Introduction of the Keynote Speaker: Imbolo Mbue

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III. Introduction of Keynote Speaker Imbolo Mbue

Amy Anderson, Associate Provost for Global and Intercultural Affairs

It is my honor to introduce our speaker tonight. My name is Amy Anderson and I serve as the Associate Provost for Global and Intercultural Affairs and Executive Director of the Center for International Programs. Before I introduce tonight’s speaker, a few announcements: I’d like to kindly remind you to silence your electronic devices; after the presentation, there will be time for Q and A and then an opportunity for a book signing outside the ballroom.

Now on to the most important item ...

Imbolo Mbue is the author of Behold The Dreamers, a 2017 Oprah’s Book Club pick and winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award. After reading Imbolo Mbue’s debut novel, National Book Award winner Jacqueline Woodson remarked, “Who is this Imbolo Mbue and where has she been hiding?” This is the question many were asking themselves when Mbue’s manuscript lit up the literary community in 2014. In addition to these accomplishments, Mbue holds a B.S. from Rutgers University and an M.A. from Columbia University, and lives in New York City.

Behold the Dreamers tells the story of Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant living in Harlem who lands a job as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, a senior executive at Lehman Brothers, in the fall of 2007. Jende hopes the new job will enable him, his adored wife, Neni, and his young son, Liomi, to live a better life in the U.S. When Neni is hired by Clark’s wife to help in the household, their economic situation improves. But in the course of their work, Jende and Neni begin to witness infidelities, skirmishes, and family secrets. Desperate to shield the fragile life they’ve built in New York, the Jongas protect their employers, even when the wealthy couple’s secrets begin to drive a wedge between them.
All the while, Neni is studying to be a pharmacist and in the U.S. on a student visa. Jende’s immigration status is less clear, and he finds himself navigating the complicated U.S. immigration system to stay in the country. With the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers, all four lives are dramatically upended, and Jende and Neni are forced to make an impossible choice.

Mbue’s book is informed by her experience of being an immigrant and the experiences of the many immigrants that she knows. Like Jende and Neni, she grew up in Limbe, Cameroon, before immigrating the U.S. The journeys of our students and Ms. Mbue connect in Limbe: each summer a group of UD students travels to Cameroon for a cultural-immersion/study-abroad program. When Ms. Mbue was asked about how she approached writing about the Jongas and Clarks, she remarked that developing empathy for Jende and Neni wasn’t difficult: “They’re from my town. I know the struggles of being a black working-class immigrant.” For the Clarks, on the others hand, “I had a lot of judgment toward the Clarks and Cindys of the world. But to tell this story honestly and completely, I had to learn to see them as humans—imperfect humans, yes, but still human like the rest of us, with virtues and vices and joys and despairs and a long list of dreams. I learned that showing empathy doesn’t really have anything to do with having similar demographics or backgrounds or lifestyles. It’s about a shared humanity.”

Mbue’s work is particularly relevant as we have a national conversation about immigration. Behold the Dreamers explores the complexity and interrelationship of these journeys and their connection to systems that privilege, oppress, or liberate people. Its story, characters, and ideas challenge us to think and reflect deeply and critically about what it means to be human in our global world.

Please join me in a warm welcome for Imbolo Mbue.