

The dramatic collapse of Lehman Brothers sends shockwaves through the financial world, directly impacting Clark Edwards' career and the family's financial stability. The Edwards' world is turned upside down, forcing them to confront significant losses and a drastic change in their lifestyle. Jende's employment becomes highly precarious, threatening the Jongas' aspirations and immigration status.

Desperate Measures

Both families are forced to take desperate measures to cope with their new realities. The Edwards grapple with their loss of status and wealth, while Jende and Neni face increasing pressure to maintain their immigration status, find new employment, and provide for their family. The pursuit of the American Dream becomes a desperate struggle for survival and stability.

Ethical Dilemmas

In the wake of the financial crisis, Jende finds himself in ethically compromising situations. His loyalty to Clark and his own desperate need for money lead him to make difficult choices, including participating in activities that challenge his moral compass. These dilemmas force Jende to confront the true cost of his pursuit of a better life and the compromises he is willing to make.

Return to Roots

Spoiler: Facing insurmountable obstacles, including the loss of Jende's job and the failure of Neni's immigration application, the Jongas make the difficult decision to leave America. Disillusioned with the elusive American Dream, they choose to return to Cameroon, seeking a different kind of future where family, community, and a sense of belonging take precedence over material wealth and perceived success.

Themes

- American Dream
- Immigration experience
- Class disparity
- Financial crisis
- Family loyalty
- Identity and belonging

Notable Quotes

• "The hardest part of being an immigrant was not the struggle, but the constant pressure to pretend that there was no struggle." — Reflecting on the hidden burdens and expectations faced by immigrants in America.

• "How could a man be so rich and yet so unhappy?" — Jende's recurring thought as he observes the personal struggles and marital discord within the wealthy Edwards family.

• "Jende had come to America to make money, to send money home, to build a house, to bring his family. He had not come to be a witness to the rich people's problems." — Jende's internal monologue, expressing his frustration and bewilderment at becoming entangled in his employers' personal dramas.

• "We are all dreamers, aren't we? Dreamers of dreams, big and small, dreams that come true, dreams that don't, dreams that are shattered, dreams that are reborn." — A thematic reflection on the universal human experience of aspiration and the varied outcomes of pursuing one's dreams.

• "Neni knew that in America, everything was possible, but everything was also expensive." — Neni's pragmatic understanding of the duality of opportunity and the high cost of living and achieving success in the United States.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Behold the Dreamers about?

It's about a Cameroonian immigrant couple, Jende and Neni Jonga, whose lives become intertwined with their wealthy American employers, the Edwards family, during the 2008 financial crisis. The novel explores their pursuit of the American Dream, class differences, and the challenges of immigration, highlighting the stark contrasts between their two worlds.

Is Behold the Dreamers worth reading?

Yes, it is highly regarded for its compelling narrative, rich character development, and timely exploration of themes like immigration, class, and the American Dream. It offers a poignant and insightful look into the lives of two families from vastly different worlds, making it a powerful and thought-provoking read.

How does Behold the Dreamers end?

Spoiler: After facing numerous setbacks, including the loss of Jende's job and the failure of Neni's immigration application, the Jongas decide to leave America and return to Cameroon. They choose to rebuild their lives there, prioritizing family and community over the elusive and often disappointing American Dream they had pursued.

Who should read Behold the Dreamers?

Readers interested in contemporary literary fiction, immigrant stories, social commentary on class and wealth, and novels set against the backdrop of significant historical events like the 2008 financial crisis. It appeals to those who appreciate nuanced character studies and explorations of cultural identity.

How long does it take to read Behold the Dreamers?

The book is approximately 384 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take a typical reader about 7 to 8 hours (approximately 460 minutes) to read the entire novel.

Questions & Answers

What is the central conflict in "Behold the Dreamers"?

The central conflict revolves around the Jonga family's pursuit of the American Dream as Cameroonian immigrants, juxtaposed with the unraveling lives of their wealthy employers, the Edwards family, amidst the 2008 financial crisis. It explores themes of class, race, immigration, and the disillusionment that can accompany the pursuit of a better life, highlighting the stark differences in how economic downturns affect different social strata and exposing the vulnerabilities hidden beneath the surface of both privilege and struggle.

