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Arts and Humanities Awards 12/00 [Barbara Kingsolver]

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*The Cincinnati Enquirer, November 24, 1998*

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**SECTION:** TEMPO, Pg. C04

**LENGTH:** 1129 words

**HEADLINE:** Politically artistic

Author **Barbara Kingsolver** refuses to separate her beliefs from her books

**BYLINE:** ANNE STEPHENSON

**SOURCE:** The Arizona Republic

**BODY:**

When Barbara Kingsolver was 7, her family moved from its home in Kentucky to central Africa, where her parents did public health work for a year.

Her father, a physician, wanted to go where he could be most useful, and no place needed him more than the Congo, a country struggling with new independence and old rivalries, a place on the brink of civil war.

The Kingsolvers stayed there just long enough for Barbara to miss second grade. She returned to the United States with memories of life in an African village, an understanding of what it meant to be a minority, and an interest in the Congo that would draw her over the years to stories about its ongoing political turmoil.

Now, 30 years later, she has written a novel that is rooted in her time in Africa. The Poisonwood Bible (Harper Flamingo; \$ 26) is the story of renegade Baptist missionary Nathan Price, who in 1959 takes his family from its home in Georgia to the Congo, where he is determined to convert people and save souls. Narrated by Nathan's wife, Orleanna, and each of their four daughters, it is Ms. Kingsolver's most political novel, built around the violent struggle for power in the Congo and the role American interests played in it.

Ms. Kingsolver does not apologize for this, although the insistent social and political messages in her previous books (Animal Dreams, Pigs in Heaven) drew criticism from some reviewers. She will continue to write on such subjects, she says, and she encourages others to do the same. With her advance for The Poisonwood Bible she has founded the Bellwether Prize for Fiction, an award of \$ 25,000 (plus guaranteed publication) given each year to an emerging writer whose manuscript "addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships."

Ms. Kingsolver lives in Tucson, Ariz., with her husband, Stephen Hopp, and daughters, Camille, 11, and Lily, 2. In a recent interview, she talked about her politics, her art and her great commercial success.

**QUESTION:** Did it take a lot of energy to write this book?

**ANSWER:** Energy, plus blood, sweat and tears. It was by far the hardest thing I've done. But that's OK. I try to do something new with each book, and have, but somehow it hasn't been as evident to people in the past as it seems to be now.

Q: How did you begin?

A: I suppose the grain of sand that started this book was U.S. foreign policy, something I've been interested in my whole adult life, ever since I moved to Tucson and began noticing what the U.S. was doing in my name and with my tax dollars to other countries, mostly Latin America. I think what the U.S. did in the Congo stands for so much in terms of cultural, economic and spiritual arrogance.

Q: How did your brief time in the Congo play into it?

A: My own family, I'm happy to say, was very different from the one in this book. But since I was 8 I've had a personal interest in the Congo, so of course I felt the weight of its tragedy, year after year, just in the small bits of information that came through to us.

Q: Are many of the details of the book from your time there?

A: I came home with powerful memories. And I kept a journal. The day we left for the Congo was the day I began keeping a diary in earnest, so I guess in some ways I can trace my writing life back to that day.

Q: You use five narrative voices in this novel. Why?

A: I always begin with theme, and then I construct characters who can play out that theme. There were many viewpoints on what happened in the Congo. My task was to identify those points of view, fine tune them and assign each one to a character with physical and emotional characteristics that would make her point of view work.

Q: The voices are very different. Orleanna, the mother, is very mature, capable of deep love and sorrow. Rachael, the oldest daughter, is almost irritatingly shallow. Did you like both of these characters?

A: Oh, I loved them! I loved them all. You can't write a character that you don't believe in. I think Orleanna is the conscience of the novel, but oddly enough, Rachael's voice was the easiest to write.

Q: Did you write the novel straight through?

A: No, I don't write a book in a linear way. First I construct an outline, and then I layer things in.

Q: Does criticism of your political themes bother you?

A: Any writer in this culture who wants to address issues of social change and responsibility runs the risk of being called too political. It's very provincial. In just about all the rest of the world, social justice and the ways that economics and culture affect human relations are considered the fundamental domain of art. Sometime in the 1950s we suddenly were provided with this artificial split between art and politics and we've never gotten over it. It doesn't bother me at all because it's irrelevant and will pass. People will look back on this someday as a real stupid time.

Q: So you write what you want to write?

A: I write what I have to write. It's not a choice for me. I'm a cultural and social realist in my art. I write about the world that I see and understand, and I've never lived in a world that doesn't have racism and sexism and cultural imperialism in it. I can't imagine that world. Evidently some people do live in that world, but I don't.

BOOK REVIEW

THE POISONWOOD BIBLE

By Barbara Kingsolver

HarperFlamingo; \$ 26; 542 pages.

Also available on audiotape, (Brilliance; \$ 44.95; 16 hours; unabridged).

Read by Dean Robertson.

'Poisonwood' a family's complex journey

The Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver's most ambitious and finest work yet, confirms the author's deepening and maturing talent while giving promise that her best is yet to be.

A considerable accomplishment, the book is the result of several years of writing - and virtually a lifetime of research.

On its most basic level, this is the story of Nathan Price, a self- righteous Baptist minister; his wife, Orleanna; and their daughters: Rachel, a teen-ager; Leah and Adah, adolescent twins; and Ruth May, 5.


In 1959, the Prices depart from Bethlehem, Ga., for the Belgian Congo as it is about to achieve independence. Nathan Price is on a zealous mission: converting to his brand of evangelical Christianity those unfortunate Congolese souls who think the way he does. The story - what gives it its beauty, heartache and resonance - is what happens to the family, outwardly and inwardly. It is a story of naivete, arrogance, wonderment, disillusionment, tragedy and, finally, wisdom and hope.

This novel is much more than a diatribe against colonialism and imperialism. It is a complex saga of a family's journey together and then apart from one another.

Knight Ridder News Service

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*Queen's Quarterly December, 1998*

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December, 1998

**SECTION:** v.105(4) Wint'98 pg 601-610; ISSN: 0033-6041

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**HEADLINE:** Huck Finn, **Barbara Kingsolver**, and the American dream [The Bean Trees, Animal Dreams, Pigs in Heaven and High Tide in Tuscon]

**BYLINE:** Litovitz, Malca

**BODY:**

The fiction of Barbara Kingsolver involves motifs of departure and return. This theme can first be seen in a brief examination of her own life. Born in 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, the daughter of a physician and a homemaker, she was raised in a small rural town in eastern Kentucky. She was, like Huckleberry Finn, a self-proclaimed "consummate liar" and loved to invent stories. While writing was her first love, however, she had no live literary role models: "The writers that I read," she explains in an informative interview in *Contemporary Authors* (Vol. 134), "were mostly old dead men. It was inconceivable to me that I might grow up to be a writer myself, so when I chose a vocation, I chose biology because it interested me and seemed reasonable ..."

Kingsolver was ostracized as a teenager because she was different. She was the only one in her high school who wanted to read authors like Kafka and who scribbled poems in the margins of her textbooks. She was a tall, skinny, flat-chested girl living in a community where reproductive abilities were the criteria for evaluating women. She couldn't get dates with the football heroes she craved or compete with the cheerleaders she knew. She decided that the only way to come into her own was by leaving home. Thus, she went off to Depauw University, where she completed a BA (magna cum laude) in 1977 she completed an MS at the University of Arizona in 1981 and married a chemistry professor named Joseph Hoffmann in 1985. She worked as a research assistant in the University of Arizona's department of physiology (1977-79), as a technical writer in the Office of Arid Land Studies (1981-85), and as a freelance journalist (1985-87), before finally becoming a full-time writer in 1987.

All through her academic and professional career, she worked hard to lose her hillbilly accent. Like the heroine of *Pygmalion*, Kingsolver knew that she had to leave her linguistic homeland in order to be accepted into the academic world she had chosen. Staying put in eastern Kentucky would have meant being barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, at best. But her plans for a better life were not easily realized.

Kingsolver's life is a series of created miracles. She has the knack for working bad luck to her own advantage. In the midst of a failing marriage

she managed to turn an angst-ridden pregnancy into an occasion for creativity. While carrying her daughter Camille, she suffered from a bad case of insomnia. Her doctor told her she could spend the time scrubbing bathroom tiles, but she decided to write a novel instead. Following her divorce, Kingsolver struggled as a single mother and met her second husband, an ornithologist to whom she is now happily married the epigraph to her recent essay collection reads: "for Steven, and every singing miracle." And she also enjoyed a triumphant Kentucky homecoming, with the cheerleaders and football players who once ignored her hanging "Welcome Home" banners in her honour and lining up to receive signed copies of her best-selling book.

In *The Bean Trees* she also returned to her native roots and found infinite wonder. Through the heroine, Taylor Greer, the author gives us an unsophisticated girl's view of the world and uses the very diction Kingsolver had so painstakingly suppressed in order to become "civilized," as Huck Finn would say. Returning to the language of rural Kentucky, she finds the seeds for the rich metaphors, feisty humour, and grassroots poetry for which she is now famous. "I feel really blessed to have grown up in a place where that poetic language is used, where people say, 'I'll swan' and 'He's ugly as a mud stick fence' (Contemporary Authors).

Kingsolver was determined to write books that everyone could understand. She didn't want to exclude anyone from her universe, and wished to honour her roots. She wanted townsfolk who might never have read a novel to enjoy her work, as well as the literary intelligentsia. But she worried at first about what her old neighbours would think of her portrayal of their town. She insists she doesn't use real people, doesn't want to alienate her relatives.

Like Mark Twain, she uses the wisdom of children and common-folk in wonderful ways. The title of *The Bean Trees* is an emblem of miraculous transformations. A three-year-old named Turtle stares at some wisteria flowers.

"Bean trees," she says, as plainly as if she has been thinking about it all day. We looked where she was pointing. Some of the wisteria flowers had gone to seed, and all these wonderful long green pods hung down from the branches. They looked as much like beans as anything you'd ever care to eat.

