11.3 Thank God for Editors: Imbolo Mbue and Sarah Dimick (RB)

Transcript

Rebecca Ballard
Welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*. Novel Dialogue brings together critics, novelists, and other members of the literary sphere to talk about the making of novels and what to make of the novel today. I'm Rebecca Ballard, one of the hosts you'll be hearing from during this 11th season of the podcast, and today we're truly lucky to have Imbolo Mbue in conversation with Sarah Dimmick. Imbolo Mbue is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Behold the Dreamers*, which won the Penn Faulkner Award for Fiction and was an Oprah's Book Club selection. Her second novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, about a fictional African village's fight against an American oil company, was named by the *New York Times*, as one of the 10 best books of 2021. And I know today we're also going to be talking about her at the time of recording a forthcoming, but I think recently released at the time of release, third novel, *Every Story is a Love Story*. A native of Limbe, Cameroon, Mbue lives in New York.

Sarah Dimick is an assistant professor of English at Northwestern University, jointly appointed in English and the Environmental Policy and Culture Program. Her research focuses on literary portrayals of climate change and environmental justice in 20th and 21st century Anglophone literatures. Her first book, *Unseasonable*, was published by Columbia University Press in 2024 and shortlisted for the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present Book Prize. She co-edits the University of Virginia Press's Under the Sign of Nature book series and currently serves as the vice president of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment.

So welcome, Imbolo and Sarah. Thank you so much for being here today.

Imbolo Mbue
Thank you, Rebecca. And you pronounced my name perfectly, so thank you.

RB
Glad to hear.

IM
Yes.

Sarah Dimmick
Thank you so much for having us. I've been excited about this conversation for just months now.

IM
Thank you, Sarah. It's nice to meet you too.

RB
So this season of the podcast is thematically unified by the concept of the literary ecosystem, which is a thing that we're reading as capaciously as possible. I think that we're kind of riffing on the idea of literary institutions. So thinking about all the kind of spaces through which literature is shaped and circulated and received today. Agents, editors, other publishing figures, literary journalists, booksellers, genre systems, awards, book clubs, etc. And that's sort of a theme that's going to be running through all of the episodes this season, which we're calling "the literary ecosystem."

But we are especially excited to have you joining us, Imbolo, for this season, not only because of your insight into those literary ecosystems as an author—especially given the Oprah's book club of it all—but also because of the way that your second novel in particular really emphasizes ecosystems and ecology *not* as a metaphor. And so that's kind of our thematic overview. But with all of that in mind, we're going to be starting each episode of this season off with a very open-ended question: What does a literary ecosystem mean to you?

IM
Oh, wow. What does a literary ecosystem mean? Well, I guess I am in one, you know. I just haven't thought about what that means. But it's, I mean, to me, it's the whole universe, I suppose, because I don't know, like literature is, you know, because my whole life is literature, right? I read a lot. I talk about it. I write. I, you know, right now I'm reading five books at once. One of those people is always like: I can't wait to read everything! Like the ecosystem is basically, you know, it's like that.

And I think it's David Foster Wallace thing about what is water, right? I feel like that's what I feel like. Like I am in it, and I live in it. And it is just from the period of the time I learned how to read, I have lived in it. So I can't even describe it because it's just such a part of me and I am a part of it.

SD
Imbolo, I was reading in another interview that you gave that you were learning to write by reading a lot of the books that were Oprah's book club picks.

IM
That's right.

SD
And was that a particularly important set of books or a collection that really shaped your work in some way?

IM

I think so. I mean, because, you know, growing up in Cameroon, I read mostly African writers. And even when I came to America, I went to college, I went to Rutgers. And I remember like at our library in Rutgers, the main library, there was one section that had all the African writers and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'os, you know, and, you know, Achebes. And I just went there and just read all of those books over and over. I didn't even consider reading American writers until I walked into a public library and I saw that that library, this was in Forest Church, Virginia. They had all of the Oprah book picks on one shelf. And that was probably the first time I thought: oh, I could read American writers too. Before that, it was, you know, all the British writers and African writers. I just never considered that other parts of the world had great literature.

