

EVENT TITLE: Storytelling for Change: Kiese Laymon & Imbolo Mbue on Environmental Racism and Literature

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* is a masterful exploration of what happens when the reckless drive for profit comes up against one community's determination to hold on to its ancestral land. MacArthur recipient and author of *Heavy: An American Memoir*, Kiese Laymon has been heralded as a fearless and provocative voice chronicling the Black experience and advocating for greater recognition of Black creativity. Mbue's newest takes on environmental devastation, corporate colonialism, and activism through literary lens with a story set in an African Village being polluted by an oil company. Growing up in Cameroon, Mbue watched how international oil interests impacted African countries and communities. Laymon's intergenerational ties to Mississippi have caused him to consider climate justice and how environmental degradation, corporate interests and the legacy of slavery have all affected communities of color here in the US. For years, Jackson, Mississippi residents of the majority-Black city have endured service disruptions and recurring boil-water advisories due to failures to upgrade Jackson's aging infrastructure. These are realities that disproportionately impact communities of color. How can literature bring more awareness to the larger reading public about environmental justice? Together, authors Laymon and Mbue discuss how literature can be used to provoke community discussion about these pressing issues.

EVENT CATEGORY: Environmental Racism and Literature

EVENT ORGANIZERS: Presented by Lyceum Agency and Literary Arts

EVENT PARTICIPANTS/BIOS

Kiese Laymon is a Black southern writer from Jackson, Mississippi. In his sharply observant, often hilarious work, Laymon does battle with the personal and the political: race and family, body and shame, poverty and place. A 2022 MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellow, his savage humor and clear-eyed perceptiveness have earned him comparisons to Mark Twain and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The bestselling *Heavy: An American Memoir* won the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction and the Christopher Isherwood Prize for Autobiographical Prose, and the audiobook, read by the author, was named the Audible Audiobook of the Year. *Heavy* was named a best book of 2018 by *The New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, NPR, *The Washington Post*, *Entertainment Weekly*, among other publications and one of the 50 Best Memoirs of the Past 50 Years by *The New York Times*. Laymon is also the author of *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, a collection of lacerating essays on race, violence, celebrity, family, and creativity; and the genre-defying novel *Long Division*, which combines elements of science fiction, satire, and social commentary. Laymon, "one of the most dazzling, inventive, affecting essayists working today (*Nylon*), has written for *Gawker*, *Esquire*, *ESPN The Magazine*, *NPR*, *Colorlines*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *Ebony*, *Guernica*, and *The Oxford American*, among others. A contributing editor for *Vanity Fair*, he has taught at the University of Mississippi, Vassar College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is at work on several new projects including the long poem, *Good God*; the horror novel, *And So On*; the children's book,

City Summer, Country Summer; and the personal narrative about family and Mississippi, *I Don't Know What You Mean*.

A “bright and captivating storyteller” (*The Washington Post*), **Imbolo Mbue** is the author of two novels. Her stunning debut, the *New York Times* bestseller *Behold the Dreamers*, was an Oprah Book Club selection and winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In this “quintessentially American” work (NPR), Mbue explores marriage, immigration, class, race, and the trapdoors in the American Dream through the unforgettable story of a young Cameroonian couple making a new life in New York just as the Great Recession upends the economy. Praised by *The New York Times* as “savage and compassionate in all the right places,” *Behold the Dreamers* has been translated into eleven languages, adapted into an opera and a stage play, and optioned for a miniseries. It was named a Best Book of the Year by The New York Times Book Review, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Guardian, and the Chicago Public Library among others. A *New York Times* Top 10 Book of 2021, *How Beautiful We Were*, is a sweeping story about the collision of a small African village and an American oil company, offering “a brilliant exploration of modern colonialism and capitalism—and the fight for justice” (*People*). The book was a finalist for the 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and *USA Today* raved “This one’s going to grab you.” A native of Limbe, Cameroon, and a graduate of Rutgers and Columbia Universities, Mbue lives in New York City.

FORMAT (75 MINUTES)

- 5 min: Introductory remarks
- 5 min: Laymon reads
- 5 min: Mbue reads
- 45 min: Laymon and Mbue in conversation (not moderated)
- 15 min: Audience Q&A

OUTLINE / SCRIPT

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Mbue: *[Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to “Storytelling for Change: Environmental Racism and Literature.” I’m Imbolo Mbue, author of... Today, Kiese and I will talk about...]*

Laymon: *[Thank you, Imbolo. I’m Kiese Laymon, a writer and educator... We’ll also spend time discussing... Before we get started, a couple of administrative notes:*

- *Thank you to the sponsors of this afternoon’s program, Literary Arts and The Lyceum Agency.*
- *After our conversation, we will take audience questions with the remaining time.*
- *We will be signing books immediately after this conversation in XXX*

Mbue: *[To get us started, Kise and I will read short passages from our books. Kiese do you want to kick off the reading?]*

EXCERPT READINGS

Laymon: *[Kiese reads for 5 min]*

Mbue: *[Imbolo reads for 5 min]*

Mbue to Laymon QUESTIONS:

1. You've written about the water the color of vegetable oil in Mississippi but you also make sure to ritualize the play around this infrastructural failure. Why is important for you to show Mississippi kids playing in lead water or enjoying getting sprayed by insecticide?
2. How did your grandmother's experience as a laborer in a chicken plant impact your relationship to literary labor, and the violence of everyday work for black southerners?
3. In a lot of your work, we see grandchildren and grandmothers searching for selves in gardens. What's your favorite garden experience? Did you ever get lost in the garden as some of your characters do?
4. In Long Division, the woods expand or shrink, depending on the time period. What were you attempting to do with woods in Long Division? The woods seem to, at once, signify safety and a sinister force. What are you exploring in the eroding safety of woods in Mississippi?

Laymon to QUESTIONS:

1. You grew up in Africa at a time when people were fighting back, and you've said that even as a child you had a deep admiration for dissidents and revolutionaries. Can you talk a bit about how this influenced you writing a book that is very much about environmentalism and globalization?
2. As a person of color who is concerned about environmental degradation, do you think it is important for literature to be used to champion a cause?
3. Why was it necessary for you to show the humanity of the people who work for the corporation, as well as the failings of those who were fighting against the corporation?
4. Moving onto craft, this is a sweeping multi-generational story. Why did you choose the structure you did, where the story is mostly told by a chorus of children? Did you use an outline or did you start with one story that kept on making it bigger?

Q&A SESSION

At the end of conversation, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the microphones.