



Barbara Kingsolver

“The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. The most you can do is live inside that hope, running down its hallways, touching the walls on both sides.”

—2008 Commencement Address, Duke University

FOR BARBARA KINGSOLVER (1955–), best-selling author of *The Bean Trees* (1988) and the Oprah Book Club selection *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), writing is a form of a political activism, a reflection of her deeply ingrained social consciousness. Her fiction and nonfiction address questions of social, environmental, economic, and legal importance: compromised and disappearing cultures, including those of Native Americans and Africans; class, race, and gender rights; environmentalism; colonialism; and individual freedom versus community, among other issues. In *Animal Dreams* (1990), an American is kidnapped by the U.S.-backed Contras; *The Poisonwood Bible* is a colonial morality tale, examining the U.S. role in 1950s Congo; and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007) makes a case for eating locally grown, sustainable food. “What a fiction writer or a poet or an essay writer can do is re-engage people with their own humanity,” Kingsolver says. “Fiction and essays can create empathy for the theoretical stranger” (interview with Bill Moyers, 5/24/02).

Despite—or perhaps because of—her idealism, many of Kingsolver’s books, especially her novels, are delightfully accessible, warmhearted tales filled with hopeful lessons. “What she really delivers are progressive fairy tales for grownups,” notes critic Gail Caldwell, “where the Earth is honored, the children are saved and class exploitation is endured rather than endorsed. If Kingsolver’s fiction was a bumper sticker, it would have to be Kill Your Television” (*Boston Globe*, 7/18/93). Yet Kingsolver’s heroines, far from long-lost princesses about to reclaim their kingdoms, are recognizable misfits—endearing, self-aware, and quirky, marginalized by society but determined to make their own way in the world. But readers can interpret Kingsolver’s

stories any number of ways—from fairy tales to dark morality plays. “If someone wants to read just for entertainment, I hope that I can entertain them. I have a commitment to accessibility,” she says, “I think partly because of where I came from as a person. I came from a class of people who were not readers of literature, who read newspapers maybe, or ... the *Sears Catalogue*, but who never read great novels. And I think about those people when I’m writing” (*Journal of the Short Story in English*, Autumn 2003).

Growing up in rural Kentucky (though born in Annapolis, Maryland in 1955), the expectation was that Kingsolver would, in some capacity, later become a productive member of the farming community. Certainly, her works are rich with images of her native Appalachia, with ample evidence of her devotion to the land and people. Yet her family did not fit the stereotype; as a child, Kingsolver enjoyed reading and writing, and her family spent a year in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), where her father practiced medicine. When Kingsolver attended DePauw University in Indiana on a piano scholarship (she graduated with a degree in biology), she became active in the last days of the anti-Vietnam War movement, a political bent that carried over into her literary career. In the late 1970s, Kingsolver spent a few years in Europe, returned home in 1979, moved to Tucson, and pursued a graduate degree in evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona. While studying the social life of termites, she enrolled in a creative writing class. Instead of choosing a biology career, she took a writing job as a science writer for the university and began to freelance for magazines and newspapers. Many of her articles appear in her best-selling collection *High Tide in Tucson* (1995).



Kingsolver in 1992



While writing short fiction, poetry, and articles, Kingsolver started her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky for Tucson. She completed it just before the birth of her first child in 1987. Kingsolver has written 11 more books since then, many of them best sellers, with other writings appearing in major newspapers and magazines. In 1997, Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize, which honors new books that address issues of social justice. She received the National Humanities Medal, the nation's highest honor for service through the arts, three years later. In 2004, Kingsolver, her husband, and two daughters moved from Tucson to southwestern Virginia, where they raise free-range poultry, sheep, and grow vegetables—a story told in her most recent book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007).

MAJOR WORKS

The Bean Trees (1988)



In this bildungsroman, her first novel, Kingsolver explores blue-collar life, friendship, motherhood, and the meaning of community while exposing “invisible” members of society. Critics described *The Bean Trees*, told in an authentic, first-person Southern voice, as an inspiring, visionary work. The story continues in *Pigs in Heaven* (discussed below).

