

## Imbolo Mbue: How Beautiful We Were

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**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Hello and thank you for joining us. I am Yvonne Battle Felton, author of 'Remembered'. I'm sitting here with Imbolo Mbue and we're talking about her beautiful book, 'How Beautiful We Were'. And first I'd like to say thank you so much, well, I guess two things, thank you so much for this beautiful book, and thank you so much for joining me this afternoon to talk about your beautiful book.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Thank you so much, Yvonne. And thank you to the festival. I'm so excited to be doing this with you.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I'm excited to be doing this with you too. And so let me say a little bit about you, Imbolo is the author of the New York Times Bestseller 'Behold the Dreamers', which won the PEN Faulkner Award for Fiction and was an Oprah's Book Club selection. The novel has been translated into 11 languages, adapted into an opera and a stage play, and optioned for a miniseries. A native of Limbe, Cameroon, Imbolo lives in New York. So then about the book, the first blurb part of it is: From the author of the New York Times Bestseller 'Behold the Dreamers' comes a sweeping story about the collision of a small African village and an American oil company.

It's set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, 'How Beautiful We Were' tells the story of a people living in fear amidst 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 are made and ignored. The country's government led by a brazen dictator is not much help. And what I would say about this book, it is absolutely beautiful. It's an emotional experience that will have you laughing and crying, cheering, and celebrating, mourning. It may bring you to rage, move you to tears. It brings you deeper. It encourages discussion and reflection. And I am so thankful to have read this beautiful book.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Thank you Yvonne. Thank you so much. That all means a lot to me.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Thank you. And could we start off this conversation by, I've told you how much I love to be read a story, and I think it's something beautiful about hearing a story in the author's own words. And so if you could start us off by reading a bit from the book, we'd be forever grateful.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Sure. I'd love to. So I'm going to go the beginning, just like the first page or so of the novel, 'How Beautiful We Were'.

We should have known the end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn't want us to know? When we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, they told us it would soon be over, that we would all be well in no time. They asked us to come to village meetings to talk about it. They told us we had to trust them. We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting-liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil. We should have cursed their mothers and grandmothers, flung pejoratives upon their fathers, prayed for unspeakable calamities to befall their children. We hated them and we hated their meetings, but we attended all of them. Every eight weeks we went to the village square to listen to them.

We were dying. We were helpless. We were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation. We ran home from school on the appointed days, eager to complete our chores so we would miss not one word at the assembly. We fetched water from the well, chased goats and chickens around our compounds into bamboo barns, swept away leaves and twigs scattered across our front yards. We washed iron pots and piles of bowls after dinner, left our huts many minutes before the time the meeting was called for, we wanted to get there before they strode into the square in their fine suits and polished shoes. Our mothers hurried to the square too, as did our fathers.

They left their work unfinished in the forest beyond the big river, their palms and bare feet dusted with poisoned earth. The work will be there waiting for us tomorrow, our father said to us, but we will only have so many opportunities to hear what the men from Pexton have to say. Even when their bodies bore little strength, after hours of toiling beneath a sun both benevolent and cruel, they went to the meetings, because we all had to be at the meetings. The only person who did not attend the meetings was Konga, our village madman. Konga, who had no awareness of our suffering and lived without fears of what was and what was to come. He slept in the school compound as we hurried along, snoring and slobbering if he wasn't tossing, itching, muttering, eyes closed. Trapped as he was, alone in a world in which spirits ruled and men were powerless under their dominion, he knew nothing about Pexton. In the square we sat in silence as the sun left us for the day, oblivious to how the beauty of its descent heightened our anguish. We watched as the Pexton men placed their briefcases on the table our village head, Woja Beki had set for them.

There were always three of them, we called them the Round One, his face was as round as a ball we would have had fun kicking, the Sick One, his suits were oversized, giving him the look of a man dying of a flesh-stealing disease, and the Leader, he did the talking, the other two did the nodding.