Who are Jende and Neni Jonga, and what are their aspirations?

Jende Jonga is a Cameroonian immigrant working as a chauffeur for a wealthy Lehman Brothers executive, Clark Edwards. Neni Jonga is his ambitious wife, studying pharmacy and working odd jobs. They both aspire to achieve the American Dream: financial stability, a good education for their son, and a secure future, believing America offers limitless opportunities for those who work hard. Their dreams are rooted in providing a better life for themselves and their family, both in America and back in Cameroon.

How does the 2008 financial crisis impact the Jonga and Edwards families differently?

The 2008 financial crisis devastates both families but in vastly different ways. For the Edwards, it means the loss of immense wealth, status, and the exposure of personal secrets, leading to emotional collapse and legal trouble. For the Jonga family, it threatens their very ability to stay in the country, jeopardizing Jende's job, their immigration status, and their hopes for a better life, pushing them to the brink of destitution and forcing difficult choices that challenge their core beliefs.

What role does Clark Edwards play in the story?

Clark Edwards is a high-ranking executive at Lehman Brothers and Jende's employer. He represents the pinnacle of American corporate success and wealth. His character serves to illustrate the hidden vulnerabilities and moral compromises within the elite, as his affair and the

financial crisis expose the fragility of his seemingly perfect life and the ethical dilemmas he faces. He embodies the pressures and often superficial nature of the American corporate dream.

Describe Cindy Edwards' character arc.

Cindy Edwards, Clark's wife, initially appears as a privileged but somewhat detached figure. Throughout the novel, her character arc reveals her struggles with depression, alcoholism, and the pressures of maintaining a perfect facade. The financial crisis and her husband's secrets push her to a breaking point, leading to a breakdown and a period of recovery, where she begins to confront her own vulnerabilities and seek genuine connection, ultimately finding a path towards self-acceptance and healing.

What does the title "Behold the Dreamers" signify?

The title "Behold the Dreamers" refers to both the immigrant characters, like Jende and Neni, who arrive in America with dreams of a better life, and the wealthy characters, like the Edwards, who are living what appears to be the American Dream but are also dreaming of maintaining their status and happiness. It invites readers to observe these dreamers and the often-harsh realities they face, questioning the nature and attainability of their aspirations and the true cost of their pursuits.

What is the significance of Jende's asylum application?

Jende's asylum application is a crucial plot device that highlights the precarious legal status of many immigrants and the bureaucratic hurdles they face. It underscores the constant threat of deportation and the desperation that drives individuals to seek refuge. The outcome of his application directly impacts the Jonga family's future in America and their ability to pursue their dreams, symbolizing the fragile foundation upon which their hopes for a better life are built.

How does the novel explore the theme of class differences?

The novel vividly explores class differences by contrasting the lives of the Jonga family, who struggle for basic necessities and legal status, with the Edwards family, who live in luxury but face their own set of moral and emotional crises. It shows how wealth provides a buffer against hardship but doesn't guarantee happiness, while poverty amplifies every challenge, exposing the vast disparities in opportunity and security in America and the different ways people cope with adversity.

What challenges do Jende and Neni face as immigrants in New York?

Jende and Neni face numerous challenges as immigrants, including navigating a new culture, language barriers, racial prejudice, precarious employment, and the constant anxiety over their immigration status. They experience loneliness, financial strain, and the pressure to succeed for their family back home, all while trying to maintain their cultural identity and adapt to American life. Their journey highlights the immense sacrifices and resilience required to pursue a new life in a foreign land.

How does the relationship between Jende and Clark evolve throughout the book?

Initially, Jende views Clark with respect and admiration, seeing him as a benevolent employer and a symbol of success. As the financial crisis unfolds and Jende becomes privy to Clark's secrets, their relationship becomes more complex. Jende feels a mix of loyalty, pity, and disillusionment, realizing that wealth doesn't equate to moral superiority, and ultimately, their professional bond dissolves under the weight of their differing realities and the ethical compromises made by Clark.

What is the role of secrets in the Edwards family's downfall?

Secrets play a pivotal role in the Edwards family's downfall. Clark's affair and his involvement in questionable financial dealings, along with Cindy's hidden struggles with addiction and depression, create a facade of perfection that eventually crumbles. These secrets erode trust, contribute to their emotional distress, and ultimately lead to the exposure of their vulnerabilities and the collapse of their public image and personal lives, demonstrating the destructive power of hidden truths.