"Will you look at that," I said. It was another miracle. The flower trees were turning into bean trees.

Like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Bean Trees* is a picaresque novel, a road trip in which unexpected things happen. A female protagonist "lights out for the territories" in search of her identity. Proud that she's managed to survive high school and earn enough money to buy a car, she leaves home to make her fortune. Like Huck, she has been raised by one parent, but in her case it is a loving mother rather than a competitive, alcoholic father. Taylor tells us:

There were two things about Mama. One is she always expected the best out of me. And the other is that then, no matter what I did, whatever I came home with, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good.

Like Margaret Atwood, whose proud mother would sometimes reward her for baking horribly bad blueberry pies, Kingsolver also had the benefit of a mother who nurtured self-confidence. In the preface to *High Tide in Tucson* (1995) she writes:

When I told my mother I was making a book of my essays, many of which had been published previously in magazines, she responded with pure maternal advocacy: "Oh, good! I think that there are some out there that I've missed." ... Hurray for Moms, who give us the courage to take up our shelf space on the planet...

In *The Bean Trees*, it is Taylor's voice that keeps us turning the pages. In Kingsolver's universe, we are fascinated by the ordinary, which is what good poetry is supposed to do. It makes us look at the familiar through a new lens. It has taken Taylor five years of scrimping to buy her Volkswagen as she pulls up to a gas bar, we witness her fine sense of irony as she talks with some boys:

"Wash your windows, lady ... Dollar for the whole car."

"I got no windows," I told them.

Moments later, entering a coffee shop, she inquires:

"You got anything to eat that costs less than a dollar?" I asked the old guy behind the counter ...

"Ketchup," the gray-hat cowboy said. "Earl serves up a mean bottle of ketchup, don't you, Earl?" ...

"He don't mean nothing by it, miss," Earl told me. "He's got a bug up his butt. I can get you a burger for ninety-nine cents."

These same passages also show us Kingsolver's empathy for the poor. But she doesn't see these poor as living "lives of quiet desperation" (as Thoreau put it) instead she finds them often triumphing over enormous odds. Downtrodden single morns, in particular, are shown to have the power to transform their lives, particularly if they help each other. She has written a non-fiction book entitled *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Mining Strike of 1983* (ILR Press, 1989) about the extraordinary heroism in the lives of ordinary women, a group of miners' wives during a strike in which people found themselves stripped of their civil liberties. Through the terrible times, there was humour, friendship, and love. Some of the women were so empowered by their experiences during the strike that they later put themselves through college and became union organizers.

In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor seeks to empower herself by changing her name upon leaving home, an act that is emblematic of her desire to create her own identity. Her last name -- her mother's -- remains Greer, and the reader inevitably associates this with Germaine Greer, one of the great mothers of women's liberation. Taylor determines to take her name from the first town in which she runs out of gas. Her mother accepts her daughter's shedding of her birth name and quest for autonomy and will support her in various ways throughout her entire odyssey, which continues in the sequel *Pigs in Heaven* (HarperCollins, 1993).

But no sooner has Taylor left home and the likely fate of an unwanted teen pregnancy than motherhood is thrust upon her. Again, I think of Huckleberry Finn, in which Widow Douglas "took me for her son," then sat down and "learned me about Moses and the Bulrushes ..." The Bean Trees also opens with the theme of an abandoned baby, left not in the bulrushes but in a pink blanket on the roof of Taylor's Volkswagen when she stops for gas. The suddenly minted mother names her found child Turtle because of the way the little girl clasps onto her with tiny fingers, clinging to her newfound mother like a turtle to a rock.

The infant is an abused child of the Cherokee people, and her appearance heralds the author's involvement with the struggles of native Americans. To whom does Turtle belong? Is her adoptive mother guilty of something akin to voice appropriation in literature? Kingsolver has addressed the issue of ethnicity and a writer's right to tell stories from cultures not her own. "I can think of no genetic credentials that could entitle a writer to do this. ... The point is not to emulate other lives, or usurp their wardrobes. The point is to find sense: bearing witness is not the same thing as possession." (The New York Times, 15 October 1995).

Like Huck, Taylor is immediately confronted by the interracial dynamics of her mother country. And later, in *Pigs in Heaven*, she faces the potential loss of her adopted daughter. Turtle, now six, becomes a media sensation after seeing a man fall into a spillway at the Hoover Dam and summoning help in time to save his life. Because of this, she is featured on a segment of the Oprah Winfrey show dealing with child heroes. But during her Warholesque moment of fame, Turtle is spotted by Annawake Fourkiller, another model of contemporary woman. A Cherokee lawyer whose brother has suffered as a result of being adopted into another culture, Fourkiller defends the rights of the tribe to its children. The story of Solomon's judgement is replayed here as the love of adoptive mother Taylor vies with the rights of the Cherokee people for the privilege of raising the little girl. Both sides of this complex issue are presented even-handedly by this empathetic author with a strong social conscience. Taylor crisscrosses America in search of the origins of her daughter. She leaves no stone unturned in her efforts to hang onto a child she has come to love.

As in *The Bean Trees*, *Pigs in Heaven* shows Taylor's plucky mother Alice giving her daughter room to grow and supporting the young woman's odyssey into Cherokee country. In fact, Alice also proves herself to be liberated. "She knows that no woman with varicose veins and a brain in her head would walk away from a decent husband but she's going to anyway." Leaving her husband slumped in front of the TV, she presses into the Cherokee heartland: a world of stomp dances, myth-making, nature worship, and communal living.

This is a story of the decimation and recovery of American Indian cultural roots. Kingsolver steeped herself in this tradition and rejoices in its brave resurgence. The title, *Pigs in Heaven*, is taken from a native legend concerning the Pleiades star cluster. As Annawake explains to Taylor's boyfriend Jax:

"There's a story about these six boys that wouldn't do their work, so their moms cooked their baseballs for supper. The boys said only pigs would eat this and told the spirits about it .... And the spirits listened, I guess. They figured, 'Well, a mother knows best,' and they turned the boys into pigs. They ran faster and faster till they were just



a blur. Their little hooves left the ground and they rose up into the sky, and there they are."

Taylor has to leave her mother in *The Bean Trees*, and in the sequel she must part with her lover Jax. The quest for identity is a characteristic Kingsolver theme. Taylor is independent -- whole without a man, without a job, seeking both autonomy and intimacy in relationships. As the great sage Lao Tzu tells us, "Be whole and all good things shall follow."

It is satisfying to see some role reversal here. Jax is more dependent on Taylor than she is on him, yet he remains a strong character whose remarks are full of raunchy wisdom: "Sex will get you through times with no money better than money will get you through times with no sex." Some critics have accused Kingsolver of being an "ecofeminist," creating a world where men have little function, but this doesn't seem the case. She is, rather, a universal humanist. She waxes poetic on the subject of erotic love in *Pigs in Heaven* and *Animal Dreams*, where she gives her heroines wonderful lovers. For example, in *Pigs in Heaven*, she writes: "He kisses her hair which smells like a thunderstorm, and her shoulder which smells like a beach rock." Jax is a sexy rock 'n' roll guitarist, who has a lusty affair with his landlord Gundi while Taylor is away, but is there for Taylor upon her return.

Like Jane Austen, Kingsolver is a believer in romantic closure. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers," and Kingsolver says she has "hope, unyielding faith in the enterprise," which for her is her writing. Her heroines, like Alice, Taylor, Turtle, and Codi, often find the good fortune they have earned by virtue of their sterling characters. Alice falls in love with Turtle's Cherokee grandfather, and in the end both the adoptive mom and the tribe can share in the raising of the little girl. Some may find this too much of a Pollyanna resolution, but Kingsolver writes of America as it should be: a democratic home, a place where cultural conflicts can be resolved.

"Art," says Kingsolver in *The Christian Science Monitor* (20 December 1995) "has the power not only to soothe a savage beast but to change a savage mind." She also accomplishes her aims through satire. Not all of her female characters, for instance, are exemplars of the women's movement. In *Pigs in Heaven*, we meet a waitress named Barbie who is the doll come to life, a foil to the strong women all around her. She looks, talks, acts, and thinks exactly like her namesake, with one exception: she is a petty thief, stuffing money into her Barbie handbag. Here, we enter Larry McMurtry territory, with its trailer parks and ladies in pink rollers. One thinks of Margaret Laurence, William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, and George Eliot: "regional" novelists who enshrined small places on the global literary map.

Barbie is not just comic relief, she is a symbol of the author's revenge. Unlike the plastic princess, Kingsolver never knew how to dress during her lonely youth. In her essay "Life without Go-Go Boots," in *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), she writes that even on her early book tours she didn't know what to wear, although eventually she assembled a wardrobe that reflects her maverick constitution. On one occasion, she was almost thrown out of the Rainbow Room in New York for wearing red hightop sneakers.

She remains a satirist of American consumerism, with its television culture and emphasis on appearances. She hates the fact that writers must have

images suitable for media consumption, that heavily promoted readings and television appearances are mandatory. She has given herself permission to express her creativity in whatever form she wishes. In "Confessions of a Reluctant Rock Goddess," in *High Tide in Tucson*, she explains that she studied classical music for many years, and when a group of writers including Amy Tan, Dave Barry, and Stephen King formed their own rock group, the "Rock Bottom Remainders," she played keyboard with enthusiasm. This topic is an opportunity for Kingsolver to meditate on individuality, on the importance of eschewing conventionality and being one's own person.

As we have seen in *Pigs in Heaven*, *America for Kingsolver* encompasses the rich legacy of Cherokee Indian culture. Her first poetry collection, *Another America* (Seal Press, 1992), is a bilingual work -- Spanish on one side, English on the other in its pages she demonstrates her love for Spanish-American culture and her powerful identification with its struggle. This theme is further developed in her novel *Animal Dreams*, which also introduces another of Kingsolver's passions -- animal rights. Here the representative Spanish-American figure is Lloyd Peregrina, a strapping man involved in cock-fighting, like a character out of Hemingway. But he gives up this blood sport for his beloved Codi. For the author, the animals, the plants, and the land are all important parts of the planet, just like people.