We mumbled among ourselves as they opened their briefcases and passed sheets of paper among themselves, covering their mouths as they whispered into each other's ears to ensure they had their lies straight. We had nowhere more important to be so we waited, desperate for good news. We whispered at intervals, wondering what they were thinking whenever they paused to look at us, at our grandfathers and fathers on stools upfront, those with dead or dying children in the first row, our grandmothers and mothers behind them, nursing babies into quietude and shooting us glares if we made the wrong sound from under the mango tree. Our young women repeatedly sighed and shook their heads. Our young men, clustered at the back, stood clench-jawed and seething. We inhaled, waited, exhaled. We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names, nor cures, our siblings and cousins and friends who had perished from the poison in the water and the poison in the air and the poisoned food growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling. We hoped the men would look into our eyes and feel something for us. We were children, like their children, and we wanted them to recognize that. If they did, it wasn't apparent in their countenance. They'd come for Pexton, to keep its conscience clean, they hadn't come for us.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Thank you so much. It was, I think you capture that breathlessness that we feel when you immerse us into this story, this landscape, this time and with these characters. So I was just really wanting to know, so 'How Beautiful We Were', you invite readers to reflect on who among us will be the first to speak out against injustice, unfairness, things that are accepted because they've gone on for so long and they seem unchangeable, unstoppable, unmovable and set in this fictional village.

Where few see the gains and profits of a relationship with Pexton, this American oil company. And yet everyone feels the effects of this relationship and some worse than

others. Few are prepared, or even know how to alter the relationship. What inspired this book?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Well, my inspiration, thank you so much, Yvonne, it was what you said before about people not doing anything about injustice, right. My inspiration was the people who did something about injustice. Ever since I was a child, I've always been fascinated by revolutionaries and dissidents and freedom fighters and protesters, anybody who stood up and said, I do not like what is happening, I'm going to change this, I'm going to try to overthrow the system. I was in awe of them. I grew up in Africa, in the eighties and nineties, and it was a time when we were celebrating the great African revolutionaries, the Patrice Lumumbas, and the Mandelas, and Thomas Sankara, and there were just many people who had done so much to put an end to colonialism and were also fighting to put an end to lots of dictatorship and they came at a really great price to them. And then I came to America and I learnt about the Civil Rights Movement, I read a lot about Malcolm X and Dr. King. I read, you know, Gandhi, and I saw people who were trying so much to build a better world, and so they only increased that fascination. So when I started writing, and this book is the very first thing I started writing, I started writing it way before my debut novel. When I started writing, the first story I wanted to tell, the only story I had to tell, it came from this place of fascination.

What does it take? What does it take to overthrow a system? What does it take to fight back? Because it's easy to look at the news or to hear about the great revolutionaries and what they did and what they achieved, but there was a price to be paid. And so I was interested in going behind the scenes at an uprising, and behind the scenes at a movement and seeing what it's like to start a movement and the people involved and what it does to their relationship, what does it take to fight an American corporation? I mean, Pexton is not any oil companies, a major American oil corporation. They have the support of the country's government. How does this small African village fight a powerful American oil company?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Wow. So one thing that's really interesting, there was so much, that was really interesting there, but one of the things, was so this book came, you started this book before your debut. I guess how does it feel that the same issues, because it feels so timely and so relevant and timeless in that, but how does it feel that the same book that was urgent, you know to write then it's still is urgent and relevant right now.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Because injustice is here, right? You know it was injustice then, injustice now, sadly the problem injustice tomorrow. And so I, you know, I think that when I was studying writing, I wasn't thinking, Oh, is this timely or relevant. I don't write from that place. I mean, you're a literary writer, you understand that you write what comes to, comes out of your heart.

And so I wasn't thinking along those lines, I was thinking about what it is like to actually rise up against a very powerful enemy, what that takes. And I remember that childhood fascination. I also grew up in a dictatorship and the country in which its villages has a dictator as president.

So I grew up in a dictatorship. I am English speaking Cameroon, and I grew up in a predominantly French speaking country. So I had a good understanding of, you know, living in a society, in which people were treated differently because in my case, because I speak a different language and being Anglophone Cameroonian is one of the rare cases in the world where speaking English is a disadvantage, but so growing up in a dictatorship and having these, this somewhat fascination with movements and revolutions, I think that it compelled me to tell this story. I wasn't thinking about timeliness. I wasn't thinking about, I mean, I'd never written anything at that point, this is the first thing I started writing. So I wasn't thinking about what anybody would like. I was just determined to tell a story that matters to me.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I absolutely love that. You know, you mentioned that there are a number of revolutionaries. Even within the book and they have different ages and genders and statuses, different costs that they are willing or made to pay.