So, in a sense, even though I had, you know, never been introduced to American writers, once I read Toni Morrison and once I read Franzen and once I read Junot Diaz, I was just like, oh my God. So, those people and those writers shaped my writing because when I started writing, that is what I read mostly. You know, like Junot Diaz and just the way he so freely, like writes, you know, in the voice that he writes in. I was like, oh my gosh, I could write and a lot of pidgin English and, and it's okay. So, but I don't know. I don't know if I would have been a writer if I didn't read those writers, you know, because I never read the African writers and I thought, oh, I want to do this. But something about this American novelist sort of like gave me this permission that I'd never considered before.

SD
I love that answer because I think my favorite element of a literary ecosystem or ecology is the library. The public library is just, it's, it's where I learned to read, and I remember being a kid and going into the library and thinking, I'm going to start with the A's and I'm just—the shelves! So I think so many of us have that, that library is part of our system.

RB
I'm curious about if your relationship to reading or to the sense of these literary ecosystems has changed as your career has gone on. Like as you, you know, you've talked a lot, I think in this conversation about the kind of beginning of your own writing, but I'm wondering, I mean, I'd be thrilled for you to tell me, no, that you're still just this like voracious, you know—I'm wondering what that sense of how your movement through those spaces or how your reading behaviors have changed as your career has gone on.

IM
Right. Well, I guess the one thing that I changed is that I don't get to only read what I want so much because I get asked to blurb books all the time. And I'm like, I understand how much supporting other writers is important because I have been supported by other great writers. My first book, you know, Franzen gave me a great blurb. And so I do feel, you know, like, and I love to discover, you know, young writers, also debut writers. I'm like so excited. So I guess it's sort of changed where it's like, oh God, I just want to read what I want to read for a while. But then I have to say, no, but I, right now I'm only

reading what I want to read. So I feel good about that, even though I have two more books to that waiting for my blurb. But that relationship has changed because I do.

And also, you know, before I was just, you know, I was just a reader, you know, and so my relationship to books was different. And I spent years writing before I became published from when I started writing to when I was published, it was 14 years, you know. So it was a very long journey for me learning to write to me actually getting published. And I just, you know—you know, it's different when it's something you love and a hobby. Versus when it starts becoming, money gets attached to it, you know, everybody will tell you that, you know, when money gets attached to it. And that did not happen so much in my first novel because that one, nobody knew me. But my second and my third novel is like, okay, you know, you have to, you know, you have to start thinking, oh, this is what people expect, but I don't want to do that. That is not who I am. Like, I do not have the capacity to do that. So it's always that, you know, where do I meet the writer? How do I stay true to myself?

And to be in this ecosystem and to be a, you know, to be a positive member and to deliver what can serve all of us, not just me. Because if it was just me, I would probably not write *How Beautiful We Were* or my third novel. I probably would have written something—I mean, I'm sorry, *Every Story is a Love Story*, I had a whole other story, which is another topic for later maybe. But I am, you know, like, it's this balance of the relationship between me and the readers, you know, how do I meet them? How do I let them also come and meet me?

SD
Well, maybe this is a good time to start talking about *Every Story is a Love Story*.

IM
Yeah.

SD
I am so thrilled that this book is out in the world. And I have big questions for you today, Imbolo, about forgiveness. I really want to talk with you about forgiveness. And just for readers who maybe have recently obtained this book but haven't paged through it yet, I will set the scene and just say that *Every Story is a Love Story* that really tracks the aftermath of a traffic accident. Victoria Snow, who is an American pilot in her early 30s, is on her way to the gym in the morning. She's driving in her car when she accidentally hits Yoma, who is a Cameroonian American graduate student who's pregnant with twins and had gone out for a jog. And Yoma and her unborn twins are killed in this accident. And I think one of the interesting things about your novel is that this accident occurs before the story begins. So it's really a plot that focuses on Yoma's husband, Wolo. And the question of how he is to relate to Victoria Snow, who is the driver who killed his wife and his future children. There's this real curveball where Wolo, I think, really does realize that he needs to find a way not to drown in hatred towards another person. And he really does yearn for that ability to forgive and to be forgiven that this workshop promises.

