A READING GUIDE TO
MIGHTY BE OUR POWERS

We are providing the following supplementary materials—an update on the author’s life, discussion questions, suggestions for further reading and exploration, and the transcript of a recent interview with her—in the hopes they will enhance your reading of Leymah Gbowee’s Mighty Be Our Powers. We hope they will help you to engage with the text and will provide a jumping-off point for reading group discussions.

About the Author: Update

Leymah Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011—shared with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, and Tawakkol Karman, Yemeni journalist and peace activist—“for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.” She cofounded the Women Peace and Security Network–Africa and is president of the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa—the mission of which is to promote and facilitate activities and initiatives aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation through the holistic participation of local communities. The foundation envisions a peaceful and reconciled Africa that recognizes and utilizes the skills and talents of all, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Gbowee is the Africa columnist for Newsweek/Daily Beast, serves on the board of directors of the Nobel Women’s Initiative and the PeaceJam Foundation, and is a member of the African Women Leaders Network for
Reproductive Health and Family Planning. She holds an M.A. in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Based in Monrovia, Liberia, she is the proud mother of six.

Carol Mithers is a journalist and book author. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and national magazines. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and daughter.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1) The prologue to this memoir shows how women are traditionally left out of war histories. In just two paragraphs Gbowee questions violence, sexism, colonialism, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the classical genre of war histories. Does the prologue help you understand the overarching themes of the memoir? What are those themes?

2) Leymah’s sense of herself changes throughout the book. In Chapter 1, at age 17, she is full of confidence and a sense of her own agency. How does she win, and then lose, this confidence, and what, finally, allows her to regain it? What do you have in common with the young Leymah? Is it possible to discuss her identity without reference to the brutal wars she and her family endure?

3) Talk about the relationships between the Congo People, the Americo-Liberians, and the indigenous people of Liberia. Who are Leymah’s people, and in what ways does her heritage predict her options in life?

4) Leymah’s graduation presents included a pair of Dexter boots. When she is forced to leave them behind as the family flees the civil war, she has a pang of regret. Two years later, on page 39, she returns to Paynesville and sees a neighbor on the way to the city, wearing her Dexter boots. What changes in that moment? What else did she leave behind in Paynesville?

5) Why does Leymah choose to be with Daniel? During her abusive relationship with him, there is a scene where she turns to the Bible and
discovers Isaiah Chapter 54. She reads this passage: “For the Lord has called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit. . . . O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. . . .” How do you interpret this passage as it relates to Leymah?

6) What is meant by the “cycle” of domestic violence? How does Leymah first learn to put a name to her experience of abuse, to recognize her own story? At what point does she learn to see the relationship between the personal and the political? What roles do her children and her work play in ending the terrible relationship with Daniel?

7) Describe Leymah’s relationship with Tunde. What are the similarities and differences between her relationship with Daniel and her relationship with Tunde? How could Tunde be both deliverance and another trap?

8) Leymah’s boss, BB, challenges her intellectually, calling on her to become “academically fit.” He claims she is learning in a “naïve” way. How does he teach her to read critically? What questions does he ask?

9) After Leymah gets her associate’s degree and teams up with Thelma Ekiyor, she has the opportunity to go to Accra in Ghana to help launch the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET)’s first conference. What were the most important results of this conference? What role did the WIPNET workshop practices called “Being a Woman,” “The Shedding of the Weight,” and “Crown and Thorn” have in bringing the women together? Were these therapeutic exercises or political exercises, or both?

10) How did Leymah and her fellow sisters in the peace-building movement set about to get an actual seat at the political table in April 2003? How did the Mass Action begin? Would you have been able to summon the courage to approach Charles Taylor? The LURD rebels?

11) After Charles Taylor is indicted by a UN war crimes tribunal and flees the peace talks in Ghana, he returns to Monrovia and the fighting begins anew. What was Leymah’s next move, and how did Ellen Johnson Sirleaf help jumpstart the peace movement underway in Accra and in Liberia, where the women sat together in fields?
12) Discuss the moment when Leymah begins to remove her clothing in the doorway to the negotiating hall in Ghana. What is the power of humiliation, and who is humiliated in this scene?

13) Gini Reticker and Abigail Disney approach Leymah about doing a documentary film about the Mass Action and Leymah’s role in it. What effect did this project initially have on the women of WIPNET? How does Leymah cope with the rejection of her peace-building sisters? What changed after the documentary’s success?