There's Thula, there's Konga, Yaya, Bongo, Thula's mother, her age-mates, other villagers. They come from just across the village. Who can lead a revolution or lead change?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Well, there's a quote by the great African revolutionary, Thomas Sankara, and he was President of Burkina Faso and he was murdered. But this is somebody that died in my childhood, you know, I was fascinated with, because I had a Thomas Sankara t-shirt and that was probably my very early introduction to this idea of revolutionaries, and they could, but Sankara was about, there's a certain amount of madness, right? You need a certain level of madness to try to do something like this, to try to overthrow a system, to try to fight an American oil company.

And so I wanted to pay an homage to that idea because, both Konga and Thula there is a certain level of madness involving their way of thinking about what they suggest and what they do. And even with Thula's friends who eventually join and become part of her revolution, there's a level of madness, but also think that, from my reading of studying people like that, and looking at the Dr. King, the Malcolm X, and Mandelas and many other people who are not household names, they also have a certain degree of hope that is not common. I mean, these people really, really believe, they really believe that I'm going to do all this and it's going to make a different country. It's going to change the country. It's going to change a community or the change your world. So I think that that was two things that I really thought about, the madness and the hope, I mean, Obama is another example, right? This was a guy who nobody really, you know, like it said in his memoir, nobody thought that I was going to become what I became, but his message was very much about hope.

And I just, I'm just about to finish his memoir and he really, really had hope that this country could live up to his ideals. So that's, that to me is very crucial, the hope element. They believe that as crazy as it sounds like I can actually, we can actually fight an American oil company. Now we're not going to give the ending, I say what happens, but it is the novel is about the journey and the struggle. I, you know, more than it is about who wins in the end. It is more about the struggle.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** You know, that's really, it's funny you should say that because I know I was wondering about Konga and, you know, and even in the introduction he's introduced as the village madman, and I was curious about how much of that status, allowed or didn't allow for others to, others in the village to follow him, to follow his lead, how much him being a madman was relevant to what they decided. And even in that opening the characters or the narrator's kind of dismissing his hold on reality. And yet I know so much more.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Right, and that was a thing because like he's a madman. He's dismissed. I mean, and we live in a world where people say, Oh, you said something really crazy. And they're like, oh you're crazy. Or something really new. And they're like, don't listen to her. She is crazy. He's crazy. But I love that Apple has this commission for many years ago, the Apple company, and they had this commercial called 'here's to the crazy ones' and they had all these great people across history who did something really crazy and even from like the Einstein's or whoever they had this really novel ideas. And so this Apple commission pays homage to the idea of madness being something that should not be dismissed. Right. I mean, obviously Konga has a mental illness, so he's not just mad in the regular way of talking about, Oh, you crazy.

He actually is mentally ill, but maybe, because he is so free from worrying about normal, everyday constraints. He doesn't have a wife, he doesn't have children. He doesn't have to worry about, you know serving little children that I suppose he'd worry about, that he is more free to say I have an idea how we can fight this company and the villagers obviously in the beginning, they're thinking, wait no, we not listening to this madman.

But obviously, you know, that decision to listen to him, it pulls apart for decades of a really intense struggle between them and the oil company.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** You know, and so you've inspired me to ask this question that I said that I wasn't going to ask. So we've been like, even thinking about kind of who risks what, because revolution, in putting yourself up as a, well, I guess we don't necessarily say I'm going to be a revolutionist. It's kind of, you start it and maybe people form around you or behind you, but. So we know that, so there's the village madman and he takes a stand and others take a stand. And Thula takes a stand and she, without giving away spoilers, which I say as a person who gives away spoilers all the time, what she pays for her stand, it had me in tears because I was thinking like my goodness, like, do you know how, when things happen to a character and it happens in life, but when it happens to a character, you want there to be some, you know, some hopeful good thing. And I just felt like the closer she got the farther it, you know, why? Why did you do it to, to us and to her.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Well, Yvonne I will tell you that this was a very, very difficult book to write. For among many reasons, I mean, not that any book is easy to write because, you know, I think it's not easy, but because it was important to me that I really show honestly, what is involved in taking a stand that if it was easy, right? If you could do it and not pay really, really hefty, ugly prices, everybody will be standing up on fighting against injustice's left and right. And we will, it will be a different world. It is because not many people are willing to pay the price. Normally when people are willing to make sacrifices, the extent to which Dr. King made, I mean, Dr. King knew who was going to be killed and he still, you know, stood up and said what he did. And he didn't live to be 40, neither did Malcolm X. Malcolm X didn't live to be 40 either. They all made sacrifices. And that is why we all benefited from it. But there is something to be said about the fact that, you know I couldn't treat Thula any differently because she was a character that I created, and I love her.