So I guess for me as a reader, I felt like this scene made me realize that my understanding of forgiveness is so threadbare or shallow in relation to my understanding of anger or violence. I think I have better language to speak about anger or violence.

IM
Right, right, right.

SD
I think we live in such polarized, painful times.

IM
Right, right.

SD
It's almost untrendy to talk about or to write about forgiveness.

IM
It is not a sexy topic, no.

SD
No! So what made you want to take up forgiveness?

IM
This is a very new, you know, way of writing for me because you guys know my first two novels, *Behold the Dreamers*, and *How Beautiful We Were*, they're more focused about like, you know, characters in a socio-economic or socio-political environment that they're wrestling against and, you know, how do they manage it? How do they survive it? Whether it's immigration, whether it's pollution.

And this one is like nothing—this is all about the human heart. And so I had to, it was very difficult for me because I came there with a very simplistic idea of forgiveness, you know. I thought, okay, somebody says forgive me, you do or you don't, right? And that is where I started. And then I realized, oh my God, this thing is so complicated. Like there is a reason why people do not forgive, you know, easily. This is the reason why, I mean, during the writing, over the past years, I've read four different memoirs that, you know, the writer says explicitly, I will not forgive this. I will never forgive this. And one of them was, I mean, for very clear reasons, you know, and so understandable, Salman Rushdie said that in his memoir, knife about the guy who, you know, would try to kill him. Like, you will not have my forgiveness. Michelle Obama said it in a memoir about, about Donald Trump, you know, because about Trump saying Obama wasn't born in America. You would, you will not get my forgiveness. And he only says that in a wonderful, um, um, you know, Pulitzer Prize memoir, um, things in nature merely grow about the people who had made, said terrible things after both of us children died by suicide, you know?

And she said, you have neither my forgiveness nor my understanding. And then the daughter of Gisele Pelicot also said it about her father. Like, I will not forgive him.

So I am always like fascinated when I hear that, like, wow, like, you know what? You, you will not get me to understand why you did what you did to me. And so this novel came from me trying to like really get to the depth of that because we live in a society right now where mercy is not a thing, right? We don't know whether people forgive each other ultimately in the novel, right? This is a novel where, you know, it's not very clear if anybody gets the forgiveness that they seek. But it's more about the journey, the asking themselves a question and, and what it's like to live with that guilt. That is, that was my original inspiration because it was inspired by, um, something that happened when I was a teenager.

When I was growing up in my hometown of Limbe, Cameroon, I was involved in a fight where a young man was injured and, and I, I was not directly responsible for the injury, but in any event I was involved and, and I didn't think about it. And this is when I was a teenager, I'm in my forties now. So this is, you know, decades ago, but for some reason I started thinking about that during the pandemic and I was very overwhelmed with guilt and, and, and that guilt is the inspiration for Victoria's letter because I thought, you know, if I had merely in, you know, been involved in injuring somebody 20, 30 years ago, what is it like when you kill somebody? So the idea was to write about Victoria, about Victoria's—what it's like to live with this guilt. That was, that was my original inspiration. And then, you know, thankfully my agents got in, my editors got in and everybody said, Oh no, no, no, wrong direction. Talking about the ecosystem! [laughter] And that is why I was more concerned about, about navigating life with a sense of shame. It's shame that will not leave you because what you've done is final.

SD
I love how the novel opens with a letter from Victoria Snow to Wolo, because it made me think about the ways that forgiveness and, it almost always has to be routed through apology in a way. And like the words are so important. I think there is something about writing and words that are the material that enables forgiveness.