What does Neni's ambition reveal about the immigrant experience?

Neni's ambition to become a pharmacist and her relentless pursuit of education and work reveal the immense drive and resilience often found in immigrants. It highlights their determination to make the most of opportunities, not just for themselves but for their families. Her journey underscores the sacrifices, hard work, and often overlooked intellectual capabilities that immigrants bring to their new country, challenging stereotypes and showcasing their profound commitment to self-improvement and family well-being.

How does the novel portray the concept of the "American Dream"?

The novel portrays the "American Dream" as a complex and often elusive ideal. For the Jongas, it represents hope and opportunity, but they encounter its harsh realities and limitations. For the Edwards, who seemingly embody the dream, it proves to be a fragile construct built on material wealth and hidden struggles. The book ultimately suggests that the dream is not universally accessible and can be a source of both inspiration and profound disillusionment, depending on one's circumstances.

What is the significance of the Cameroonian community in the novel?

The Cameroonian community provides Jende and Neni with a vital support network, a sense of belonging, and a connection to their cultural heritage in a foreign land. It offers practical assistance, emotional comfort, and a shared understanding of the immigrant experience. However, it also presents its own pressures and expectations, highlighting the complexities of maintaining cultural identity while assimilating and the importance of community in navigating the challenges of immigration.

Spoiler: What ultimately happens to the Jonga family at the end of the book?

Spoiler: After Jende's asylum application is denied and his job with the Edwards family ends, the Jonga family decides to return to Cameroon. They leave New York, disillusioned by the American Dream's unfulfilled promises and the hardships they endured. While their return is a defeat of their initial aspirations, it also represents a choice to rebuild their lives in their homeland, seeking a different kind of stability and happiness away from the pressures and disappointments of America.

What is the significance of Vince Edwards' character?

Vince Edwards, Clark and Cindy's rebellious son, represents a critique of inherited wealth and privilege. He rejects his family's corporate values and seeks a more authentic, socially conscious path, choosing to work on a farm rather than pursue a traditional career. His character highlights the generational divide and the questioning of traditional success metrics, offering a contrast to his father's ambition and his mother's struggles within the confines of their wealthy lifestyle, and suggesting alternative paths to fulfillment.

How does the novel use setting (New York City) to enhance its themes?

New York City serves as a powerful backdrop, embodying both the allure of the American Dream and its harsh realities. The glittering skyscrapers and luxurious apartments symbolize wealth and opportunity, while the crowded streets and immigrant neighborhoods highlight the struggle and diversity. The city's energy and anonymity amplify the characters' hopes and fears, making it a dynamic character in itself that reflects the novel's themes of aspiration, disillusionment, and survival, showcasing both its promise and its indifference.

What lessons about resilience can readers take from the Jonga family's story?

Readers can learn about immense resilience from the Jonga family's story. Despite facing poverty, discrimination, legal uncertainty, and the collapse of their dreams, Jende and Neni continuously adapt, support each other, and make difficult choices for their family's well-being. Their journey underscores the human capacity to endure hardship, find strength in community, and redefine success when original plans falter, emphasizing perseverance and the ability to find hope and purpose even after significant setbacks.

How does the author, Imbolo Mbue, use point of view to tell the story?

Imbolo Mbue primarily uses a third-person omniscient point of view, allowing her to delve into the thoughts and experiences of multiple characters, particularly Jende, Neni, Clark, and Cindy. This narrative choice provides a comprehensive understanding of both the immigrant and the wealthy American perspectives, enabling the author to draw parallels and contrasts between their lives and highlight the interconnectedness of their fates, offering a nuanced exploration of their individual struggles and shared humanity.

What is the role of cultural identity in the lives of Jende and Neni?

Cultural identity is central to Jende and Neni's lives. Their Cameroonian heritage provides a strong foundation of values, community, and tradition that they strive to maintain amidst the pressures of assimilation in America. It influences their decisions, their understanding of family, and their coping mechanisms, serving as both a source of comfort and a point of tension as they navigate a new cultural landscape. Their identity shapes their perspective on the American Dream and their ultimate choices.