I had to be honest about what it takes to stand up against a powerful entity, like an American oil corporation.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Wow. So I can like, yeah, it makes total sense when you say it that way, it doesn't ease my heart.

**Imbolo Mbue:** I understand because it's, you know, you get invested as a reader, you get invested in something. And I got this about my first novel, also 'Behold the Dreamers' where, you know, people felt like, Oh, the characters were invested, and they were working really hard. And you want to see the characters win in the way we should believe winning should be right. And this is what my idea of success looks like. This is what my idea of winning the revolution looks like, but I am one of those writers that I just, you know, I am all about keeping it real. Let's keep this real. Okay. You might not be pretty, but let's keep it real.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** You know, I have to say that, while I didn't appreciate, like, while I was reading it, there were times when I found myself doing that cry and it's, you know, it's that cry that it seems like only a really good book can just pull you into where your actual, like when you're hurting.



**Imbolo Mbue:** Right. You're really upset. I, yes. I mean, you're like I did, this is so unfair, you know, but that is what literature is for, that's what we read for, to be happy of course, but also to be like, to feel something right. To feel something.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** That's 100% it's for me, it's why I fall into books, whether I'm happy or sad or whatever that emotion is, but I do, I read to feel something. So thank you for, you know, for this experience.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Thank you.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Can I ask you, it's such a beautiful title and it's well, you know, on one hand it's so it's concise, but it's 'How Beautiful We Were'. And I think it's, there's so many times if you can read and stop at any point and come back to that title. And it just seems like it answers so many questions. So where did the title come from? And at what point in the writing?

**Imbolo Mbue:** I had a very hard time coming up with a title for my first book, 'Behold the Dreamers', which was a very difficult title for me. And with the second book, I said, I want to mention that I have my title before I start having to fight with my publisher, because my publisher did not, you know, I went through a whole title drama with my last book.

And so I was in the midst of writing this. I was thinking about the title a lot and it's like you said, it's a book that touches on so many things. I was thinking, what is the essence of this story? What is it? What is going on here? And I realized that it is a love story, ultimately. It may not seem like it right?

This is a story about a village fighting environmental degradation. It's about, you know, corporate greed and it's about dictatorship and post-colonial war. But ultimately it is about people. It's about the families and friends and marriages and relationships and the community that is close-knit and beautiful.

And I wanted to pay, to pay respect to that, that this is about love. This is about love for their land. It isn't that they're willing to fight. We need to sacrifice it because they love their land, they love their world, and they want to hold onto it and preserve it. And so, I had 20 different titles, but then I went back and so I love the book of Solomon in the Bible, which is a biblical book, is a series of love songs.

And so one day I was looking at Song of Solomon and Song of Solomon in chapter four, verse one, it says 'how beautiful you are, my darling. Oh, how beautiful.' And I thought, wow, what a declaration of love, 'how beautiful you are, my darling.' And so I thought these people are talking to their land, you know, and obviously I feel like the title sort of gives away the ending because it says 'How Beautiful We Were'.

So, you know, that they're talking about the past that they were beautiful. But as I was concerned that it gives away the ending, but not really, not really. So, but, so that is how I came up with, from that. But there's How Beautiful You Are My Darling. And I thought. You know, these people are saying about themselves, 'How Beautiful We Were'.

So you had this nostalgia to Eve. And this sort of reverence and romantic feeling of like such closeness that they had wooed away. My concern was that maybe it sounded a little too, like a couple sitting on their porch, holding hands and think about back when they were young and beautiful and they're like, how beautiful we were. My editor said, no, nobody's going to think that. So after many, I had a couple of other titles and I tried many of, a few of my friends were like, nope, 'How Beautiful We Were'. That is very, very special. And of course, I was aware, people are going to say, Oh, 'How Beautiful We Were'. It's a beautiful topic. It's a

bit of a title and there'd be so much use of the word 'beautiful'. And I was like, you know, a beautiful is a beautiful word. So it's okay. People will say it's a beautiful title.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I think you just have to own it. It is a beautiful title... So one thing I really wanted to know, and you talked about like the love and I think the, yes, it is definitely a love story.