Lloyd asked, "What do you think animals dream about?"

"I don't know. Animal heaven," I laughed.

"I think they dream about whatever they do when they're awake ..."

"But that's kind of sad. Couldn't a dog have an imagination, like a person?"

"It's the same with people. There's nothing sad about it. People dream about what they do when they're awake. ... Your dreams, what you hope for and all that, it's not separate from your life. It grows right up out of it. ... If you want sweet dreams, you've got to have a sweet life."

Lloyd also tells Codi that he would die for the land. Through his eyes, we see the splendour of the other America of pueblos, desert arras, land rich in foliage, and rocks of incredible colours. As Lloyd and Codi make their way through the rich underbrush, we see the beauty of native American soil. These are novels where the land itself is a character, with its turbulent weather and geographic splendour.

In the high-school biology classes that Codi teaches, children learn to respect the land and to begin to face the environmental hazards humankind is creating. The town of Grace figures in this work, a paradise of exquisite apple orchards and clear rivers, but pollution threatens to destroy Eden. Kingsolver's background as a biologist comes into play when she writes about the environment and its inhabitants she once began a PhD thesis on the social life of termites and has written technical papers on arid lands.


*Animal Dreams* also contains a critique of American involvement in Third World countries. Codi's altruistic sister Hallie is motivated to go to Nicaragua to help with the struggle and is killed there. Parts of this

novel and some of Kingsolver's poems have an overly didactic quality. Kingsolver herself is aware of this hazard and says, "If there were a single banner hanging over my writing desk, it would say 'Don't preach.' I have to work hard to refrain from diatribe because I feel very strongly about human rights and human justice ..." (Contemporary Authors).

Although she is shy, she is firm about the issues that affect her most. Like Hallie in *Animal Dreams*, she is ethical. She has a powerful disdain for war, for example, and during the Gulf War she decided to relocate to Spain's Canary Islands. She believes that writing is writing, and for each idea she has, she chooses an appropriate vehicle, a genre. (She first learned about her craft when an early writing teacher told her to compose sonnets. She produced hundreds. At its best, her work has the poetic conciseness of this most difficult literary form.) When she offers occasional classes in creative writing, she is surprised to find that many of her students have no idea what they are trying to say. She says that she would never waste her readers' time unless she felt she had something important to tell them. "If I don't, then I should, as Dolly Parton says, do hair, get out of the field."

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# Barbara Kingsolver

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**Great quotes to inspire, empower and motivate you to live the life of your dreams and become the person you've always wanted to be!**

## Hope

**T**he very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.

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**HEADLINE:** Fiction;  
Talking with ...**Barbara Kingsolver**;  
A child's eyes bring awareness of world's cultures

**BYLINE:** Carolyn Nizzi Warmbold

**BODY:**

Barbara Kingsolver hearkened to past experiences in creating her new novel, "The Poisonwood Bible" (HarperCollins, \$ 26), which is set partly in Georgia.

The book focuses on the Price family, who set out from Bethlehem, Ga., in 1959 to serve for a year as unsanctioned, evangelical Baptist missionaries in a Congo village. The story is told not by Nathan Price, who bullies his wife and four daughters, but by the five female family members over several decades.

As the daughter of public health workers --- "different in every way from the parents I created for the narrators of this tale" --- Kingsolver spent time in the Congo as a child. In a recent phone interview from her Tucson, Ariz., home, the author, born in 1955, recalled her family's stay in a remote village in the early '60s when former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was coming to power (after the novel's political events). "It was my first experience with another world," she said, "and it permanently altered notions of my own culture. . . . It formed my idea of right and wrong."


Kingsolver spent five years outlining and writing the novel. "It was an enormous project and scary," she said. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it."

The author has always been interested in cultural differences. "It's easy to settle into a particular culture and to feel right about your place at the table," she said. "There's nothing like a visit to an extremely different culture to unsettle that."

Kingsolver grew up in Kentucky but spent a lot of time in Georgia, hiking and visiting Atlanta, so it made sense to use North Georgia as the family's starting point. Besides, she wanted her characters to come from the segregated South of the 1950s and to "carry those ideas about race into Africa with very interesting results." And finally, she wanted some of the Prices to return home and to come of age as Atlanta and the nation did. The city's rich civil rights history is important in the course of the novel, as is its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Barbara Kingsolver / STEPHEN L. HOPPER / HarperCollins

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## INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA KINGSOLVER

**Question:** I have met many missionaries to Africa in their adopted environments, and so I was enthralled by your depiction of the Prices and their reception from the villagers. Could you comment about the research and life experience that helped you so accurately recreate the world of these missionaries to the Congo?

**Kingsolver:** Historical fiction is a frighteningly labor-intensive proposition. It took me many years to write *The Poisonwood Bible*, most of them spent on research, which fell into several categories.



Most obviously, I read a lot of books about the political, social, and natural history of Africa and the Congo. Some of these are listed in a bibliography at the end of the novel; dozens more are not. Sometimes, reading a whole, densely-written book on, say, the formation and dissolution of indigenous political parties during the Congolese independence, or an account of the life histories of Central African venomous snakes, would move me only a sentence or two forward in my understanding of my subject. But every sentence mattered. I knew it would take years, and I tried to be patient. Some of my sources were famous and well-written, but most were obscurities, like the quirky self-published memoirs written by missionaries to the Congo in the 50's and 60's, which I'd sometimes find in used book stores. These were gems, rendering clear details of missionary life and attitudes from the era.

I read, and re-read daily, from the King James Bible. It gave me the rhythm of the Price family's speech, the frame of reference for their beliefs, and countless plot ideas.

Likewise, I began nearly every writing day by perusing a huge old two-volume Kikongo-French dictionary, compiled early in the century (by a missionary, of course). Slowly I began to grasp the music and subtlety of this amazing African language, with its infinite capacity for being misunderstood and mistranslated.

One of the novel's challenges was the matter of capturing the language of teenage females from the Southeastern U.S. in the late 1950's. Since I was barely alive then, this was also foreign territory. Teenage speech is stereotyped and notoriously ephemeral; if I'd just guessed, it would have sounded inauthentic. This stumped me, until I hit paydirt in a used book store in Boston: 35 pounds (I had to mail them home) of *Life*, *Look*, and *Saturday Evening Post* magazines from 1958-1961. I spent hundreds of hours immersed

in the news, attitudes, and advertisements of these years. Slowly the voices of my novel began to emerge, and Rachel Price--like Athena--was born fully formed, with every hair in place.

"Aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?"

Another kind of research I did, as your question suggests, was in the domain of life experience. I happen to have spent a brief portion of my childhood (1963) in a small village in central Congo, and this undoubtedly gave that place permanent importance in my mind. I have strong sensory memories of playing with village children and exploring the jungle. When I began the novel my parents shared photographs and journals from that time, which helped stir my own memories. My parents were not missionaries, but we met several missionary families in Africa (although none quite like the Prices, I'm happy to report), so I knew a little of that life. But the bottom line is this: I was a child, in 1963, and understood only about a thimbleful of what was happening around me in the Congo. The thematic material of *The Poisonwood Bible* is serious, adult stuff. I wrote the book, not because of a brief adventure I had in place of second grade, but because as an adult I'm interested in cultural imperialism and post-colonial history. I had to approach the subject in an adult way.

Books can provide only verbally-rendered information. I also needed to know things about Africa that must be learned first-hand. I made research trips into Western and Central Africa (as near as I could get to Mobutu's Zaire), and kept detailed journals on sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and the sort of domestic trivia that seldom shows up in important books. Whenever possible I stayed with residents of the area I was visiting, and I always volunteered to cook dinner so I could walk to a village market with coins in hand and face the daunting, educational experience of bargaining and bringing home the ingredients of a decent meal. I asked a lot of questions that many Africans surely found amusing and too personal, but once in awhile I struck up a friendship. I'm especially grateful for those--the Senegalese mother, the University student in Cotonou, who suffered my curiosity for days on end, frankly giving me views on religion, history, and family life that would permanently alter my universe.

I spent time in museums, here and abroad, studying exhibits on African religion and material culture. I lost myself in the amazing Okapi diorama in the American Museum of Natural History. And I spent one unforgettable afternoon in the Reptile House of the San Diego Zoo, watching a green mamba.

So there you have it: what I did last summer, and the many seasons before. If this laundry list of disparate observations seems excessive or odd, I can only say that this is what it means to be a novelist. You have to be madly in love with the details.

**Question:** One of the greatest challenges a writer faces is creating multi-faceted characters, and that challenge becomes particularly difficult when the character is as one-sided and single-minded as Nathan Price. What are your feelings about Nathan? Do you believe you've done him and his faith justice?

**Kingsolver:** Nathan kept me in thrall for thousands of pages, counting the many drafts of this long novel. Am I pleased with how I rendered him? Of course! I never turn in a



manuscript until every character, image, and word is exactly how I want it to be. Nathan is single-minded all right, but hardly one-sided. He's ferocious and cowardly; charismatic and revolting; brilliant and tedious. I'm not sure what you mean by "doing him justice." I certainly don't owe him anything. He's a character, invented by me, for no other purpose than to serve my plot.

As a writer of literary fiction, I count on my readers to have the intelligence and subtlety to understand this relationship between characters and theme. Nathan Price doesn't need to represent the missionary profession, any more than Dr. Jekyll represents all physicians or King Lear represents all old men with daughters. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a political allegory. Nathan Price is a symbolic figure at its center, suggesting many things about the way the U.S. and Europe have approached Africa with a history of cultural arrogance and misunderstanding at every turn. He is meant to be difficult to understand, hard to love, and ultimately, something we must all own up to on some level.