14) On page 205, Leymah writes: “I know my children were angry at me. Later, when I asked if any of them wanted to grow up to be a peace-builder, Amber’s response was, ‘No. I want to stay home with my children.’” What do you think of Leymah’s choice?

15) Leymah dedicates this memoir to her sister Geneva. What role does Geneva play in Leymah’s life? What role does Leymah play in Geneva’s life?

16) Discuss the subtitle of Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War. Did this book change the way you think about people’s power to achieve peace through non-violent action? How were the women of western Africa so successful?

Suggestions for Further Reading and Exploration

- A cultural history of the role of religious and ritual expression in Liberia’s civil war. Ellis discusses the child soldiers and teenage killers who were pressed into service by rebel fighters for the siege on Monrovia, and provides political background on the wars. This history provides excellent context for understanding Leymah Gbowee’s early social work practice with disabled child soldiers.

- The classic autobiography of the leader of the struggle for the independence of India from Britain. Gandhi was author and practitioner of the philosophy of non-violence, non-cooperation, and peaceful resistance. These teachings helped to create the underpinnings of Leymah Gbowee’s women’s peace movement in Liberia.

Hetherington, Tim. Long Story Bit by Bit: Liberia Retold (Umbrage Editions, 2009).

- Hetherington was an award-winning photographer and filmmaker who spent four years photographing, collecting oral histories, and documenting his time in Liberia. He lived with a rebel army in the rainforest during the civil war, one of only two journalists to live behind enemy lines. His stories provide additional detail to Leymah Gbowee’s accounts of Liberia’s civil wars.

Kamara-Umunna, Agnes (with Emily Holland). And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation (Hyperion, 2011).

- This memoir of war in Liberia is an excellent companion book to Leymah’s own. After a time of forced exile in Sierra Leone, Agnes returned to host the UN-run radio program “Straight From the Heart,” in which she presented live on-air stories of the child soldiers, warlords, rape survivors, and others in their own words.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. Letter from the Birmingham Jail (Harper-Collins, 1994).

- The definitive writing on racial injustice by Martin Luther King, Jr., architect of non-violent civil rights protest and inspiration to Leymah Gbowee.

- Essential reading by two Pulitzer Prize–winning journalists reporting on the oppression of women and girls in the developing world. The book recounts their time in Africa and Asia, offering portraits of women overcoming appalling odds. The authors come to see these women and their resilience as the key to economic development world-wide. *Half the Sky* calls upon readers to understand that the emancipation of women leads to freedom for all.


- Sirleaf is the twenty-third and current president of Liberia, the first woman president on the African continent. Her memoir tells the story of a woman of great accomplishment and personal resilience and analyzes the recent political history of Liberia and the West African States. Sirleaf was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, shared with Leymah Gbowee.


- Wendy Maragh Taylor’s chronicle of a journey to Liberia with her husband, a native Liberian. The couple takes part in the construction of a building now serving as a church and school, helping to rebuild a small piece of Liberia. As her culture shock subsides, she comes to see Liberia as a place of hope.


- The story of the destructive powers of the rebel leader who wanted to bring change to Liberia. At one time an elected president, Taylor later became an international fugitive, a warlord on the run. He
was eventually brought to The Hague where he was sentenced to fifty years for war crimes. Excellent background on the figure Gbowee stared down and ultimately helped topple.


- An accessible study of the social and political teachings of Jesus by respected theologian John Howard Yoder. In this account, the author takes the traditional view of an apolitical Jesus and turns that view on its head. The book draws on the New Testament for its argument that Jesus was a pacifist and political ethicist.

For more information about Leymah’s current projects, visit her website at http://leymahgbowee.com/wipsen.html.

*Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, the documentary about the women’s revolution in Liberia, and Leymah’s place in that movement, is available for viewing in streaming video in the United States at http://video.pbs.org/video/2155873888 and on Netflix. You can also purchase the DVD for personal use at amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, and other retailers. If you are interested in purchasing a DVD copy of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* for a public event in your community or on your campus, or if you’d like the DVD for use in your library, school, or research institution, please visit rocoeducation.com/film.