And throughout the book, there's the devastation's, drought, the village heals. They pray, they build, they rebuild, some move away, some stay, throughout there's friendships, family. The children, their children, they play, they go to school, they grow older, they fall in love and some fall away. Why was it important to show the everyday business of living even while dying?

**Imbolo Mbue:** That's a good question because you're living while you're fighting, right. It's not separate. And that is one in that I had to learn in the process of writing this book, because, you know, in the beginning it was all like, yeah. It's about the struggle that I had to remember that.

These are people going about their lives while they're struggling against this oil company, it is a big issue in their life. But they are still falling in love, still getting married, they're still having babies. There's a scene in the book where there is a right of passage where the young men go through a right of passage as they become adults.

And so it was important to me that I showed the village in its entirety. That this is not just a book about people fighting an oil company, but it's about humans and their lives and this particular culture and how they go through their daily lives while also fighting, you know, like people still fall in love and have children even when they're marching in protest for Black Lives Matter, or they marching in protest against any form of injustice they still go about their lives.

It's not the only thing that defines them. So that, it was important to have a holistic picture.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I love that. And I guess it's a, it's another testament of you know, keeping it real that these things don't exist in a silo, life does march on.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Exactly.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** One thing I quite appreciated. So each of the narrating characters, they weave the narrative in their own way and they fill in the spaces between providing access that other narratives maybe don't have.

And as a reader, it immerses us into each experience, answering questions. And in some ways, planting other questions, it connects and, or enlightens us. What character do we not hear enough from? Who, if anyone has more to say than we see on the page.

**Imbolo Mbue:** You know, I'm curious what you think about that. What was your like, who I would like to hear more from?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I love that. You know... I wanted to hear more from Konga.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Really? I thought you were going to say Thula.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** You know, I feel like on one hand I should want to hear more from her but of course I wanted to hear about her father. So what happens and without giving too many things away, but I definitely wanted to hear his story, but there was like Konga, I was

like, okay, you sit up you know, you did the thing, everybody was talking about doing a thing or wondering about doing a thing but you were just like, you know what, and that, to do the thing without even being in conversation when other people were talking about we should do or how about we do, like, just be like, you know what, forget it. Like I've already actually done it, like you're all sitting here talking about some, Oh, and I've done it. And we see what happens to him or we're told what happens to him, but yeah, he's one character that I feel like, Oh, what would you say to me, if you be like, if you know, what do you want to do now?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Oh, because he's the one who sort of, you know, got the ball rolling on all this, and you wanted to see how, from his point of view, I suppose, like what I felt like that, I mean, that's a very, that's a very good point that I was thinking more and it was important to me that I also show how mental illness is treated.

Right. In that, in that culture and also in a culture like mine, where, you know, and most of the world, there's a lot of, you know, shame and misunderstanding and things that are spoken about the mentally ill that is very sad. And I think that while this village was mostly kind to Konga, as far as you know, he'd been a mentally ill, which obviously had a different explanation of what's going on with him.

It was important that I also show how much people like Konga are dismissed from the world. People like Konga and even when they stand up and do certain things, because they're considered to be madman, they're crazy. Not enough credence is given to them. So even when Konga starts everything, I think that the village respects him, but also think that, Konga is beyond all that, right. He's beyond the minutiae of the, of the everyday fight. He, I think he saw himself more as somebody who opened the eyes of the people, like his job was like, I am going to open your eyes and you're going to see that you can fight this oil company. You have what it takes to fight this oil company.

I mean, this is a story of power, right? Because on the surface, the oil company is all powerful. I mean, how dare you try to fight the mighty American corporation. But what Konga does is opens the people's eyes and says you have your own powers, use it. You know, use it to the best of your ability. And so that was mostly what his role was.

He wasn't, because of him being a madman, he wasn't going to be involved in the everyday struggle. Right. We see the struggle is led by different people, faces, I mean, before the, before Konga came in, it was Thula's father. And then after that was Thula's uncle and Thula and they have friends and it moves from generation, one generation to the other.