IM
Right, right, right, right. No, it's true because I guess it's better to be putting it in writing, right? Has a different power than just showing up and say, Oh, I'm sorry, forgive me. And that was, you know, the letter was something that, you know, I struggled with because I had, you know, some feedback from my team about why would you want to put the person who killed at the very front of the novel? You know, this is not about her. She's the one who killed, why would she have all this attention? Why would she, this be her story? But the truth is that it was her story because it was my story about getting some kind of self-forgiveness for this young man's injury in my town.

SD
Yeah. No, that makes, that makes complete sense to me. I thought it was—it's an unconventional way to open. And I think that drew me in more as a reader.

RB
And that makes me think too about, I mean, you're sort of saying that there are moments, right, when you're writing, where you—if this began as a novel about guilt and then the team sort of moved, you moved with the team and the team moved with you to find where it ended. But I love that there was still, you know, there was something, as you say, you know, you meet the readers where they are, but they also have to meet you where you are. And it seems like where you were, it was like, no, we start with this letter. We start with this.

IM
That's right. That's right. That's exactly. I mean, I insisted. And thankfully my editor definitely was the one person who agreed with me. It was like, you know, we need to start with this letter. But I felt like, you know, because in this day and age, you know, again, talking about ecosystem, you know, as writers, we've been pushed to write what readers like, and it appears readers like when, you know, everything happens really fast in the beginning and they don't know, and there's tension in the beginning. And this novel starts—it's like, okay, we know the guy, the woman killed the other woman. There's no tension. Yeah. It's just a letter saying, she's sorry. And I was like, no, we need to take—this is going to be a long game. We need to take the slow approach of really hearing how it feels to have killed somebody, you know, like really hearing that the depth of that shame, that pain, that guilt, my gosh, I killed somebody, it was an accident, but I killed somebody. And I think that for me, I needed to write that.

SD
Yeah. It feels like a story to me about the long aftermath for this event. And I think those stories, unless you're a very skilled writer, which luckily you are Imbolo, they're harder to grip a reader because the huge cataclysmic event has already happened.

IM
That's right.

SD
And then you're stuck with this long decades, years, like potentially lifetimes, generations, those questions about what happens afterwards.

IM
That's right.

SD
I wonder too, how forgiveness operates at different scales. I was trying to think about what it means to forgive someone person-to-person versus trying to think if forgiveness is even a framework that makes sense when we're thinking about corporations or banks or these larger systems that we all live within. Because I cannot imagine, I think as a reader, thinking about forgiveness in terms of Pexton, right? But I found myself hoping for so many of the characters in *Every Story Is a Love Story* that they would find

forgiveness. And it felt like this contradiction within—what do you think about the scale of forgiveness? Is that something you struggle with as a writer?

IM
Yes, yes, yes, I do. I mean, literature to me, it's not about answers. It's about questions, right? You know, like I tell people do not come to my books for answers because you will get no answers, you know, like go to your priest, go to your rabbi, go to your, you know, guru. I have so many questions about forgiveness myself and, I don't know.

There was an, there was an op-ed in the *New York Times* years ago by a woman, she was African-American, and I think something had happened. There was some violence against an African-American or something. And, I think there was a call for forgiveness and the woman said, don't you dare ask me for forgiveness. You know, I am tired of our people being asked to forgive. You know, all these things are being done and over and over, we should be the forgiving one. But what about you guys? And I thought, wow, you know, should I ask, I don't know, a Holocaust survivor to forgive Hitler? I don't know, should I ask, there's so much going on that, you know, if you're in a descendant of the Native Americans, should you ask, oh, forgive what they did to you and how they took away your land? I don't know. I just don't know. I think it's a very, very, very difficult conversation to have.