THE STORY: Taylor Greer grew up in Pittman, Kentucky, “the only place on earth where people started having babies before they learned their multiplication tables.” She escapes that fate by driving away from her hometown in her beat-up Volkswagen bug. But on the outskirts of an Indian reservation in Oklahoma, a desperate Cherokee woman thrusts an unwanted toddler into her arms. Taylor, left with little choice, starts to care for the girl, whom she names Turtle. When their car stalls in Tucson, Taylor, with Turtle still in tow, finds a job, befriends a battered wife and her baby son, and becomes involved with Guatemalan refugees. Soon, she is immersed in a new life, learning important lessons as she goes.

“Kingsolver’s ear for humor and dialect, and her eye for those simple moments that alter lives, are so astute that we pause many times in each chapter to reread otherwise mundane descriptions ... Sometimes Kingsolver’s style is a bit too contrived for comfort, and yet *The Bean Trees* is so wry and wise that we wish it would never end.” PATRICIA HOLT, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 3/6/88

“In its simple descriptions of what’s wrong in underclass America, and in its lovely conjuring up of how some people might get busy fixing things if they had a mind to, this novel goes beyond ordinary storytelling in its noble intent. ... *The Bean Trees* is the book of a visionary. John Steinbeck, Kenneth Patchen, Kate Seredy, would all be proud to be seen in Barbara Kingsolver’s company.” CAROLYN SEE, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 4/4/88

Animal Dreams (1990)



The fictional Grace, Arizona, seems to be the idyllic rural town, with its groves of fruit trees and sacred Native American lands—but it is a threatened paradise on many levels. In her second novel, Kingsolver casts a sharp eye on environmental, socioeconomic, and political issues—from Nicaragua’s struggle against the contras, class and racial tension, and family dysfunction to environmental ruin. It is also a story of personal engagement with the world, told through memories, dreams, and Native American myths.

THE STORY: After finishing medical school, Cosima “Codi” Noline, the eldest daughter of a small-town physician, suffers an identity crisis. Failing to hold a medical license, she leaves Tucson and returns to her hometown of Grace, Arizona, where she has always been an outsider, to teach high school biology. While she deals with her father’s Alzheimer’s, her younger sister, Hallie, born shortly before their mother’s death, makes the fateful decision to work with peasants in Nicaragua. As their father’s mind wanders deep into the past, Codi starts to confront her own childhood memories, uncover mysterious parts of her and her family’s identity, and rekindle an old romance. A worked-over copper mine, meanwhile, slowly pollutes the town’s river.

“[Kingsolver’s socially conscious] work reminds us of some of the important Latin American writers, novelists like Mexico’s Juan Rufo, Colombia’s Gabriel García Márquez or Chilean Isabel Allende. Yet her concerns are rooted in 20th-Century North America.” MARGARET RANDALL, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 9/9/90

“In *Animal Dreams* she demonstrates a special gift for the vivid evocation of landscape and of her characters’ state of mind. That she leaves open spaces, that she doesn’t quite integrate everything into a perfect system, is probably to her credit.”

JANE SMILEY, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/2/90

Pigs in Heaven (1993)



The sequel to *The Bean Trees*, which again features Taylor Greer and her adopted daughter, Turtle, broadens the themes of Kingsolver’s first novel. However, unlike *The Bean Trees*, critics thought *Pigs in Heaven* a tad too neat and cheerful, though it stayed on the *New York Times* best seller list for many weeks. In this sequel, a moral conflict between the needs of a community and the claims of a mother’s love takes center stage. Kingsolver also explores adoption and the preservation of cultural identity, particularly Native American.

THE STORY: When Taylor Greer takes her adopted daughter to visit the Hoover Dam, Turtle, now six, witnesses a young man falling over the side of the spillway. After he is rescued, Turtle appears on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* as a child hero. But her public debut draws the attention of a new attorney for the Cherokee Nation, who, striving to

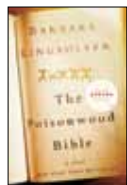
maintain the cultural integrity of the Nation and its children, recognizes Turtle and starts to investigate the legality of her adoption. Taylor and Turtle, joined by Taylor's mother, flee Tucson to avoid the investigation and land in Portland. But unable to support her young daughter, Taylor returns to the Indian reservation, where Turtle's fate will be decided.