But I think that Konga was the instigator. And then he was like, you know, he dropped the mic and he said, okay, I've done my part, you carry on...

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I think that's a beautiful way to look at it because, yeah, at the end and seeing it and hearing you saying it in a way there was, a lot of that kind of mic or Baton passing.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Right.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** It was definitely a community effort, which I think is one of the things that makes it so beautiful.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Right. And because it's not like people play different roles in change, right. Everybody plays a different role. I think that what you're doing to bring about change, the part of what you're doing is even for mine and that we should celebrate every different, every part of that, you know, like in every struggle, what are the people who are the preachers in the civil rights movement, or the people who march and the people who cooked food for the



protestors. Like everybody has a role to play in bringing about change. And I think it's important that we appreciate what we are able to do. And Konga did what he was able to do.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** You know what that leads right nicely and quite beautifully into...

**Imbolo Mbue:** We have got to use the word beautiful 50 times before this is over.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Let's see how...

**Imbolo Mbue:** Let's look for synonyms... How pretty we were, no that doesn't quite work

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** How about lovely?

**Imbolo Mbue:** I was going to know how fabulous we were but that's all I could...

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** So I was struck by a line and it says 'perhaps our mothers were realizing as we all were that no one was coming to save us. And we had to save ourselves by any means that presented themselves.' What advice might you offer people who recognize a need for change? What step might they take today to advocate for a cause that they believe in, a change for more equitable, safer, more free world that they might want to see if it was just one step, what would you recommend they start, doing?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Firstly, I love how you read that. It was so beautiful. And secondly, Yvonne, I love this book because I don't have answers. If I had answers, if I knew, I tell people I would be a preacher or a college professor, somebody who tells people. I think that as a writer, my job is to present a story. And then you can think for yourself, you know what steps.

I mean, it's, I do believe as a human being that we should all speak up against injustice in any way we can. And again, it's different. I mean maybe your way of speaking up is just having a hashtag on social media or maybe it's marching in protest. Or maybe it's, I mean, this is a book that does a lot with environmental degradation and I, and the environment is very important to me.

And maybe all you can do is just be mindful of your choices, but it is, I think what Literature does for me is that it opens my eyes and makes me think about how I can do things differently, how I can, how I can play a role. And I think that works better for me than when people told me do this or don't do this, you know, but I do think that other people have way better ideas and, and I would love to hear your ideas on what you think, you know, what do you think is a possible response to that question?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I think, I wish I knew. I think it's definitely a combination of things and one thing not to bring it back to the book, but to bring it back to, I think one thing that works quite lovely is how there are, there's no one right way in the book. Everyone does their, they advocate in their own way.

They take, they make change or, and they might be going in a way that doesn't have favourable consequences, but sometimes it was just them needing to do something.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Right I and that is a very good point because we see even in the story, there's so many different strategies that are used, right.

I mean, there's at one point, you know, some characters resort to violence and you know, I'm not going to sit there and tell you, like don't use violence, even though I don't believe in violence, but it is for you to look and say is violence ever called for I mean, there are movements that have used violence.

And I looked at that also. I mean, most people don't know that there was, the African National Congress used a bit of violence in the anti-apartheid struggle. And that was very fascinating to me because they said to themselves, we can't get them to listen any other way. So we're going to burn down buildings, but that is another way.

But again, it is for you to look at it and see and say I don't know if violence really works or if we think it works well, I dunno. I mean, you need to rethink that. I think, because but I still have to present characters and see how they came about to get to that point and really think that violence was their best option.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I think that makes a lot of sense because I know reading it, there was, there were times when there were characters who might seem, you know, really patient and they, the appearance of being really passive and sometimes I would be thinking, you know do something and then a character would do something. And you're like, Ooh, I don't know if that was a something. You're reading it. You're going well, you know, in retrospect.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Not the best move.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Exactly, but like that you put us in all of these different situations anyways, so that, and maybe if you were reading it and saying, well, I need to make some changes and yeah, I'm going to resort to this, or I'm going to do that, or I'm going to, and maybe just seeing different ways that this might play out and defining what success is like you said, what does success look like for you for this.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Exactly, I mean the villagers the ultimate goal was to live in a safe, clean environment that you don't want success. They want that the oil company to just stop polluting their land. I mean, when the book opens, we can see the rivers are covered in toxic waste and the air is dirty and the pipelines are spilling, and children are dying.