Unlock the Intelligence, Passion, and Greatness of Girls

*In a Talk she gave at the annual TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in Long Beach, California, in March 2012, Leymah spoke about the role of girls in the women’s peace-building movement she founded in Liberia during two civil wars. These wars took an enormous toll on families, and especially on*
children and young women who were forced directly into the conflict by rebels and government soldiers who committed violent rapes and murders as everyday war strategies. This Talk, transcribed below, is a testimonial to the courage of girls in conflict areas globally, and to the power they can unleash when working together. At the end, Leymah converses briefly with TED conference curator Chris Anderson.

Many times I go around the world to speak, and people ask me questions about the challenges, my moments, some of my regrets. 1998: A single mother of four, three months after the birth of my fourth child, I went to do a job as a research assistant. I went to Northern Liberia. And as part of the work, the village would give you lodgings. And they gave me lodging with a single mother and her daughter.

The girl happened to be the only girl in the entire village who had made it to the ninth grade. She was the laughingstock of the community. Her mother was often told by other women, “You and your child will die poor.” After two weeks of working in that village, it was time to go back. The mother came to me, knelt down, and said, “Leymah, take my daughter. I wish for her to be a nurse.” Dirt poor, living in the home with my parents, I couldn’t afford to. With tears in my eyes, I said, “No.”

Two months later, I go to another village on the same assignment and they asked me to live with the village chief. The women’s chief of the village has this little girl, fair color like me, totally dirty. And all day she walked around only in her underwear. When I asked, “Who is that?” She said, “That’s Wei. The meaning of her name is pig. Her mother died while giving birth to her and no one had any idea who her father was.” For two weeks, she became my companion, slept with me. I bought her used clothes and bought her her first doll. The night before I left, she came to the room and said, “Leymah, don’t leave me here. I wish to go with you. I wish to go to school.” Dirt poor, no money, living with my parents, I again said, “No.” Two months later, both of those villages fell into another war. Till today, I have no idea where those two girls are.

Fast-forward, 2004: In the peak of our activism, the minister of Gender Liberia called me and said, “Leymah, I have a nine-year-old for you.
I want you to bring her home because we don’t have safe homes.” The story of this little girl: She had been raped by her paternal grandfather every day for six months. She came to me bloated, very pale. Every night I’d come from work and lie on the cold floor. She’d lie beside me and say, “Auntie, I wish to be well. I wish to go to school.”

2010: A young woman stands before President Sirleaf and gives her testimony of how she and her siblings live together, their father and mother died during the war. She’s 19; her dream is to go to college to be able to support them. She’s highly athletic. One of the things that happens is that she applies for a scholarship. Full scholarship. She gets it. Her dream of going to school, her wish of being educated, is finally here. She goes to school on the first day. The director of sports who’s responsible for getting her into the program asks her to come out of class. And for the next three years, her fate will be having sex with him every day, as a favor for getting her in school.

Globally, we have policies, international instruments, work leaders. Great people have made commitments—we will protect our children from want and from fear. The UN has the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Countries like America, we’ve heard things like No Child Left Behind. Other countries come with different things. There is a Millennium Development called Three that focuses on girls. All of these great works by great people aimed at getting young people to where we want to get them globally, I think, have failed.

In Liberia, for example, the teenage pregnancy rate is 3 to every 10 girls. Teen prostitution is at its peak. In one community, we’re told, you wake up in the morning and see used condoms like chewing gum paper. Girls as young as 12 being prostituted for less than a dollar a night. It’s disheartening. It’s sad. And then someone asked me, just before my TEDTalk, a few days ago, “So, where is the hope?”

Several years ago, a few friends of mine decided we needed to bridge the disconnect between our generation and the generation of young women. It’s not enough to say you have two Nobel laureates from the Republic of Liberia when your girls’ kids are totally out there with no hope, or seemingly no hope. We created a space called the Young Girls Transformative Project. We go into rural communities and all we do, like has
been done in this room, is create the space. When these girls sit, you un-
lock intelligence, you unlock passion, you unlock commitment, you un-
lock focus, you unlock great leaders. Today, we’ve worked with over 300.
And some of those girls who walked in the room very shy have taken
bold steps, as young mothers, to go out there and advocate for the rights
of other young women.