And all I can say is that after writing this novel, I am in awe of people who can forgive. Like, I am in awe. We can forgive heavy stuff, deep stuff. I am in awe. And I have tremendous compassion for people who choose not to forgive or are unable to forgive. I have compassion because I do not appreciate how hard it is until I wrote a novel where I saw the depths of pain that people live with, because again, when you're dealing with, you know, I'm writing about, financial crisis, immigration, environment. It's like, easy to paint, you know, you know, the corporation, you know, black, easy to paint, you know, American immigration system, black, that when you're dealing with humans one-on-one, it is different, you know, because it's not so easy to shift the blame. And you don't—you get to write about what goes on behind the scenes and in their mind. And so that all left me really without any answers.

SD
It leaves us with questions, which is a more interesting place to be really. And I, yeah, I thought a lot about the limits of forgiveness and when it's really important to respect a limit beyond which you can't forgive or shouldn't be asked to forgive. And also those incredible moments where people somehow find a way to surpass that limit in interesting ways. So both, both are fascinating. It made me think, Imbolo, about conversations within environmental literary scholarship. There's such an obsession in my field right now with questions about the future, like the idea of futurity. And I think this is for really obvious reasons. We have threatened futures that we have right now. And I usually think about the environmental future in terms of environmental injustice or environmental justice, but your work makes me wonder about forgiveness and the future. And if there are connections between forgiveness and our sense of what the

future holds, like is, does forgiveness enable different futures in any ways? Or is it more a stance towards the past?

IM
I mean, I'm thinking again, you know, back to my second novel, because that's a novel that I spent a lot of time on. And like I said, that is, that is me, like the most me you ever get in literature. And I think that the thing about that novel that was, you know, hard is that there was really no future, anymore, and without—anybody who hasn't read it, I hope it doesn't say too much—but you know, like the future was already taken away. Like by the time the story starts and this village is polluted, and everybody knows about pollution, it's not that it's really hard to reverse pollution, you know? So that future was really taken away. And so I guess, you know, in some ways, and I think that this is a bigger topic, you know, people are asked to forgive usually because they are in—they have somebody more powerful over them. Like usually the powerful do not say, oh, forgive me. Right? Is it the ones who have so much that they can give and take as a—they are not in that position. It's usually the person who, you know, needs something. So if the villagers need to forgive Pexton, well, then Pexton will reward them for forgiving them. But if, you know, Pexton will not say, oh, forgive me for doing this because what, why do they need the forgiveness of, you know, these poor villagers?

So I just, people said to me, oh, this novel at the end, it gives me hope. And I felt no hope when I finished writing that novel. I felt very hopeless because as much as I like for us to sort of, you know, find a way to move forward. I also spent so much time writing and I know that, you know, humans are so complicated that there's just no, I mean, even in Every Story is a Love Story you see characters trying to forgive, but there's all these roadblocks to forgiving and everybody's future is all, you know, blurry as far as how they're going to move forward after the story ends, because they can't, you know—forgiveness has opened up a whole new set of problems for them.

SD
As you were writing, Imbolo, did you, was there a moment during your writing that felt like a real challenge for you to move past as a writer or something that you really had to figure out in order for the novel to click into place? Or did you start this work just knowing the full shape of it?

IM
Right. No, I did not know. And I think that the thing that I struggled with was also, again, you know, my having an agenda. You know, at some point, which is something that I have never really done. You know, I think that I am really able to put aside my agenda and tell the story, but with this novel, I really wanted to see punishment. I really wanted to see punishment, and my editor would not let me. And I will not say what storyline I want to be punished, but I wanted to see some severe punishment. And that revealed a lot about myself that like how much I was still angry about certain things, not about, not done to me, but systematically. Like I was very angry about certain injustice being done to certain people. And I wanted to use my, this novel to do that. And my editor says, no, you cannot do that. You know, like that is not your job.

SD
Did she say, why not?

IM
Because it was like, because Sarah, you would have noticed if I did that, you would have said—Rebecca would have noticed, the reader would notice. It was because, I was not letting the characters breathe. I was trying to suffocate them with my own agenda. And it was obvious that that was what I was trying to do. Because again, like I said, I had lived in this world and I've seen this injustice and I felt like nobody was writing it and I had to right this wrong and it was not the right way for me to go.