Did I do justice to his faith? I believe so, yes. The soul of the book is its portrayal of the divergent spiritual views of its characters. This is by far the most religious book I've written, and gave me a chance to explore not only African religion, but the spiritual traditions of my own culture. As the very Jesus-like Brother Fowles says, in the novel, "There are Christians, and there are Christians." Nathan Price and Tata Fowles offer an inkling of the extremely wide range of people who use the same name for many different brands of faith and works.

**Question:** You have said of yourself, "The natural world provides me with my philosophy and religion. My training is evolutionary biology, and that's ultimately how I understand the workings of the world." Could you comment briefly on the faiths the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* embrace as a result of their life experiences, and how they seem to make sense of the world?

**Kingsolver:** I'm not certain how the first part of your question relates to the second. If you mean for me to explain, further, about my own faith, I'll mostly demur, because my own faith is a personal matter. Suffice it to say that I consider myself a very religious person, though other people do not always agree. I live and raise my children with one eye on Creation (with its endless, comforting cycles and stories of change through time), and the other firmly fixed on our obligation to serve justice, moral conscience and future generations.

As for the second half of your question, the answer is the book! The moral development of the Price women, their life experiences, and the different paths to faith and redemption which the separately embrace--that is what *The Poisonwood Bible* is all about. If I could set it out for you briefly, I wouldn't have needed to write 700 pages. To my mind, religion is never well served by people who attempt to reduce it to a sound bite.

Thank you for your excellent questions.

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## LIT CHAT



### "I'm a horrible eavesdropper"



Balancing a strong sense of social justice with a warm narrative voice, novelist Barbara Kingsolver won the loyalty of tens of thousands of readers with her first three novels, "The Bean Trees," "Animal Dreams," and "Pigs in Heaven." Her new book of essays, "High Tide in Tucson," was published in October. In a recent interview at San Francisco's City Arts & Lectures series, Kingsolver talked about multiculturalism, the pressures of publicity, and how she learned to write with a Southern accent.

**You write a lot about racial and ethnic pride. You say in one essay: "I'm not so much interested in bloodlines as I am in the motivation for multicultural appreciation. I appreciate because I am interested. Just as I can admire tropical fish without being part fish; and if I am part fish, that's my business." How does that fit with movements for the celebration of racial and ethnic pride in schools and in the larger society?**

It's probably separate, I hope no one questions that it's a terrific thing to know your own history and ethnicity and celebrate it, and celebrate your holidays and your food and your language and be pleased about that, and be open to sharing it with others.

The transfer to writing gets tricky. We're always writing about someone else, unless we're writing our autobiography. So the question gets to be, how far can you go and not be stealing? I know writers who say if I execute it well, I can write about anybody on the planet, from the point of view of anyone on the planet.

On the other end, there are writers I admire very much who say it's wrong to write from the point of view of anyone you have not been; even for a woman

to write from the point of view of a man is wrong. The arguments for that are compelling. One is that you probably won't get it right. Another is that you are indeed usurping the position of someone who could have told that story better. And if you view publishing as a world in which there are finite slots for books to come through, then if I as a white woman use the slot that Spike Lee could have used, then that's wrong. And I agree with that, too.

### **Are there are a limited number of slots?**

Well, it's a pretty big limited number, but sure. The way I've settled this question for myself is this: I will first of all observe the world in which I live, which happens to be racially and ethnically very diverse. My first task is to pay close attention to other points of view as they come into my world, and to report accurately. And to invent characters who are true to what I see, in order to play out the questions that I want to answer. I look to John Steinbeck as a terrific model. He wrote characters who were Mexican laborers, he wrote women wonderfully, a character who was mentally retarded, and he did all that without ever entering their consciousness. He did it from the outside, and he did it wonderfully.

That seems like solid ground for a writer: I know what it looks like and what it sounds like, but I just don't know what it's like to live my life in that skin.

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Next page: The poetry of everyday speech

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THE ELECTION MAY BE OVER,

September 1, 1993

AT LUNCH WITH BARBARA KINGSOLVER

## Termites Are Interesting But Books Sell Better

By SARAH LYALL

**B**arbara Kingsolver arrived for lunch so promptly as to be early, a refreshing gesture from someone who was soon casually confessing that her writing career began with an enormous white lie.

The lie occurred some years ago, before Ms. Kingsolver had published her three novels and one book of short stories, and before her latest book, "Pigs in Heaven," made its gently opinionated author a bona fide literary success. Back then, Ms. Kingsolver was a graduate student at the University of Arizona, studying the social life of termites.

It's a very interesting question if you're in this special field of population biology," Ms. Kingsolver said, "but if you're not, and most people aren't, it's very difficult to understand what it has to do with the state of the union." Her thesis was to have been called "Kin Selection Among Heterotermes Aureus," but the whole thing was making her increasingly dispirited, she said.

She was growing tired of the grinding lab work, as many graduate students do, and tired of the academic back-stabbing, tired of the struggles to keep her subjects alive (termites are very sensitive to temperature changes). So she decided to quit and take her first writing job, as a science writer for the university. Fine for her; dismaying for her academic advisers.

"My thesis committee was really mad at me -- they all thought I had great potential -- so I felt under great pressure to come up with a legitimate excuse," Ms. Kingsolver said, sipping an iced tea. She was speaking with great care and an undercurrent of almost constant playfulness, as if she might break into laughter at any time.

"I can't say what it was -- I'm too embarrassed -- but it had to do with a family member who is still alive. I made up a terrible lie involving a car accident and a permanent disability, and said I needed to take another job to support my unnamed, maimed relative."

Ms. Kingsolver, who is now 38 and nothing if not mature, related all this quite sheepishly over Southwestern food at the East Side restaurant Arizona 206, chosen because that is her home state. Comfortably dressed in a sleeveless flowered top and flowing scarlet skirt, with a broad, amused face and kinky brown hair falling in little curls at her forehead, Ms. Kingsolver said she couldn't eat too much: her agent, Frances Goldin, was waiting at the hotel with homemade lasagna. Instead, the decision was made to share five or six appetizers.

An array of delicacies arrived, including a murky black fungus dish that Ms. Kingsolver swore was made of hallucinogenic substances. There was also a salad with tiny quail eggs that the author dove right into, despite the soft spot in her heart for the "darling, adorable" quail who live behind her house in Tucson, Ariz., and who inspired a lyrical quail sighting in "The Bean Trees," her first novel.

Until now, Ms. Kingsolver's career has been quietly successful, gaining momentum with each book. Independent booksellers have nominated her three times for their Abby Award, which they give to the book they most enjoyed recommending and selling to their customers. And in May, the author charmed hundreds of sleepy booksellers at their convention in Miami with an anecdote about how, during a period when she wrote freelance pieces, she once stepped out of the shower and interviewed Kurt Vonnegut naked. (It was over the telephone, she explained, adding, "I don't know what he was wearing.")

"Pigs in Heaven" is her first book on the New York Times best-seller list. (It has been there for 11 weeks and, as of Sunday, Sept. 5, will be in the No. 9 spot, all the more impressive at a time when the list is crowded with beach books by people like John Grisham and Jeffrey Archer.) The novel tackles so many personal and public issues that it defies easy description. But at the heart it is an account of a custody battle between a white woman who adopted an abused, terrified little Indian girl left behind at a roadside rest stop, and the Cherokee nation, whose members identify the girl as one of their own and fight to get her back. It ends with a Solomonic compromise that is either fatally contrived or wonderfully creative, depending on how you see it.

Women are undeniably Ms. Kingsolver's biggest fans. Some men seem puzzled by her appeal, pigeonholing her as a touchy-feely women's author even as their sisters, mothers, girlfriends and wives read, reread, borrow, lend and discuss her books. The occasional negative reviews usually seem to come from men who, to use Deborah Tannen's words, just don't understand.

One reviewer, Vince Passarro, wrote in *Mirabella* magazine, "This looks like a marketing person's idea of what a novel should be, with heavy plot, unconvincing dialogue and predictable-at-every-turn characters."

Ms. Kingsolver writes books with strong idealistic messages, about the environment, the working poor, Central American refugees, single motherhood, and Indian rights. But she isn't some dogmatically leftist, preachy author, even if she did select her agent, Ms. Goldin, on the basis of an advertisement saying: "I do not represent any material that is sexist, ageist, or gratuitously violent."

Her books show a droll wit and an intricate understanding of the almost imperceptible subtleties of relationships. They feature exceptionally strong women who act unexpectedly, if emphatically, and who aren't so sure they need men around. (Which seems, in part, to be wishful thinking on Ms. Kingsolver's part: she has just undergone a wrenching divorce from her husband, a chemistry professor. "I don't much enjoy being single," she said, her voice cracking a little and becoming even more measured. "I hear it's supposed to be fun, but what it means is that you fix dinner and you do the dishes and you bring in the groceries and you balance the checkbook, and you do it all while you're on a book tour.")

Being a novelist seems to have been the remotest of career possibilities for Ms. Kingsolver when she was growing up, gawky and string-bean thin and different from everyone else, in rural Kentucky. "I wanted to read 'Anna Karenina' and everybody else wanted to do stuff in the back of cars," she said. School was decidedly unchallenging -- she has recalled that the only math and science courses offered were called "Math" and "Science" -- and so, rather than stay home and become a tobacco farmer's wife, she fled for DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., winning a music scholarship.

"I was trained in classical piano, but it kind of dawned on me that classical pianists compete for six job openings a year, and the rest of us get to play 'Blue Moon' in a hotel lobby," she said. So she switched to biology.

After arriving in Arizona, embracing and then abandoning her termite studies, Ms. Kingsolver took the science-writing job, addressing such topics as the potential of gopher weed as a fuel crop for the university. All the while, she wrote poetry and short stories, showing them to no one.

