

A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

# *SHE WOULD BE KING*

A Novel

Wayétu Moore



## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *She Would Be King* is a work of fiction that incorporates historical events. What do the fictional elements add to the portrayal of the founding of Liberia, or of the transatlantic slave trade?
2. The narrating presence of the wind both cautions and comforts the characters in the novel. How does this presence change the way the entire novel is read? On pages 60–61 we're given a clue about where the voice in the wind comes from. Does this new information change the role of the wind as a narrator, and, if so, how?
3. There are several stories and storytellers embedded in this novel. With its many narrative threads and points of view, what does *She Would Be King* reveal about the power of storytelling?
4. How does the magical realism employed in *She Would Be King* relate to recent pop culture representations of African and African American superheroes, such as Black Panther and Luke Cage? How do these characters' special abilities align with the reality of the communities to which they belong?
5. Gbessa's relationship to her Vai heritage changes when she joins the settlement in Monrovia. What are the tensions between the cultures? Is Gbessa successful in balancing her various allegiances?
6. Much of the conflict in the book springs from encounters between insiders and outsiders: the way of life in the West African villages is threatened by American settlers and French slavers alike, and Gbessa is branded as an outsider from the moment of her birth. What does *She Would Be King* have to say about suspicion or acceptance of outsiders?
7. Gbessa is set apart from June Dey and Norman Aragon in several ways, and some of those have to do with the fact that Gbessa is a woman. What challenges do characters like Gbessa, Darlene, Nanni, and Maisy face

that the men in the book do not? What strengths do these characters have that set them apart?

8. What role does motherhood play in the novel? How do the various characters experience kinship and lineage?

9. In the author's note at the beginning of the book, Wayétu Moore describes a story that inspired the writing of *She Would Be King*. In what ways does this seed of inspiration take root in the narrative?

10. How would you characterize the ending of *She Would Be King*? Somber or hopeful? Resolved or open-ended?

## FOR FURTHER READING

While loosely based on a short chapter in Liberian history, *She Would Be King* is a fictional retelling of the country's founding. If these pages inspired your interest in Liberia, Wayétu Moore recommends the following works:

Clarence E. Zamba Liberty, *Growth of the Liberian State: An Analysis of Its Historiography*

C. Patrick Burrowes, *Black Christian Republicanism: The Writings of Hilary Teage (1805–1853), Founder of Liberia*

D. Elwood Dunn, editor, *Liberian Studies Journal* (Volume XIV, Number 2)

Stephanie C. Horton, editor, *Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writings* (2004–2011)

C. Patrick Burrowes, *Between the Kola Forest and the Salty Sea: A History of the Liberian People Before 1800*

William Henry Heard, *The Bright Side of African Life*

Robtel Neajai Pailey (scholarly works)

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley (poetry)

Vamba Sherif (novels)