And yes, that saddened me, that upset me because I felt like this is—and because also in the world in which I came from, that did not happen enough. And I think that that needs to happen. And so this was very much about punishment. You know, this is a novel that has to do with punishment. We should be punished. We should, we should receive mercy. And, I thought somebody should be punished in a certain way. But again, that was not something that was going to serve the novel. So thank God for editors who do not let you do that.

RB
Whenever an author says, you know, my editor, I wanted to do this and my editor told me I couldn't, my immediate instinct, right, my immediate instinct is that there's going to be a kind of thing that you have to forgive in that, right? Where you're like, this is about the market and this is about—but it seems like you actually felt that this intervention was really in the service of the characters. And I'm wondering, I mean, this is a bit off the question of forgiveness, unless it's about things you've had to forgive. I'm not sure. But I am curious about like how that editorial relationship has worked in different moments of your writing.

IM
Right. Yeah. So my editor is a wonderful gentleman named Andy Ward. He's my editor, but he's also the publisher of Random House. So I get to have the big boss as my editor and he also edits, you know, Hisham Matar, he edits, you know, George Saunders. So anyway, this is all to say that this guy is like the crème de la crème of editors. Now that said, it doesn't mean that I agree to everything he says, right? Because, and you guys probably talk to writers, you know that they say thanks sometimes, right? I said this about my editor: so he is 20 steps ahead of me, he sees where I'm trying to go and then he's basically like, this is where you're trying to go and I'm going to let you go there and then I'm going to help you get there because I know what you're trying to do. So it's like, I get this idea and it was the early drafts, he was like, this is where you're trying to go. Like, you just, you've kind of lost your way, because I lost my way a lot, and there was an intervention, and that's a whole other story. Not quite an intervention, but we had to have a meeting, like Imbolo, what are you doing? But that was—that I do respect him tremendously and he gets me and I, but he also is, he is a lovely man. He's a white man, you know, and I'm a black woman. I'm an immigrant black woman. And so I think

having an editor like him is that he's out looking out for the reader in a way that I wouldn't, because I am writing in my world, you know, all of three of my novels have to do with African characters and African point of views and all of that. And he, so he's sort of there to, you know, like, okay, Imbolo, you can't go too crazy over here.

And that is what I was going to do with this particular storyline and this punishment, because it had to do with my culture, with the way things happen in my culture that I felt like needed to be corrected. And I felt like I just had so much anger about something that I needed, like to see serious punishment. And, and he was like, no, this is, this level of punishment is, is almost, it's almost vulgar, you know. And he didn't use that word, but, it's this, it is not in line with what you're, what these characters are about or what you're trying to do here. And I pushed back for a very long time. I think it was three or four drafts. He kept on saying, you know, is this what you're trying to do here? And I had to realize that, you know, this is not about me. This is not, this is not about what I think, if I was going to write about what I think, I'll write a very different novel. Like this is a story about these characters who are not me.

And I had to also examine my relationship with punishment, because I grew up in a very punishment, you know, oriented society. And, and this is actually not only that, I feel like America is very punishmentalist right now, I mean, and so that punishmentalism has somewhat gotten to me, and I was like, we need to see punishment. And that is why this novel ends up exploring punishment. Like, who should be punished for what? You know, I mean, like what is mercy? And I spent a lot of time thinking about mercy, you know, which is something that I not really think about, but I thought about, who is deserving of mercy? And, sort of let these characters, you know, show me. And, and in the end, again, no answers, right. Because we see the characters, you know, Wolo's mother, you know, she has a very different relationship from punishment than Wolo does, you know, or we'll see Wolo has a different relationship from punishment than, than an American would have, even though he's lived in America for so many years.

So I had to just basically step back and explore, you know, what punishment is and what it serves and, and why, you know, these characters choose it or believe that this is the best way to go.