It is, success to them was just they weren't asking to go to the moon. They didn't want, you know, to win a Nobel prize, peace prize or get an Oscar. They just want it to live safely on their own environment. So that was success. And they had their own strategies that they tried. I mean, to me, I will say the many different things that they tried and, you know, and they failed but it is also worth remembering that these things take time. But if you look at many struggles across history, they take time. I mean, look at women's rights. Women, you know, wake up and, you know, in America and become vice presidents right, it takes many, many years and maybe even centuries, of one woman after another fighting and passing on the baton.

And maybe some people didn't use the best strategies, that now mean this is where we are now.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** I think that's a really beautiful way to, the word again, but it's a really generous way to look at it. And that reminder about, sometimes I guess it's that being patient doesn't mean not doing anything and maybe it's times to reflect and times to be active in other ways.

So that it's, at the end, I guess, looking at that end game and what that might look like. I've never been a patient person, probably something that I'm working through.

**Imbolo Mbue:** And it's not easy I think there is a scene where one of the characters and I was just reading it the other day, the way they were talking about, we've been fighting this battle for so long. Ever since we're children, our whole life has been consumed with hearing

our parents talk about fighting this oil company. Then we talk about fighting this oil company and we thought it would be over by now because by then this thing started in 1980. And by then it's almost the year, 2000 and they're like, we're still fighting. And I know people, a friend of mine in drafts said to me, how can there be this passion? Like I said, You know what, how many options is life giving them?

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** That's a great point. That is a good, yeah, you're right. What other choice do they have at some point, but then to wait and when people, the characters do take, I guess, choice into their own hands, it's looking at what happens to them and what doesn't. It's funny though so even when you were just talking about like the setting I was, I found myself, I was just struck by the language and it was often really vivid, beautiful description moving if sometimes really quite concise, even when characters were, experiencing things that you didn't want them to experience, you were immersed in the language and in the story of it, all the telling of it, it was sometimes just lush and overflowing. It was just the imagery. You often use a sense, a sense of the senses to invite readers, to places that we may not have otherwise accessed. And I know this is a fictional place, but I'm curious, what sort of research did you do if any, to bring these landscapes to life and how did you bring the setting to life?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Yeah. Thank you so much. So I should start off by saying that I grew up reading a lot of African Literature, which was set in villages sort of. I mean and I feel a great deal of, you know, credit to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the African writer. He wrote books like 'Weep Not, Child' and 'Devil on the Cross', 'Matigari' and so I think growing up reading books that were set in similar places like Kosawa, that was my early introduction.

I also spent my early childhood in a couple of villages where my mother was working. My mother was a community development assistant. But the villages were nothing, like Kosawa nothing like that. But I think I've had enough, I've been to enough African villages that I had a sense. I also grew up in a town and one never would feel like a little village. Again, nothing like that.

But so I, but I'm also a pan-Africanist, I bought very heavily from other African cultures. I looked at, you know, rights of passage in other cultures, I looked at, you know like the things that are not exactly familiar to me for my own country, I considered. But I also, I should add that I have a fascination with anthropology, so it was important to me that I build a culture that felt very real because I just love anthropology and I'm fascinated with culture. So I went, I basically built this culture from scratch using inspiration from not only African countries all over the world. And I put it in one African setting, because it wasn't enough to just tell the story of these people and their struggle. It was important to talk about what would be lost if they did not, you know, they did not come out victorious.

They are beautiful ways. They are beautiful. The celebrations, the weddings, the rights of passage they're attached to the ancestry, their lives in this place that was so in sync with the supernatural, there was so much about this place that, and it's sad because places like this are somewhat, you know, disappearing, because again, it's globalization is happening, and the world is getting smaller and languages are disappearing.

And so I wanted to almost do a drawback, you know, back to a small African village in the eighties and celebrate it because I don't think this is like, Kosawa, I've given a lot of attention because it thinking, well, the world is moving forward, everybody has TVs and smartphones and everything.