As she was recalling this, a tape recorder that had been whirring quietly on the restaurant seat suddenly stopped, refusing to start up again even with new batteries and a good deal of coaxing from Ms. Kingsolver. She grew visibly nervous, remembering a day in her own career when hours of interviews were inexplicably obliterated from a malfunctioning tape recorder. "You poor, poor thing," she said to her visitor, and then seemed a bit spooked, in empathy, for the rest of the lunch.

How did she begin her career in fiction writing? About a decade ago she

entered a short-story contest held by a Phoenix newspaper, The New Times, which she described as "one of those free weekly alternative papers that's arts oriented and does investigative pieces like uncovering the dirt on the city council." Months passed by and nothing came of it, until more than a year later, when a friend congratulated her -- she had won and nobody had told her.

More short stories were published (a compilation is called "Homeland"); then in 1988 came "The Bean Trees," which she wrote during the chronic insomnia of pregnancy, and "Animal Dreams." She says that she writes easily and fluidly, as if writing a screenplay for a movie in her head, and that she thinks of her characters as house guests who have come to stay for a spell. Her daughter, Camille, now 6, was a big help with "Pigs in Heaven," providing her mother with useful child's-eye-view observations.

Ms. Kingsolver said that she had expected some questioning of the adoption issues in her "Pigs in Heaven," but she seemed genuinely taken aback later on in the day when two enraged women got up at a mostly cozy reading at Shakespeare & Company on the Upper West Side to noisily condemn her book for, they said, endorsing the notion that adoption is bad for children. (Ms. Kingsolver says that it's much more complicated than that, that she agreed in part with both the antagonists in her book and in fact feels that she gave more weight to the adopted mother's side.)

But now that she's become genuinely famous, she's learning to take in criticism, even from the most unexpected sources. Early in the summer, for instance, she appeared on a television call-in show to discuss her book and her work. "One guy in New Mexico was listening in his pickup truck," Ms. Kingsolver said. "He pulled over to the side of the road to call and tell me that I was all wrong." (He didn't say exactly what he meant.) "What could I say? 'Get back in your pickup truck, sir, and have a nice day.' "

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# Barbara Kingsolver

by Judi Ketteler



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## How to Read:

As you begin a Barbara Kingsolver novel, the sense of voice will strike you immediately, especially with the first-person narratives of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*. Her characters are spunky, eccentric and let you know it right away. Kingsolver's unaffected prose reads quickly--accessible, yet at the same time, holds up in academic circles of discourse. Her novels have definite feminist implications, the sense of community among women in *The Bean Trees* so strong and poignant that you may never want to leave it. A social activist in life and writing, Kingsolver tackles the colonial experience in her most recent novel *The Poisonwood Bible*--a longer and more ambitious work. Her books are ideal for your favorite overstuffed chair, but leave some time for intellectual and political reflection afterwards.

**Best Starting Book:** *The Bean Trees*

## Biography:

Born: 1955, Annapolis, Maryland

Educated: DePauw University, B.A., 1977;  
University of Arizona, M.S., 1981

A former science journalist, Barbara Kingsolver has emerged as one of the leading voices in contemporary American fiction. Bridging the gap between the "popular" and the "literary," her novels appear on both best-seller lists and college syllabi. Kingsolver weaves environmentalist and feminist themes into both her fiction and regular contributions to scientific journals. The latter have the literary tilt of the essays of Stephen Jay Gould.

After college Kingsolver worked as an archeologist, x-ray technician, and typesetter, among others, before finding her stride as a freelance journalist. Specializing in science writing, she won the Arizona Press Club Award for outstanding feature writing in 1986. During this time, she also worked on a novel about



Taylor Greer, a young woman who, on a cross-country trip, "acquires" a child she names Turtle. What began as a cure for her insomnia became *The Bean Trees* (1988). Embraced by a wide swath of readers, *Ms.* magazine called the author "A major talent...Kingsolver's characters tug at the soul."

Kingsolver next published *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (1989)--a non-fiction book based on her previous reporting. Published that same year, the collection *Homeland and Other Stories* focused on women's physical and emotional journeys to their homelands. Returning to familiar places only to find them irrevocably changed is a familiar theme in Kingsolver's work. Her next novel *Animal Dreams* (1990), told the story of sisters Hallie and Codi who travel, correspond, and struggle with their own losses.

Raised in rural southern Kentucky, Kingsolver's post-college travels immersed her in what could be deemed a "Southwestern multiculturalism." In 1992, she published *Another America: Otra America*, a collection of her poems translated into Spanish. The *Women's Review of Books* noted that "Kingsolver feels a deep connection to the Spanish-speaking lands that begin before the Rio Grande and stretch all the way to the windswept limits of Tierra del Fuego." Kingsolver politicizes the anthology: The poems explore and ultimately explode racial stereotypes, throwing a cold eye towards Western colonialization.

Kingsolver picked up the tale of Taylor and Turtle Greer in *Pigs in Heaven* (1993). Turtle has a Cherokee heritage; in order to be able to keep her daughter, Taylor has to journey with Turtle to Turtle's own homelands. Overall, the novel received positive reviews, although some critics complained of a mid-plot "flatness." Her next collection of essays, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never* (1996) received higher praise when *The New York Times* said that Kingsolver "speaks in a language rich with music and replete with good sense."

Kingsolver's latest novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, (1998) became a best seller and was a finalist for both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pulitzer Prize. An ambitious project, it tells the parallel stories of an American missionary

family separated by political upheaval in the former Belgian Congo. Compared to the work of Paul Theroux and Peter Mattiessen, Kingsolver's politicizing of the Western experience in post-colonial Africa garnered both critical praise and accusations of heavy handedness. Around this time, she inaugurated the Bellwether Prize, awarded for fiction addressing issues of social justice.

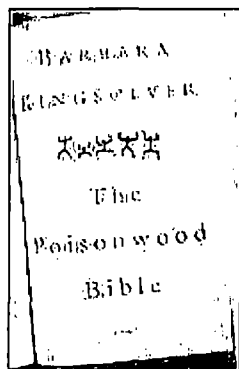
Barbara Kingsolver lives in Tucson, Arizona with her husband and two daughters.

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HOME



## Barbara Kingsolver turns to her past to understand the present

INTERVIEW BY ELLEN KANNER

Barbara Kingsolver was a little girl of seven when she and her family left their Kentucky home to spend two years in the Congo. When she returned, the world looked totally different to her. "I understood the way we lived in my little corner of Kentucky was just that," says the author. "One little corner where we had certain things we did, possessed, believed in, but there was a great big world out there where people had no use for many of the things my community held dear.

"I came home with an acutely heightened sense of race, of ethnicity. I got to live in a place where people thought I was noticeable and probably hideous because of the color of my skin."

These weren't easy lessons, says Kingsolver, but they were priceless. She has not forgotten what the Congo taught her. It made her the person, the writer, she is.

"I'm extremely interested in cultural difference, in social and political history, and the sparks that fly when people with different ways of looking at the world come together and need to reconcile or move through or celebrate those differences. All that precisely describes everything I've ever written, *Animal Dreams*, *Pigs in Heaven*, all of it." It also describes Kingsolver's **The Poisonwood Bible**, a novel of post-colonial Africa which brings to bear all she observed as a child in the Congo and all she came to understand of it as an adult.

"Given that this is what we did as a nation in Africa, how are we to feel about it now?" asks the author. "How do we live with it and how do we move on? Given that this is our history, what do we do with it? One thing is very clear, there isn't a single answer -- there's a spectrum of answers."

Representing that spectrum is Nathan Price, a Baptist missionary, his wife, and their four daughters. The Prices arrive in Africa believing God is on their side. That changes quickly. "I always believed any sin was easily rectified if only you let Jesus Christ into

### The Poisonwood Bible

By Barbara Kingsolver  
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your heart," says Nathan's daughter, Leah, "but here it gets complicated."

Indeed. A stranger tells Nathan, "I do not think the people are looking for your kind of salvation . . . they are looking for . . . the new soul of Africa." But in his eagerness to save everyone's soul, Nathan is deaf to the truth, just as he is deaf to the nuances of the Congolese culture.

"We sang in church, Tata Nzolo! Which means 'Father in Heaven' or 'Father of Fish Bait,' depending on just how you sing it," recalls Nathan's wife, Orleanna, who returns from her time in the Congo marked and stricken by loss.



Leah, on the other hand, embraces Africa in the 30-year course of the book, even at the risk of rejecting the cornerstones of her past. "I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. Without that rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to sink or swim."

Leah's bookish twin Adah is a darker presence, a witness to the country's horrors. Rachel, the eldest Price daughter, is vain, contemptuous of her new life, and full of comic malapropisms, given as she is to "feminine tuition." Ruth May, the youngest, is the Price always in a hurry, propelled by a child's innocence and enthusiasm.

The Price girls and their mother narrate **The Poisonwood Bible** in alternating chapters. Kingsolver chose multiple voices to portray the enormity, the complexity, of her subject. That choice, however, created complexities of its own.

"I wasn't very far into this book when I realized what I set out to do was impossible." The author laughs. "Or at least extremely difficult, much harder than anything I ever did before. The most difficult thing was to fine tune the voices -- five narrators, all in the same family, most of them about the same age. How do you make each voice distinct enough that the reader could open to any page and know who's speaking?"

"It led to many quiet little fits of flying paper in my office. But it was also great fun. What I love best about being a novelist is I get to do something different every time. When you're flying by the seat of your pants, you're never bored."

Writing is Kingsolver's passion, but she's no artiste. "I consider myself a writer of the working class. I'm a little bit smug about it. I have so little tolerance for writers who have elaborate three-hour rituals before they even get down to work. I think, oh, please, Mr.