RB
I'm thinking about this too. I mean, this is something that, rereading *Behold the Dreamers* in advance of this conversation also, especially rereading it after reading *Every Story is a Love Story*, that part of what I saw in it was also a capturing of a moment of a kind of desire for revenge, revenge against the banks, right? And against the investment banks, and what you're—it's such a non-dogmatic book in the way that it traces both that desire and the kind of inevitable harm that comes from that desire way outside of the kind of perpetrators of the harm.

IM
Right, right, right. And it's funny because a lot of, you know, criticism I got for *Behold the Dreamers* was about that, like, excuse you, do you know that what Lehman Brothers did

and what they didn't do to cause all of that? And nobody, everybody gets caught, you know, gets away with it. And I said, what do you want me to do? I am not God, you know, I am not God. I mean, I'm telling a story about what it was like for them, but yes, you know, do I wish, you know, some kind of accountability would have happened? Yes. But in the real world, it did not happen. And so this is what it was like for these people who went through it. But, I guess, you know, all three of my novels have to do with that, that there's this great injustice and, and the characters just have to find a way to live with it. And this new novel, *Every Story is a Love Story*, it's probably the first story that somebody says, I am going to do something to get the punishment that this person deserves. And, I mean, to a great extent, it doesn't exactly succeed, but at least somebody tries to get somebody to be punished.

And, where we can understand why Wolo has that, because again, you know, like Keka's, Wolo's mother's, attitude is basically like, we live in a racist society. I'm a black woman and this happens to me and nobody does anything about it. And I am not going to let it go, you know, which, my first two novels, the characters couldn't do that. You know, they couldn't do much of that. They could, but there was not only so much they could do, but I felt like, you know, Keka and Wolo, they felt like we need going to fight to get some kind of punishment.

SD
Imbolo, I have one final question for you, the title of this book, *Every Story is a Love Story*, I think if I'm right, it's lyrics from a song from *Aida*.

IM
That is correct. You're good.

SD
Okay! I'm curious about if that opera inspired part of this work at all, or relationship to music. I know you love music.

IM
Yes, that musical, well, actually, so it is, so the musical, *Aida*, the one on Broadway, that was the first Broadway musical I ever saw. And it was the inspiration for how beautiful we were, you know, because I mean, I was blown away by that. Imagine, I don't know, if you remember your first time going to Broadway, but I was 19, I'd never been to Broadway, and I said, oh my God, what is this? And even to now, I just sit there, and I just go to YouTube, and I just listen to these songs over and over again. But it was significantly shaped, you know, *How Beautiful We Were*, I think that what it shares with my third novel is more the love story part. Because after writing *How Beautiful We Were*, I wanted to stay away from having any things with that level of violence, I thought, I just want to write a love story, you know. Can I just write a love story? John meets Mary, they go out to dinner, they have, nice dinner, they get married, they end, you know. Of course, I just want to write a love story. And my first attempt at the love story is completely failed, but I was determined to write a love story. But of course, me

being me, I couldn't just write a love story that did not involve all of this, which is, and then come back with my own sense of guilt about what happened.

I ended up writing the story, but it was very much about, the title has, just based homage to the fact that ultimately we're all searching for love, right? You know, to love and be loved, and maybe not, even the stories that are not about love, like even, you know, something like *How Beautiful We Were*, it ultimately is about love, right? It's the love for their land, the love for their ancestors, you know, the love for their children, you know, my first story is about love. So I don't think that I wanted to, you know, be, oh, I want to write a love story just for the sake of a love story. But I realized that ultimately, these characters, we're all searching for something, and that was love.

So that was, you know, where, and I struggle with the title, I always struggle with titles. But then one day I was, you know, listening to the songs, and I was like, this is a perfect title! And yes, we went with it.

SD
Oh, that's great. Yeah. If every story is a love story, then I have to think every love story is also a story about colonialism and the land. And stories just are difficult to separate out.

