Born in Rwanda in 1956, Scholastique Mukasonga experienced from childhood the violence and humiliation of the ethnic conflicts that shook her country. In the aftermath of the brutal genocide of the Tutsi, Mukasonga learned that 37 of her family members had been massacred. Her first novel, Our Lady of the Nile, was adapted into a film by Atiq Rahimi in 2019. The New York Times named her memoir Cockroaches one of the “50 Best Memoirs of the Past 50 Years.” In 2019, The Barefoot Woman was a finalist for the National Book Award for Translation.

In sentences of great beauty and restraint, Mukasonga rescues a million souls from the collective noun ‘genocide’… An essential and powerful read.

— Zadie Smith (on The Barefoot Woman)
1. The book begins by addressing a “you”: “You were a displaced little girl like me, sent off to Nyamata for being a Tutsi…” Who is the “you” in this collection? Is it the same “you” throughout, or does it change story to story? Generally speaking, what is the impact of the “you” in this text?

5. Throughout “The Glorious Cow,” the narrator speaks to the mixing of home culture and the culture of the colonizers, speaking about the father making “a prayer for the cows mixed with prayer for the Virgin Mary” or discussing how “the French words the teacher wanted me to learn… were now mingled with the exalted, familiar praise of the long-lost cows.” Discuss the power dynamics at play. What is the relationship between education and colonization in the text?

9. The narrator is writing from a future of which the characters have no knowledge. How does time operate in this text, and how does the narrator’s position (and our position, as readers with any understanding of Rwandan history) influence our understanding of the narratives in the text?

11. How do these stories relate to each other? Why do you think they are presented together as a unified whole rather than as individual stories?