

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.