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## **Book Discussion Guide**

### ***How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue**

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#### **Introduction**

The Summer Fiction Book Club was an invitation for participants to become immersed in the creative world of fiction books while daring to explore challenging topics related to climate change and environmental injustice. Each month, participants read a selected book on their own time, and then we gathered virtually to discuss as a group. In addition to small group discussion, a guest conversation partner joined to offer their thoughts on the book and share about its impact in their life.

Simply put, fiction has the potential to reveal present realities and imagine possible futures. Through truth-telling, a good story confronts the current systems of power, the unequal material conditions, or the overwhelming circumstances that prevent all life from flourishing. It gives voice to whomever or whatever has been silenced, forgotten, or ignored — the lives of marginalized humans and exploited nonhumans, the values or perspectives that advocate for collective good, or the complex emotions that humans may experience during planetary polycrisis. Fiction can also be a window through which we envision compelling and creative possibilities, whether social, ecological, political, or economic. Imagining what worlds are possible creates the opportunity for us to build towards a better and more just future.

Reading fiction together is a dynamic way for humans to make sense of the world(s) in which we live. By coming together to discuss these books, we also collectively share the weightiness of the subjects. Readers may find a book club to be a space where they can encounter fictional worlds, exercise their imaginative capacities, and even explore and experience their own emotions through the narrative lens of fiction.

The following discussion questions can be used by any group wishing to engage around the novel *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. A video clip from the discussion of the novel during our Summer Fiction Book Club in July 2023 is offered to provide additional perspective and basis for discussion.

### **Intro to *How Beautiful We Were***

*How Beautiful We Were* is a fierce-hearted and heart-rending story written by Cameroonian-American novelist Imbolo Mbue. This story is told through various perspectives of the inhabitants of Kosawa, a fictional African village. When an American oil company gains approval from their dictatorial government to begin drilling wells near the village, the Kosawans must decide how to fight for their traditions, autonomy, and lives. Mbue herself witnessed and experienced many of the realities she writes about when her childhood Cameroonian town was exploited by oil enterprises. In this book, she skillfully confronts the ongoing legacies of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and class warfare, along with difficult questions about hope amid devastating realities.

**Guest conversationalist from our July 2023 Summer Fiction Book Club:** Maya Williams

### **Video clip**

[Link to Session Recording](#)

Discussion: Minute markers 9.20 – 24.42 (15:22 minutes long)

### **Discussion questions**

1. What is one theme, scene, or quote that stood out to you, and why?
2. In terms of hope and meaning-making, what might this book teach us about the role of religious/spiritual/traditional communities who face enormous environmental and social injustices?
3. What could you learn from this book regarding the global influence of extractive enterprises (e.g., fossil fuels, minerals), American corporations, and even the collateral damage of our own capital-driven lifestyles?
4. Mbue invites her readers into a world where Spirit is active and present. Yet she complicates how each character interprets what Spirit is doing or requires of them. Does this relate to your own understanding or experience of Spirit (or God, Source, etc) in the midst of troubling times?
5. Consider the different styles of advocacy and activism that occur in the book. How do you make sense of such risk-taking (of self and others), strategies for change, and even violence (if or when)? How does this relate to our own time, when governmental inaction, corporate greed, and consumer lifestyles obstruct the changes necessary to confront the climate emergency and environmental injustices?
6. Mbue writes honestly about the complexities and contradictions of humans. Her characters are not one-dimensional but, as the saying goes, each person contains multitudes. Which character perspective do you relate to or intrigued you? Why?