Annie Proulx  
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Julee Rosso  
Carol Saline & Sharon  
Wohlmuth  
Jeff Shaara  
Carol Shields  
Dan Simmons  
Lauren Slater  
Jane Smiley  
Martha Stewart  
Graham Swift  
Elizabeth Marshall-  
Thomas  
Lewis Thomas  
Liz Tilberis  
Joanna Trollope  
Scott Turow  
Tracey Ullman  
von Hoffman brothers  
Alice Walker  
William Wegman  
Rebecca Wells  
Laura Zigman

#### Children's Authors

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Mary Chapin-Carpenter  
Caroline B. Cooney  
Paula Danziger  
David Diaz  
Mem Fox  
Kevin Henkes  
William Joyce  
Kathleen Krull  
Leonard S. Marcus  
Han Nolan  
Gary Paulsen  
Chris Raschka  
Gary Soto

rituals before they even get down to work. I think, oh, please. My idea of a pre-writing ritual is getting the kids on the bus and sitting down." The years she worked as a technical writer taught her "to produce whether I wanted to or not. It would be easy to say oh, I have writer's block, oh, I have to wait for my muse. I don't. Chain that muse to your desk and get the job done.

"I love revision. Revision is where the art really happens, when you begin to manipulate, shift things around so your theme begins to shine through."

While Kingsolver was revising her novel, the Congo itself began its own revision. Mobutu, the Congolese dictator in power for over 30 years, died and his regime fell. The new president, Laurent Kabila, has clashed with Tutsi rebels, and the Congo is once again in the throes of bloody strife.

"It's very odd," says Kingsolver. "This book is in some way timely, and nothing could surprise me more. When I began writing, I thought my primary task would be to get my readers to believe there was a dictator called Mobutu, that all these things really happened somewhere far away and they should care."

As America and the United Nations study the Congo and analyze strategies for intervention, Kingsolver hopes governing bodies will heed some of the lessons she learned as a child, the lessons of **The Poisonwood Bible**.

"We can never know, never look at history with anything but a narrow and distorted window," says the author. "We can never know the whole truth, only what's been recorded for us and what our cultural and political predisposition understands. Leah says history is never much more than a mirror we can tilt to look at ourselves."

#### Kingsolver's other works include:

**Animal Dreams (HarperPerennial, \$13)**

**The Bean Trees (HarperPaperbacks, \$6.99)**

**High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never (HarperPerennial, \$13)**

**Homeland and Other Stories (HarperPerennial, \$13)**

**Pigs in Heaven (HarperPerennial, \$14)**

Ellen Kanner is a writer in Miami, Florida.

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June 27, 1993

## And Baby Makes Two

By KAREN KARBO

**B**arbara Kingsolver's terrific new novel, "Pigs in Heaven," picks up where her highly acclaimed first novel, "The Bean Trees," left off.

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**PIGS IN HEAVEN**  
 By Barbara Kingsolver.
 

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In this heart-twisting sequel, her feisty young heroine, Taylor Greer, is faced with the possibility of losing her 6-year-old daughter, Turtle. Taylor, an outspoken, self-professed hillbilly from Kentucky, had headed west to avoid the poverty and despair that were snagging her former schoolmates. Passing through Oklahoma, she was snagged instead by a child.

In the offhand way that can lead a person in a whole new direction, Taylor stopped at a bar on the edge of the Cherokee Nation; there, an Indian woman deposited a little girl on the front seat of Taylor's Volkswagen and promptly disappeared. The tiny, silent toddler, whom Taylor called Turtle for her fierce snapping-turtle grip, had been beaten and abused. Taylor kept on driving, and when the car broke down in southern Arizona, she decided just to stay put. Thus Taylor Greer became a single mother.

When "Pigs in Heaven" opens, three years have elapsed since Taylor officially adopted Turtle. Not surprisingly, their household in Tucson is a happy specimen of the kind of family life that could never be described as traditional. Taylor has found love of sorts with a musician named Jax, who plays keyboard for a group called the Irascible Babies. Turtle is doing well, considering her devastating past. Together, the three live in a dilapidated stone house at the Rancho Copo, an eccentric low-rent community owned by a local artist. This is deep Kingsolver territory, familiar to readers of her previous novels and short stories, a frowzy stretch of desert where modern-day absurdity, occasional beauty and grinding injustice (usually perpetrated against Indians and Central Americans) intersect.

Early in the book, when Taylor and Turtle are on a visit to the Hoover Dam, Turtle is the only witness to a freak accident: reaching over a wall to grab a soda can, a man falls off the dam and into a concrete spillway. When he's rescued as a result of their efforts, Turtle and Taylor make national headlines

and are asked to appear on "Oprah," as part of a program called "Children Who Have Saved Lives."

It goes without saying that everyone watches "Oprah," even a brilliant, beautiful attorney for the Cherokee Nation, Annawake Fourkiller, who begins a campaign to investigate Turtle's adoption. According to the Indian Child Welfare Act, if an Indian is adopted without the consent of the tribe, the adoption is invalid. Soon thereafter, Annawake pays a visit to Tucson, where she has an awkward conversation with Taylor's boyfriend:

" 'You think Taylor's being selfish,' he states.

"Annawake hesitates. There are so many answers to that question. 'Selfish is a loaded word,' she says. 'I've been off the reservation, I know the story. There's this kind of moral argument for doing what's best for yourself.'

"Jax puts his hands together under his chin and rolls his eyes toward heaven. 'Honor the temple, for the Lord has housed thy soul within. Buy that temple a foot massage and a Rolex watch.'

" 'I think it would be hard to do anything else. Your culture is one long advertisement for how to treat yourself to the life you really deserve. Whether you actually deserve it or not.' "

Annawake is right, of course. Still, when I read this, visions of the long-suffering Cherokee who knows the value of kith, kin, sacrifice and every other noble thing missing in American society trudged through my head. And when it turned out that Turtle has relatives in a town on the reservation called Heaven, Okla., I almost despaired, foreseeing a thinly disguised morality play in which Taylor would be forced to give up Turtle simply because Taylor's skin color was politically incorrect.

I couldn't have been more wrong, which attests to Ms. Kingsolver's resounding achievement. For as the novel progresses, she somehow manages to maintain her political views without sacrificing the complexity of her characters' predicaments.

Ms. Kingsolver not only respects Taylor, she also understands a single mother's greatest fear -- that her lack of resources can be used against her in an effort to take her child away. (When Annawake Fourkiller visits Taylor's house, she notes that it "is truly rundown by social-service standards . . . and accepts that this could be used to her advantage.") But Ms. Kingsolver also respects the virtues that Annawake sees in the Cherokee Nation: the rare sense of really belonging and, even rarer, the privileged place held by young girls in the spiritual life of the community.

If the novel falls short, it is in its consideration of the people who gave Turtle away in the first place. This child has, after all, suffered a great deal, yet even though Taylor repeatedly attests to the abuse inflicted on Turtle

before she came into her care, the actual perpetrators remain offstage, dismissed as alcoholics who left the reservation and moved to Tulsa. Near the end of the novel, one of Turtle's relatives, acknowledging his suspicions that the little girl was being beaten, admits that "I should have gone and got her. But my wife was dead and I didn't have the gumption." To which Taylor replies, "I've let her down too." But this exchange seems pat and perfunctory.

On the other hand, the solution to the question of whether Turtle would be better off with her mother or her people, while answered in a way that is fanciful, is also satisfying and just. That it is gained by way of a few suspiciously happy coincidences does little to diminish the many pleasures of Ms. Kingsolver's novel. Possessed of an extravagantly gifted narrative voice, she blends a fierce and abiding moral vision with benevolent, concise humor. Her medicine is meant for the head, the heart and the soul -- and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily.

### THE ROLE OF POVERTY

"I conceived of the idea for 'Pigs in Heaven' as I watched Native American children being adopted by outsiders," said Barbara Kingsolver. "These cases are given a lot of play here in the Southwest," and the picture they paint is "that of a baby being ripped from its adoptive mother's arms. This is a religious image, an icon, in our culture. The media view the basic unit of good as what is best for the child; the tribe sees it as what is best for the group. These are two very different value systems with no point of intersection."

In a telephone interview from her home in Tucson, Ariz., where she settled 15 years ago, Ms. Kingsolver recalled that she began to form the architecture of the story when she realized it had been set up in her first novel, "The Bean Trees." "I had the option and the obligation to deal with the issue because the moral question was completely ignored in the first book."

Poverty plays a significant role in "Pigs in Heaven." "It has to do with our mythology in this country," the author continued, "that if you are smart enough and work hard enough, you will make it. It allows us to perpetuate this huge gulf between the well-off and the desperately poor. If you fall through the cracks you must be stupid or lazy or both. It's a trap because poverty is viewed as shameful. In this culture, it's more honorable to steal than to beg."

Ms. Kingsolver views single women, particularly single mothers, as especially vulnerable. "A woman without a man -- a condition of 'man lessness' -- is defined as alone," she said with exasperation. "But a single mother is less alone than the average housewife. She must have a family -- either of birth or of creation."

Like her heroine, Taylor Greer, the author is also a woman on her own



raising a young daughter. Given a number of similarities between Taylor's life in the novel and that of Ms. Kingsolver, the question of autobiography is unavoidable. "I set my novels in geographic and psychic territory that I know," she affirmed. "But perhaps the most important difference is that I didn't find my daughter in a car. People don't give writers enough credit for the power of the lie."

-- LYNN KARPEN

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February 9, 1992

## Everybody's Somebody's Baby

By BARBARA KINGSOLVER

**A**s I walk out the street entrance to my apartment, a kid in maroon high-tops and a startling haircut approaches, saying "Hi gorgeous." Three weeks ago, I would have assessed the degree of malice and made ready to run or tell him to bug off, depending. Today, instead, I smile, and so does my 4-year-old daughter, because after dozens of similar encounters I understand that he doesn't mean me *but her*.

This is not the United States.