And who cares about some African village where people live in huts? Well, I do, I do. I find it fascinating. And so. I didn't just want to brush over that. I wanted to show this vibrant place because the, many places like Kosawa that still exist in the world.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Thank you. That's lovely. Can we talk about Thula?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Yeah, your girl Thula.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Exactly, so once people have, you know, finished falling in love with this book and they'll know why I'm stuck on Thula, where does she come from as a character for you? Can you talk about how you developed her and created her and your inspiration for her?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Right. Well, I should say first of all that, Thula is not Imbolo Mbue, because I was just doing an interview that the guy said, well, Thula came to America at 17, or you came to America and you got the book like this so you must be a revolutionary too. I said, nope, I am not a revolutionary, let's not get this confused. Thula came to America and went to college and she was in protests and working and marching and I went to college and I was walking in the dining hall, hanging at my friend's bedroom. So it was a very different experience but I also was a child who struggled to make sense of the world, right?

I mean, as a child and that is where a lot of this comes from of being this young African girl and being fascinated by human rights. Being fascinated by stories coming out from the radio. We had a radio going up in my house. We didn't have a TV, but we had a radio and there were all these stories coming into the radio.

And so I was fascinated by why is this happening? Why isn't somebody doing anything about this? But there was no protest movement in my country. And if not in the extent I, you know, something like a Civil Rights Movement. We, you know, we had a dictator and in the eighties and nineties, people were like, fine we have a dictator, what are we going to do? Such is life. And maybe was a little bit of pushback. There was some movements coming up here and there, but nothing on a grand scale. So I had this, this desire to understand the world. I had this desire to make sense of why nobody was doing something about certain injustices around me.

So that is, I think where Thula comes from now. Thula, the rest of it is a composite of a lot of great revolutionaries. Like I said, Thula is a composite of many other great men I mentioned, but also great women. I mean I looked at, I read Angela Davis', I looked at somebody like Miriam Makeba, who was a, she was a singer, but she was a revolutionary in her own way. When somebody like, I was also writing this book up to 2019. And so there were lots and lots of good women to look at. Gloria Steinem in America, there's a good feminist. So I had no shortage of women and men who were considered revolutionaries to put them together and form Thula. So the world just basically gave me all these great people I say, okay, look at them and study them. I use it to do Thula. That's what I did.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Oh, wow. What a fabulous response. So my final question, you're launching within a pandemic and that comes with certain challenges. I think awfully, hopefully opportunities and some positives. How can we as readers who, you know, we support this book, we love these characters, we needed this story and I say we needed this story right now, actually, no matter when right now is, the reader reads this book, how can we best support 'How Beautiful We Were' and you?

**Imbolo Mbue:** Well, thank you for that question. I suppose it's, I think that I want this book, it was, you know, I put my heart into it and my hope is that when you read it that you take whatever you can out of it. I am not one of those writers who wanted to read my books and take this out of it.

No, it is. It is a work of art for you to interpret the way you wish to interpret it. And I'll say that this book is also a love song to Literature. I came from, I came to writing just from loving the Literature. I wish I studied writing. I wish I'd taken my literature classes seriously in school, I maybe I should have done a PhD like you, and then I would have known a lot more stuff, but I didn't.

So I came to this just from reading books and appreciating literature. And this book is full of homages to a lot of my favorite books. I mean, I pay homage to Arundhati Roy, I pay homage to Gabriel García Márquez, I pay homage to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. There's just little tiny homages that I threw in here to my favorite writers. So it is to me like important that We celebrate Literature, we celebrate the wonders of books and I'm so grateful to this wonderful festival for having us. And to your point about the pandemic, not the best thing to ever happen to mankind, this pandemic, but here we are, you in the UK, I'm here and we're having a conversation and I'm having a wonderful time and maybe this will not happen if it was not for pandemic. So I am learning to be grateful for what, for what comes my way and to make the best out of it. So here we are, so I am, I hope that the reader will read it and take what he, or she can take out of it or he, or she, or, or they can take out of it.

**Yvonne Battle-Felton:** Wonderful. So I'd like to say thank you to Ilkley Literature Festival for making the interview possible, to Imbolo for your time, your generosity, for this beautiful book, to everyone watching. And I'd also like to say, please buy the book, it's available at The Grove Bookshop, the independent bookseller, and it's an amazing book. And you will I think, appreciate it for the experience for the characters, for the wonderful story. So thank you so much Imbolo.

**Imbolo Mbue:** Thank you so much Yvonne, this has been wonderful.

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