One young woman I met, teen mother of four, never thought about
finishing high school, graduated successfully; never thought about going
to college, enrolled in college. One day she said to me, “My wish is to fin-
ish college and be able to support my children.” She’s at a place where
she can’t find money to go to school. She sells water, sells soft drinks,
and sells recharge cards for cellphones. And you would think she would
take that money and put it back into her education. Juanita is her name.
She takes that money and finds single mothers in her community to send
back to school. Says, “Leymah, my wish is to be educated. And if I can’t
be educated, when I see some of my sisters being educated, my wish has
been fulfilled. I wish for a better life. I wish for food for my children. I
wish that sexual abuse and exploitation in schools would stop.” This is
the dream of the African girl.

Several years ago, there was one African girl. This girl had a son who
wished for a piece of doughnut because he was extremely hungry. Angry,
frustrated, really upset about the state of her society and the state of her
children, this young girl started a movement, a movement of ordinary
women banding together to build peace. I will fulfill the wish. This is an-
other African girl’s wish. I failed to fulfill the wish of those two girls. I failed
to do this. These were the things that were going through the head of this
other young woman—I failed, I failed, I failed. So I will do this. Women
came out, protested a brutal dictator, fearlessly spoke. Not only did the
wish of a piece of doughnut come true, the wish of peace came true. This
young woman wished also to go to school. She went to school. This young
woman wished for other things to happen, it happened for her.

Today, this young woman is me, a Nobel laureate. I’m now on a jour-
ney to fulfill the wish, in my tiny capacity, of little African girls—the wish
of being educated. We set up a foundation. We’re giving full four-year
scholarships to girls from villages that we see with potential.
I don’t have much to ask of you. I’ve also been to places in this U.S., and I know that girls in this country also have wishes, a wish for a better life somewhere in the Bronx, a wish for a better life somewhere in downtown L.A., a wish for a better life somewhere in Texas, a wish for a better life somewhere in New York, a wish for a better life somewhere in New Jersey.

Will you journey with me to help that girl, be it an African girl or an American girl or a Japanese girl, fulfill her wish, fulfill her dream, achieve that dream? Because all of these great innovators and inventors that we’ve talked to and seen over the last few days are also sitting in tiny corners in different parts of the world, and all they’re asking us to do is create that space to unlock the intelligence, unlock the passion, unlock all of the great things that they hold within themselves. Let’s journey together. Let’s journey together.

Thank you.

(Applause)

Chris Anderson: Thank you so much. Right now in Liberia, what do you see as the main issue that troubles you?

LG: I’ve been asked to lead the Liberian Reconciliation Initiative. As part of my work, I’m doing these tours in different villages and towns—13, 15 hours on dirt roads—and there is no community that I’ve gone into that I haven’t seen intelligent girls. But sadly, the vision of a great future, or the dream of a great future, is just a dream, because you have all of these vices. Teen pregnancy, like I said, is epidemic.

So what troubles me is that I was at that place and somehow I’m at this place, and I just don’t want to be the only one at this place. I’m looking for ways for other girls to be with me. I want to look back 20 years from now and see that there’s another Liberian girl, Ghanaian girl, Nigerian girl, Ethiopian girl standing on this TED stage. And maybe, just maybe, saying, “Because of that Nobel laureate I’m here today.” So I’m troubled when I see them like there’s no hope. But I’m also not pessimistic, because I know it doesn’t take a lot to get them charged up.

CA: And in the last year, tell us one hopeful thing that you’ve seen happening.
LG: I can tell you many hopeful things that I’ve seen happening. But in the last year, where President Sirleaf comes from her village, we went there to work with these girls. And we could not find 25 girls in high school. All of these girls went to the gold mine, and they were predominantly prostitutes doing other things. We took 50 of those girls and we worked with them. And this was at the beginning of elections. This is one place where women were never—even the older ones barely sat in the circle with the men. These girls banded together and formed a group and launched a campaign for voter registration. This is a real rural village. And the theme they used was: “Even pretty girls vote.” They were able to mobilize young women.

But not only did they do that, they went to those who were running for seats to ask them, “What is it that you will give the girls of this community when you win?” And one of the guys who already had a seat was very—because Liberia has one of the strongest rape laws, and he was one of those really fighting in parliament to overturn that law because he called it barbaric. Rape is not barbaric, but the law, he said, was barbaric. And when the girls started engaging him, he was very hostile toward them. These little girls turned to him and said, “We will vote you out of office.” He’s out of office today.