For several months I've been living in Spain, and while I have struggled with the customs office, jet lag, dinner at midnight and the subjunctive tense, my only genuine culture shock has reverberated from this earthquake of a fact: People here like kids. They don't just say so, they *do*. Widows in black, buttoned-down c.e.o.'s, purple-sneakered teen-agers, the butcher, the baker, all have stopped on various sidewalks to have little chats with my daughter. Yesterday, a taxi driver leaned out his window to shout "*Hola, guapa!*" My daughter, who must have felt my conditioned flinch, looked up at me wide-eyed and explained patiently, "*I like it that people think I'm pretty.*"

With a mother's keen myopia, I would tell you, absolutely, my daughter is beautiful enough to stop traffic. But in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, I have to confess, so is every other person under the height of one meter. Not just those who agree to be seen and not heard. When my daughter gets cranky in a restaurant (and really, what do you expect at midnight?), the waiters flirt and bring her little presents and nearby diners look on with that sweet, wistful gleam of eye that before now I have only seen aimed at the dessert tray. Children are the meringues and eclairs of this culture. Americans, it seems to me now, sometimes regard children as a sort of toxic-waste product: a necessary evil, maybe, but if it's not their own they don't want to see it or hear it or, God help us, smell it.

If you don't have children, you think I'm exaggerating. But if you've changed a diaper in the last decade, you know exactly the toxic-waste glare I mean. It

goes far beyond diapers. In the United States, I have been told in restaurants: "We come here to get *away* from kids." (This for no infraction on my daughter's part that I could discern, other than being visible.) On an airplane, I heard a man tell a beleaguered woman whose infant was bawling (as loudly as I would, to clear my aching ears, if I couldn't manage chewing gum): "If you can't keep that thing quiet, you should keep it at home."

Air travel, like natural disasters, throws strangers together in unnaturally intimate circumstances. Think how well you got to know the bald spot on the guy who reclined in front of you on some long flight. As a consequence, I think of airplanes as a splendid cultural magnifying glass. On my family's recent voyage from New York to Madrid, we weren't assigned seats together. I shamelessly begged my neighbor -- a forty-something New Yorker traveling alone -- if she would take my husband's seat in another row so our air-weary and plainly miserable daughter could stretch out across our laps. My fellow traveler snapped: "No, I have to have the window seat, just like you *had* to have that baby."

Her remark left me stunned and, as always happens when someone is remarkably rude to me, momentarily guilty. Yes, she's right, conceiving this child was a rash, lunatic moment of selfishness, and now I had better be prepared to pay the price.

In the United States, where people like to think that anyone can grow up to be President, we parents are left very much on our own when it comes to the little Presidents-in-training. Our social programs for children are the hands-down worst in the industrialized world, but apparently that is just what we want. In an Arizona newspaper, I remember seeing a letter from a reader incensed by the possibility of a school budget override. "I don't have kids," he declared, "so why should I have to pay to educate other people's offspring?" The budget increase was voted down, the school district progressed from deficient to dismal and one is inclined to ask that smug nonfather just *whose* offspring he expects to doctor the maladies of his old age.

Our nation has a proud history of lone heroes and solo flights, so perhaps it's no surprise that we think of child-rearing as an individual job, not a collective responsibility. I hold that view myself, apparently, for here in my new home I'm surprised when my daughter crash-lands in the playground and a sanguine Spanish stranger picks her up and dusts her off. When a shrieking bundle lands at *my* feet, I instantly look around for the next of kin. But I'm coming to see this detachment as perverse, when applied to children, and am wondering how it ever caught on in the first place.

In the natural world, it's understandable that the robin will roll out the eggs an interloping cowbird has laid in her nest and watch them splat on the ground. But we humans are supposed to distinguish ourselves by our broad-mindedness. My grandfather's family took in and raised a neighbor's orphaned children without a thought; in an era of shortage this was

commonplace. One generation later, though, that kind of semipermeable household had vanished, at least among the white middle class.

Even in cases of formal adoption, the identity of an adopted child's birth mother was guarded like plutonium, as if the coming together of two different mothers -- matter and antimatter -- could explode the family universe. I know of an exceptional couple who recently adopted a baby, and along with the baby have more or less taken in the baby's 16-year-old mother and various of her friends and relations. I expect the baby will grow up blessed.

My second afternoon in Spain, standing on a crowded bus, as we ricocheted around a corner and my daughter reached starfish-like for stability, a man in a black beret stood up and gently helped her into his seat. In his weightless bearing I caught sight of the decades-old child, treasured by the manifold mothers of his neighborhood, growing up the way leavened dough rises surely to the kindness of bread. I thought then of the ungenerous woman on the plane, and as always happens two days after someone has been remarkably rude to me, I knew what I should have said to her: Be careful what you give children, or don't, for sooner or later you will always get it back.

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## **BARBARA KINGSOLVER: A Brief Biography**

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955. She grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field," in the part of eastern Kentucky that lies between the opulent horse farms and the impoverished coal fields. While her family has deep roots in the region, she never imagined staying there herself. "The options were limited -- grow up to be a farmer or a farmer's wife."

Kingsolver has always been a storyteller: "I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story." As a child, she wrote stories and essays and, beginning at the age of eight, kept a journal religiously. Still, it never occurred to Kingsolver that she could become a professional writer. Growing up in a rural place, where work centered mainly on survival, writing didn't seem to be a practical career choice. Besides, the writers she read, she once explained, "were mostly old, dead men. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself...."

Kingsolver left Kentucky to attend DePauw University in Indiana, where she majored in biology. She also took one creative writing course, and became active in the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in widely scattered places. In the early eighties, she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she received a Masters of Science degree. She also enrolled in a writing class taught by author Francine Prose, whose work Kingsolver admires.

Kingsolver's fiction is rich with the language and imagery of her native Kentucky. But when

she first left home, she says, "I lost my accent....[P]eople made terrible fun of me for the way I used to talk, so I gave it up slowly and became something else." During her years in school and two years spent living in Greece and France she supported herself in a variety of jobs: as an archaeologist, copy editor, X-ray technician, housecleaner, biological researcher and translator of medical documents. After graduate school, a position as a science writer for the University of Arizona soon led her into feature writing for journals and newspapers. Her numerous articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*, and many of them are included in the collection, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*. In 1986 she won an Arizona Press Club award for outstanding feature writing, and in 1995, after the publication of *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from her alma mater, De Pauw University.

Kingsolver credits her careers in scientific writing and journalism with instilling in her a writer's discipline and broadening her "fictional possibilities." Describing herself as a shy person who would generally prefer to stay at home with her computer, she explains that "journalism forces me to meet and talk with people I would never run across otherwise."

From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.



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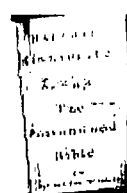
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### **The Bean Trees**

#### *New York Times Book Review*

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### **Animal Dreams**

#### *New York Times Book Review*

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#### *New York Times Book Review*

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*The Guardian (London) November 18, 2000*

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November 18, 2000

**SECTION:** Guardian Weekend Pages, Pg. 48

**LENGTH:** 3070 words

**HEADLINE:** Weekend: AMONG THE WILD THINGS: As a scientist, **Barbara Kingsolver** sees human beings as a small, not overly important part of the natural order. As a novelist, she puts the individual to the forefront. She unravels the paradox for Suzie Mackenzie

**BYLINE:** Suzie Mackenzie

**BODY:**

Just recently, the novelist Barbara Kingsolver gave her publishers an ultimatum - exerted control over her environment, you could say: she would continue to do book tours and give readings only on the condition that these took place in halls of no less than 500 people and that the money raised from ticket sales be donated to a local environmental cause. In this way she could feel she was being useful, "and not simply parading around saying look at me, drawing attention to myself, which is something I hate".

Naturally, the publishers concurred. Kingsolver is a bestselling author who deals with big themes. Her last novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, has sold more than two million copies after it was taken up by Oprah Winfrey's book club: "It reached a whole different readership," she says. "Women who watch TV in the afternoon." And her latest book, *Prodigal Summer*, has already made its way on to bestseller lists in the US. If she wants to promote the idea of self-promotion as some kind of vulgarity unless harnessed to the common good, no one is going to argue. So, the citizens of Chicago, Michigan, Milwaukee, Baltimore, North Carolina, and that was just last week, had their consciousness raised. In Tucson, where she lives, hundreds of dollars were donated in one evening to help save the Sonoma desert. And the publishers got to sell their books. Put like this, it sounds like a clever mixture of piety and calculation. But it is, as Kingsolver, a former biologist, would recognise, the perfect biological fix. It furthers the species, in this case the novelist - through the individual: it is at the level of individuals that we create, after all - while recognising, in the overall scheme of things, the individual's relative insignificance. "I am not here just to blow my own horn," as Kingsolver says.

She has never bought "the ridiculous myth" of individualism, Kingsolver says. "At school, all the heroes we were taught to admire were the solo fliers, like Lindbergh or Edison. It's the national religion of America - the self-made man who depends on no one." It is also the great human arrogance, she says, "to think we are the most important thing; and not only that, to act as if we are the only thing", when it's obvious that we are part of the animal chain - and more subject to other laws than we like to think we are.

But what has made us the most successful animal on the planet is precisely individualism. It may be an illusion, but it's a pretty effective driving force. She knows this, of course. When Kingsolver says that now she is successful she can call the shots, she may be acting on behalf of the group, but it's not a group assertion. It's her. The part of her that's the scientist can stand outside and see humans as just another species; the part that is the novelist writes from the inside, where human beings can't be seen as just another life swarm and where emotions and motivations matter. It's an unusual position for a novelist to take - both inside and outside culture. And it's a tension she plays in all her books: a reverence for nature that never gives way to a disdain for humans. What she is saying is



that as human beings we need both the humility to accept our position as part of the bigger scheme and the self-determination that makes us act. Both are survival tactics. It is this impulse that makes her write: "The belief that by re-imagining the world you can change it."

She assumed that she would be a scientist. That's not quite right. Early on, she wanted to be a professional musician. But in spite of a music scholarship to university, she gave this up on the basis that she wasn't good enough to provide herself with a decent living and took to biology instead. Coming from where she did, a small rural town in Kentucky where people struggled to make a living out of what nature provided for them - in this case, growing tobacco - she understood the basic pragmatism. "You do what you have to do. When it's time to get the tobacco in, you get the tobacco in."