"The premise of this novel is wonderfully timely, drawing on two issues that have recently compelled America: the rights of adoptive parents as opposed to biological ones, and the rights of jurisprudence in tribal matters—especially those concerning children adopted off the reservation. The book painstakingly details these issues by making them personal and familial: These are two mothers battling for the best interest of the child. ... And the stakes are high." ANTONYA NELSON,

LOS ANGELES TIMES, 7/4/93

The Poisonwood Bible (1998)

◆ OPRAH BOOK CLUB SELECTION



In this acclaimed, best-selling novel, Kingsolver leaves the Southwest for the plundered Belgian Congo (renamed Zaire in 1971 and now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo). Set during the bloody reign of Lumumba, Mobutu's dictatorship, and U.S. complicity in the violence, *The Poisonwood Bible*, like her previous works, examines the meaning of family, community, and individual responsibilities therein. The novel emerged from Kingsolver's brief childhood experience in Africa as well as her short story "My Father's Africa" (1991); she also conducted extensive research on the political, social, and natural history of the region and read the King James Bible

for appropriate tone and language. Overall, the story "came from passion, culpability, anger and a long-term fascination with Africa, and my belief that what happened to the Congo is one of the most important political parables of our century," Kingsolver says. "As long as I have been a writer I've wanted to address this, to try to find a way to own our terrible history honestly and construct some kind of redemption" (www.kingsolver.com).

THE STORY: In the late 1950s, on the eve of the Congo's independence from Belgium, an evangelical Baptist minister's family leaves the American South for a remote village in the Congo. The insufferably self-righteous, arrogant Nathan Price wishes to convert the villagers of Kilanga to Christianity, but his project is doomed from the start. The story peels away over 30 years through the alternating viewpoints of Orleanna Price and her four daughters: Rachel, a vain, shallow teenager; Leah and her gifted but mute twin sister, Adah; and the child Ruth May. The females deal with cultural clash, hardships, and moral issues while attempting to understand each other, their relationships, and the loss and recovery of their faith. But against the backdrop of fanatic fundamentalism and colonial tyranny, no one is spared.

"The Congo permeates *The Poisonwood Bible*, and yet this is a novel that is just as much about America, a portrait, in absentia, of the nation that sent the Prices to save the souls of a people for whom it felt only contempt. ... *The Poisonwood Bible* is ultimately a novel of character, a narrative shaped by keen-eyed women contemplating themselves and one another and a village whose familiarity it takes a tragedy to discover." VERLYN KLINKENBORG, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 10/18/98

KINGSOLVER'S OTHER WORKS

FICTION

HOMELAND and Other Stories (1989)

In these dozen stories, Kingsolver introduces a host of "outsiders": a Hispanic union organizer; a young woman struggling with her Cherokee ancestry; an ex-con with good intentions; and a pregnant, single mother estranged from her own pregnant mother.

ANOTHER AMERICA (1992)

This poetry collection addresses some of Kingsolver's major political and social concerns—including the suffering of people under the military regimes in Central and South America from the 1970s onward.

NONFICTION

HOLDING THE LINE (1989)

Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983

In 1983, a union comprised mostly of Hispanic women held a strike against the Phelps Dodge Copper Corporation, which had frozen wages, in four Arizona mining towns. Once wives and mothers, the women became leaders able to hold their communities together. Kingsolver relates their struggle for economic justice.

HIGH TIDE IN TUCSON Essays from Now or Never (1995)

Kingsolver addresses many topics in these essays, some previously published: her role in the writers' band the Rock Bottom Remainers; her visit to Benin (western Africa); parenting and children; her return to

Tucson; and the importance of the natural world.

SMALL WONDER Essays (2002)

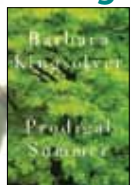
These 23 essays, written with Kingsolver's trademark sensitivity and political viewpoint, explore her trip to Japan; American idealism and expectations post-9/11; homes in Appalachia and Tucson; our attitudes toward the natural world; television; and the meaning of the American flag.

LAST STAND America's Virgin Lands (2002)

In photos and essays on wilderness and its survival, two dedicated environmentalists (Belt is a *National Geographic* photographer) capture the spirit of America's last, endangered wild lands—from the Midwest's prairies to the Arctic tundra.

"Barbara Kingsolver's powerful new book is actually an old-fashioned 19th-century novel, a Hawthornian tale of sin and redemption and the 'dark necessity' of history. ... One of the things that keeps *The Poisonwood Bible* from becoming overly schematic and lends the novel a fierce emotional undertow is Ms. Kingsolver's love of detail, her eye for the small facts of daily life: the Betty Crocker cake mixes, carefully carried to Kilanga, that won't work in Orleanna's primitive African kitchen; the Clorox bleach, 'measured out like the Blood of the Lamb' to wash the local produce; the endless bargaining the Congolese, under Mobutu's regime, must conduct for everything from a kidney-stone operation to a postage stamp." MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/16/98

Prodigal Summer (2001)



Lighter in tone and mood than her previous novels, *Prodigal Summer* marks a departure for Kingsolver. The novel, set in southern Appalachia, emphasizes the ecological and ethical issues that bind disparate characters over a summer of growth, struggle, and survival.

