

FAMILY AND BELONGING

Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2016, 382 pages

Reviewed by Mupa M'Mbetsa

The book *Behold the Dreamers* is Imbolo Mbue's debut novel. It was published by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC in 2016 in New York, United States of America. It is a very modern placed kind of work.

The protagonist Jende Jonga is, like Mbue, a Cameroonian migrant to America, along with his wife Neni and their six-year-old son Liomi. Clark Edwards, Jende's boss, an investment banker, is also a migrant, coming to Wall Street from the American hinterland; his ancestors were once newcomers. The novel begins with an interview. Clark needs a driver and Jende needs a job. For Clark, the interview is a blip in his busy day. To Jende, in his carefully chosen clothes and with his carefully doctored CV, it is the only way to sustain life for him and his family.

Jende regularly puts in fourteen-hour days as a personal chauffeur for the Lehman Brothers executive, Clark who grows to trust Jende, and Neni eventually takes a temporary job cleaning and cooking at the Edwards' second home. It does not take long before Jende and Neni both learn that the Edwards' marriage is not as perfect as it might seem. This becomes painfully apparent after Lehman Brothers declares bankruptcy just weeks before what would become a historic presidential election. Meanwhile, Jende is forced to confront problems of his own. While his wife is in America on a student visa, he is in the country waiting for his asylum application to be approved. He cannot bear the thought of returning to Cameroon.

Cindy Edward's dream is centred on having a close-knit, loving family, while her husband Clark's dream becomes a quest for integrity and satisfaction in a profession that has become increasingly unethical. Her obsession with keeping her family together arises from her need to create and sustain the family she never had. Cindy was born as a result of rape; knowing that she was the result of her mother's trauma, which included being forced to carry Cindy to term, Cindy tried, unsuccessfully, to get her mother to love and accept her. Instead, her mother projected her anger and hurt onto Cindy, who, resembling her mother's rapist, became an easy target for her wrath. Her inability to repair the fault of her birth results in her trying to create the life and the family that she always wanted. She lifts herself out of poverty by marrying Clark and legitimizes her existence by dedicating herself to marriage and the rearing of children. When Vince leaves and Clark commits infidelity, she regards their actions as signs of her own failure to create a meaningful life. She is once again relegated to feeling as though her efforts to create a new family were just as futile as her initial efforts to love her mother and sister. Cindy's death is a direct result of drug and alcohol abuse, but it is an indirect result of feeling powerless to generate the life that she wants.

Those who lived through the turbulent final years of the George W. Bush administration remember that it brought out the worst in a lot of people — not just in the bankers and politicians who let the crisis occur in the first place, but in ordinary citizens brought to the edge by the threat of financial ruin.²

²Schaub M, *Newly American 'dreamers' are torn between love and disappointment*, <<https://www.npr.org/>> accessed on 7 September 2020.

³Mbue I, *Behold the dreamers*, 224.

⁴Mbue I, *Behold the dreamers*, 309.

Mbue realizes this, and she does not pull punches. *Behold the Dreamers* is, at times, hard to read, not because of her writing, which is excellent, but because the characters keep getting hit, over and over again, by horrible circumstances beyond their control. Jende is reminded that "bad news has a way of slithering into good days and making a mockery of complacent joys;"³ Neni feels "crushed" by her own feelings of helplessness, "the fact that she had travelled to America only to be reminded of how powerless she was, how unfair life could be."

Cindy's fruitless attempts to forge bonds with her mother and her half-sister, who was born as a result of their mother's marriage, reveal the need to have a sense of family, even in circumstances in which once ostracism has been predetermined.

What both the Edwards and Jonga families have in common is a mutual need to feel a sense of belonging, as well as their reliance on family to foster that sensibility. The Jongas remain anchored in an unfamiliar land by remaining closely connected to friends and family from Cameroon, particularly Jende's cousin, Winston. Conversely, Cindy Edwards exhibits increasingly erratic and unstable behaviour as her family drifts apart, starting with her eldest son, Vince's decision to leave for India, and culminating in her discovery of her husband's infidelities. In *Behold the Dreamers*, family is key in facilitating some feeling of security among the Jongas, even when they are at their lowest points, while the absence of family ties results in unease, and even destruction, among the privileged Edwards family.

Neni and Jende not only provide Mighty with emotional support but introduce him to their culture through cuisine. Neni makes *puff-puff*, or fried dough, for him that summer and later, in the city, when Mighty visits the Jonga's home for Vince's farewell dinner, he forges a friendship with Liomi. It is not until Cindy's death that Clark starts focusing his energy on his sons. He recognizes the importance of family and pursues closer relationships with his children. For the Jongas, their pursuit of the kind of life that they imagine that the Edwards live, nearly causes their family to unravel. *Behold the Dreamers* is a remarkable debut. Mbue is a wonderful writer with an uncanny ear for dialogue — there are no false notes here, no narrative shortcuts, and certainly no manufactured happy endings. It is a novel that depicts a country both blessed and doomed, on top of the world, but always at risk of losing its balance. The travails showcased of both families become exemplary of the ways in which materialism and status-seeking can cause people to lose sight of the relationships and markers of identity that are most important. The importance of maintaining good and healthy relationships in the family cannot be emphasised enough.