



BOOK RESUME: HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE

BOOK SYNOPSIS

We should have known the end was near. So begins Imbolo Mbue's powerful second novel, *How Beautiful We Were*. Set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, it tells of a people living in fear amid 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 to the villagers are made—and ignored. The country's government, led by a brazen dictator, exists to serve its own interests. Left with few choices, the people of Kosawa decide to fight back. Their struggle will last for decades and come at a steep price.

Title: How Beautiful We Were

Author: Imbolo Mbue

Imprint: Random House

Publisher: Random House Publishing Group

On sale date: February 1, 2022

ISBN: 9780593132449

Format: Paperback

Told from the perspective of a generation of children and the family of a girl named Thula who grows up to become a revolutionary, *How Beautiful We Were* is a masterful exploration of what happens when the reckless drive for profit, coupled with the ghost of colonialism, comes up against one community's determination to hold on to its ancestral land and a young woman's willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of her people's freedom.

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

"Sweeping and quietly devastating . . . *How Beautiful We Were* charts the ways repression, be it at the hands of a government or a corporation or a society, can turn the most basic human needs into radical and radicalizing acts. . . . Profoundly affecting." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"It's a heartbreaking and relevant story that seeps into your bones, quickly engulfs you and doesn't let go." —*The Seattle Times*

"Mbue reaches for the moon and, by the novel's end, has it firmly held in her hand." —NPR

"Tragic, wrenching . . . The people of Kosawa sear themselves into your consciousness." —*The Boston Globe*

"Imbolo Mbue is a storyteller of astonishing gifts. *How Beautiful We Were* reminds me of how interconnected we remain, no matter who or where we are." —Tracy K. Smith, author of *Life on Mars*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Updated 07-19-2024

Penguin Random House

Contact BannedBooks@penguinrandomhouse.com

*Publisher suggested age range covers the wide range of readers publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate range for their diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book's intended use.

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

- Named One of the Best Books of the Year by: *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, *Esquire*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *BookPage*, and more

RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

- [“Anatomy of a book banning,” *The Washington Post*](#) (2022)
 - “In the spring of 2021, English teachers at Rapid City’s three public high schools had been asked to put together a reading list for their senior English students. . . . After the English teachers submitted their list, a separate committee reviewed and approved the curriculum of which the books would be a part. . . . They included 180 copies of ‘How Beautiful We Were,’ a novel by Imbolo Mbue . . . Valerie Seales, the district’s director of teaching, learning and innovation, sent an email to [superintendent] Simon with a photo of a passage from ‘How Beautiful We Were,’ indicating that she had gotten a complaint from a teacher about it. . . . ‘I ordered that these books be returned to the warehouse,’ wrote Seales[.]”
- [“Questions remain about controversial books meant for Rapid City classrooms,” *SDPB Radio*](#) (2022)
 - “Sherri Theroux, president of the South Dakota Library Association, said the book challenge is a First Amendment issue. ‘What we always want to say is to give people the freedom of choice,’ Theroux said. ‘You can choose to read the book or not read it, but to take it away so that it’s not available to anyone is never the correct solution.’”

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