Kingsolver describes this work as the "most challenging book I've ever given my readers"—in part because of the absence of a main plot and character. "My agenda is to lure you into thinking about whole systems, not just individual parts," she says. "The story asks for a broader grasp of connections and interdependencies than is usual in our culture" (www.kingsolver.com). A hymn to the wilderness, the novel draws heavily on Kingsolver's background in ecology.

THE STORY: A den of coyotes that has ranged into Appalachia ties together three stories of love, romance, ecology, and the precarious balance between people and the natural environment. Forest ranger Deanna Wolfe, a passionate, somewhat misanthropic wildlife biologist, tries to protect the coyotes—but Eddie Bondo, a handsome rancher, is on a bounty hunt to kill them. Even so, they are drawn to each other. Entomologist Lusa Maluf Landowski, a newly widowed city girl and Palestinian Jew, finds herself out of place on her husband's farm. Finally, feuding elderly neighbors Garnett Walker and Nannie Rawley, an apple grower, address the complexities of life. By the end of the summer, these characters forge very human connections as they start to better understand their places in the world.

"Barbara Kingsolver has a gift for taking us places we didn't know we wanted to go. ... Written with the silence and poetry of nature, *Prodigal Summer* is both sexy and funny. Though the characters have all been touched by loss, her stories are deeply life-affirming." MS., DEC 2000/

JAN 2001

"This is vintage Kingsolver, back in *Bean Trees* form, entangling her characters in uneasy relationships, both romantic and familial, all during one long, hot summer." SHARON

EBERSON, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, 1/14/01

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

A Year of Food Life (2007)



Written with her husband, Steven L. Hopp, and her then 19-year-old daughter, Camille Kingsolver, this acclaimed part memoir, part journalistic work focuses on the family's evolution during a year of eating only locally grown food on their southern Appalachian farm.

Barbara wrote the main narrative; her husband's sidebars discuss the food-production industry ("Americans put almost as much fossil fuel into our refrigerators as our cars"); and Camille's reflective essays offer meal plans and recipes. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)

THE TOPIC: When the Kingsolver family leaves Tucson for an ancestral farm in Virginia, they aspire to live for a year eating only local or homegrown food. "Our highest shopping goal," Kingsolver explains, "was to get our food from so close to home that we'd know the person who grew it." That means eating zucchini in the summer and canned vegetables in the winter, learning the intricacies of turkey mating, braiding garlic, and welcoming backbreaking labor. Since food typically travels an average of 1,500 miles before it arrives on our plates, this first-person family account explores how and why we should create a closer relationship with our food. "It's not just about the food," writes Camille, "but the experience of creating and then consuming it. People need families and communities for this kind of experience."

"Its concerns are real and urgent. It is clear, thoughtful, often amusing, passionate and appealing. It may give you a serious case of supermarket guilt, thinking of the energy footprint left by each out-of-season tomato, but you'll also find unexpected

knowledge and gain the ability to make informed choices about what—and how—you're willing to eat."

BUNNY CRUMPACKER, WASHINGTON POST, 6/10/07

"My great fear in reviewing this book is that I might make it sound like the treatise of a hokey earth mother and do-gooder, rather than a profound, graceful, and literary work of philosophy and economics, well tempered for our times, and yet timeless. And not to worry: It contains sufficient hedonism. It is a book bursting with the senses." RICK

BASS, BOSTON GLOBE, 4/20/07 ■

NEW NOVEL IN OCTOBER!

Kingsolver has been working on her latest novel, *The Lacuna*, for seven years, and it will be published in October. She mixes a fictional protagonist, Harrision Shepard, with actual historical figures: renowned Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, his wife Frida Kahlo, and exiled Bolshevik leader Lev Trotsky. Harrison, who was born in America, grows up in 1930s Mexico City. He finds work in Rivera's house, but an upheaval later sends him north to Asheville, NC. As the publisher's description says, "political winds continue to throw him between north and south, in a plot that turns many times on the unspeakable breach—the lacuna—between truth and public presumption."