RB
That is a less effective title, though. [laughter]

IM
So, I had really worse title, you know, for *How Beautiful We Were*, the title that I thought was going to be perfect, I said, this is going to be a great title. It was *Joy of the Oppressed*. And my editor was like, what in the world is *Joy of the Oppressed*? I was like, that's a great title. He's like, no, we're not going to call it *Joy of the Oppressed*. So, so that was probably my hall of fame worst title ever.

RB
I mean, if that's the worst you've got, I'm, you know, I won't tell you any of the things—

SD
Thank goodness for editors.

RB
Thank goodness for editors.

SD
Okay. So, Imbola, this is me being a critic. So, you are welcome to push back on this. But I, when I think about your novels together, the first novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, so much of that novel is set in the car. And there's this car moving through New York City.

IM

That's right.

SD
And then, as we reach, *Every Story is a Love Story*. We have the car that kills Yoma.

IM
That's right.

SD
And also then with *How Beautiful We Were*, so much of that story is driven by the quest for oil. To power these cars. So, when I think of them as a collection of novels, I had to say what ties them together before I had heard your brilliant explanation of aftermaths and questions about complicated people and the limits of forgiveness, I think I would have gone for something much more basic and said they are about cars and oil and the complications that come through that in our lives.

IM
Interesting.

SD
So I'm just curious to what degree that feels like a thread to you or that ability to move through the world? That is such a matter of freedom and mobility, but also just causes such harm in the process. Is that something you're interested about or does that feel like it's just subconsciously comes up?

IM
Yeah. Yeah. Because I never thought about that, but that is, that makes sense, right? It makes total sense because I don't know, particularly like, you know, growing up in the, in a place where, at least I grew up in the eighties in Cameroon, where, you know, a car was, still a huge, big novelty, right? People did not have, most people did not have cars. Even still now, it's still not, it's still a big deal to have a car. And I grew up and, you know, then the people who had cars, who were wealthy, they had chauffeurs, and that set us apart from them, you know, not only did they have cars, it had chauffeurs. And I came to America and I had a really ugly car, you know, I called my car Susie, I had a car—why are you naming your, you have an ugly car, name is Susie, you know, that's something, but yes, I do think that there is a matter of infrastructure going on here because I see, I see what you mean, that, you know, there is that—how it features in all three novels, right? And how, in another sense, also maybe airplanes, you know, because I'm just, you were saying that I was just picturing myself flying to America, and my third novel has a lot to do with the fact that I flew around the world, you know, for my work as a writer, speaking around, but also my own travels. And I've flown around and, you know, the planes are also connected to, to environmental degradation. So I think that is, is more than that. It's just, you know, it's the cars and the planes and every, every way in which like, you know, we move forward and, they also sort of also take us backwards.

And is that, that is what you're saying that has me thinking now. And I'm like, Oh, maybe I should write an essay about this. Cause now you're giving me an idea.

SD
Please write that essay.

RB
We will teach that essay! So often.

IM
Yes. I do think that the issue of infrastructure, now that you've mentioned it has gotten me thinking about how, I had all of these questions in my subconscious, you know, and all of these, doubts and worries about the world in which I live in, and all of these different systems and means of movement or staying in place or homes or everything that you don't think about, cause as a writer, you know—what book was I reading recently? What was it? I think, oh God, I was reading a book recently. Is it Arundhati Roy's, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*? I don't know what it is. Anyways, one of the novels I'm reading is a memoir. And she said that: who knows where fiction comes from, right? Like, who knows, and I, and I thought that was like, oh my God, that's right. I don't even know where all of this comes from sometimes. I mean, I have a vague idea of what inspires me, but when I sit down to write, I don't even know where it comes from.

And then only now when I sit with you guys, I start realizing, start trying to put the pieces together to get a sense of like, oh, this is where all of this came from. And, it makes sense now to me, like, what I did and, and, how these different infrastructures followed me because of the way I see the world and the way I like analyze, you know, the powers that they've had over me and over other people around me.

SD
Your writing helps me understand the world. So thank you for that.

IM
Thank you.

RB
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