In such a community, she says, the idea that one would be a writer - do anything superfluous to need - was risible. Her father was the local doctor, taking care of, making provision for, bodily need. Her mother "was his wife". Interdependence, mutual support systems, was the governing ethic. Elsewhere, outside this framework, it was a story of cock-up, misery, misunderstanding. Teenage pregnancies, wife beating. "Limited possibilities, limited hope." Saturday nights, all the kids would be in the back seat of a car at the drive-in. Except her. She wasn't adapted to this world, she says. Flat-chested, she didn't have the necessary physiological attractions. Boys didn't like her. To survive, or rather to thrive, she had to move on.

At DePauw University, in Indiana, she found a community of like-minded people. People who read books, who talked about ideas, who acted on their passions - protesting about Vietnam, involving themselves in the civil rights movement. Here, she found a different kind of usefulness, "a sense of obligation about fixing things that were wrong. The wider world I'd been looking for." And having left her home town in Kentucky, she never went back. What's interesting, she says, is that when she left, aged 18, almost 30 years ago, it was a community of 1,600 people, and today it remains 1,600 people. "What that means is that when I moved out, someone else moved in. It's a very static community." That is the nature of subsistence.

She both loved and hated Kentucky, her childhood. In many ways it made her who she is. A community, in which individualism was discouraged, forged her individualism. "I grew up aware of all the people I depended on and who depended on me." She loved the rural landscape - what she remembers happily of that time is climbing trees - but she also resented it. The great thing about small-town life, she has often said, is that everybody knows your business. "And the bad thing about small-town life is that everybody knows your business . . . I suppose that is my central obsession. What we owe to society, what we owe to ourselves."

At the point at which she left, she must have decided that what she owed to herself took precedence. After university she headed for Europe. Living in Greece, working on archaeological digs, she taught herself Greek. Superfluity rather than subsistence. In France, she lived in a commune. For the first time, she says, she was able to see America not as it sees itself but as how it is seen, "from the outside". Europe gave her a new perspective: "You are far less wasteful, more resourceful. Here, we are still pioneers. We arrive, we use up, we move on in a national spirit of 'when this is done, there will be more', we'll just keep moving west. Well, this is west. You have to stop somewhere." Hard to love something when you see it from the outside.

After a couple of years, when her working visa ran out, she returned, of necessity, to America and headed for Tucson. Why Tucson is a good question. She knew nobody there. Had never been there. It was 2,000 miles from home. "About as far as you in England are from the former Yugoslavia. We can look that up on a map if you want to check." Tucson, as anyone who has been there knows, is a strangely ambivalent place: an urban sprawl of a million inhabitants, dropped into the dramatic beauty of a desert. Here, two kinds of brutal isolation collide, natural and cultural. The uniform quality of the desert landscape - its symbolism as the barrier to the Promised Land - seems to mirror the barren loneliness of a city that has no centre. No one walks in Tucson. On the streets you rarely see a soul. Its grid structure is as repetitive and unrelieved as the desert itself. Yet, like the desert, it is quietly alive - hardy, resourceful, full of life. Also fragile and fascinating, vulnerable to abuse. Lots

of echoes in the desert ecosystem.

Still, she was a biologist. Still not writing. As a junior lab technician at the University of Arizona she eked out some kind of materially impoverished existence - "I was very poor" - and observed the difference between urban poverty and rural poverty. "At home, growing up, we weren't really poor. We had everything we needed, we just didn't have what we wanted. Now, in the city, I understood for the first time what it is to go without what you need."

For a community, she looked on the university noticeboards and joined various activist groups. Her natural instinct, a kind of shy assertiveness, would make her want to become part of something outside. "That was my context. It was the first time in my life that I was putting down roots, trying to establish myself. Decide who I was." And, invisible though it was to any newcomer, the support system in Tucson was fully in place. At that time, as she says, the early 80s, "The central issue here was, and it remains, Latin America."

Tucson is only 60 miles from the Mexican border. "It was a time when the US was waging covert war in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador. Refugees were fleeing American bombs and being stopped at the border. It seemed so hypocritical that America was opening its arms to refugees from China, from Cuba, and yet these people trying to escape our bombs were turned back." She joined with many others in offering refuge. "The sanctuary movement began here." Helping people establish new identities, finding them homes. All her first friends in Tucson were from this refugee community. In self-imposed exile from one world, she found herself part of something else. And she learned what has become central to her moral vision: "That a lot of the time human laws are wrong, simply put in place to serve economics."

After a few years in Tucson, she did what we are here to do as a species - got married, reproduced. The marriage wasn't a success. But Camille, the first of her two daughters, seemed to her, "the most beautiful, unique human being on the planet". Until she had her second daughter, Lily (10 years later and with her second husband), who mysteriously managed to occupy the same space. There is no objectivity in parenthood. As a mother, she says, she tries to provide her children with what they need, not what they think they want. She doesn't teach them to believe in God. But she accepts, she says, the value of religion. "I used to think religion was just more of the same thing. Dump responsibility on the big guy. Now I see an importance in that. It's a relief to accept that not everything is under your control." When her children ask her what happens when we die, she tells them that we become compost, "that our molecules are reconfigured as a tree. That is our heaven and it seems to work pretty well for us."

She ascribes "politeness" - the most contrived, "civilised" of human motivations - as the reason for writing her first book. "I can't help being polite. It is how I was raised, to be a lady." By 1983, she had left the university and begun working as a freelance journalist, mostly for scientific journals, interpreting the arcane language of science for the masses. "I discovered it was an open market for anyone who could understand the language of science but write about it in another language."

One weekend, to supplement her income, "earn my daily bread", she set out across southern Arizona to cover a series of mine strikes at the Phelps Dodge copper mines. Over a period of 18 months, while the strike lasted, and was ultimately defeated, she conducted interviews with the women who were left behind in these towns while the men were off elsewhere seeking an income. Kingsolver spent so much time there she became "that gal writing the book". "So that is what I had to do. They were counting on me."

Holding The Line is the story of these women, women normally so submissive that they would not leave home without their husband's permission, but who were now holding the line against Arizona's National Guard, handling the day-to-day running of the strike. The book became a study in transformation - from passivity to powerfulness. "The women's transformation affected every aspect of their lives, their relationships with their husbands, their children, with me." It was a frankly biased, non-fictional account; when she submitted it to the first publisher, she was told, 'Sorry but we don't accept novels'. It wasn't, as she says, a version of the truth that they could accept. Her

writing is often described by critics as "female", by which she thinks they mean "a feminine sensibility". "It's not as though I have no men in my books. But I examine support systems, not the lone hero. I am interested in how everything works together." Solitude, she says, is a human presumption. "Or, dare I say it, a male presumption."

She wrote her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, at night in a closet. She was pregnant, living with her husband in a tiny house, and he couldn't sleep if she had the light on. The day that she went into labour she heard it had been accepted for publication. "So the significance of it kind of passed me by." But the money she earned gave her enough to support herself to write her next book. And so on, until *Pigs In Heaven* and then *The Poisonwood Bible* provided financial stability.

She begins a book, she says, with themes. "I know some writers begin with character and plot; I invent characters to serve my theme." Her theme is essentially her culture, its history, and making sense of its place in the world. She remains, she says, both committed to America and despairing of America. "I take responsibility for where I am in the world and part of that is being a citizen of the US, which has done many shameful things and many great things. As a writer, it is my job to encourage people to own up to the less pleasant realities of our legacy." So in *The Poisonwood Bible*, a profoundly ambitious book set in the Belgian Congo as it comes to independence, she asks the question: how do I live in a country that did these things to Africa? A country that assassinated the elected leader Patrice Lumumba and replaced him with Mobutu, a puppet dictator? She is not preaching. Misplaced, or misdirected, zeal is also the book's subject - on the large scale in the political world, and on the small scale in the personal world of Nathan Price, a thundering Baptist missionary, unaffected by doubt, who drags his family to Africa to convert the natives. Price believes that everyone can be converted, but he is wrong, and the pursuit of salvation becomes his damnation. Kingsolver believes that writing can encourage new habits of moral perception. She tells the story from the multiple perspective of Price's four daughters - a democratic process. The only voice missing is Price's own. He is judged, as Kingsolver implies America must be judged, through the effects of his actions.

The massive success of *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998 changed very little in her life, she says. She has never been interested in money, and now gives most of it away, "far more than I keep". And her personal world had already undergone a dramatic transformation when eight years ago she met Steven Hopp, an ornithologist and sometime jazz musician. After five years on her own, sick of men, tired of dating, she met him while she was on a two-week fellowship at Virginia University. "I have always believed that the best things happen when you are looking the other way." They spent one evening together talking. And then a year speaking to each other nightly on the telephone. "When we finally did get together, we used to have to sit with our hands covering our eyes, we were so unused to each others' physical presence." There is something so sensual, erotic in this image. Two people sitting together, connected but not touching. It is this eroticism and delight in sensuality that filters through her new book, *Prodigal Summer*.

It is a strange book. She knew as she was writing it, she says, that it might have a rough ride with some critics. "I knew it was much sexier than anything I had written before and that they might have a hard time with that." Even so, she is surprised by the hostility of some responses. "It's as though I have done something subversive. That's to say: this culture has created a convincing illusion that it is in control, but it's still an illusion; that there are parallels between the natural world and the human world - to suggest that the human world is the natural world is too deeply threatening to the self-importance of the urbane." It was a shock, she says, to realise that a lot of people found it easier to accept the world and the intricate politics of the Congo than this fairly straightforward biological parable set in the Appalachian mountains.


Again the novel is told through the interweaving of linked narratives. There is no dominant character. But the framework of the story is provided by Deanna, a 45-year-old naturalist, living a solitary life in the mountains among the animals she is paid to preserve. At the beginning of the book she is happy, "or thinks she is happy". It's a happiness that Kingsolver says could have gone on maybe two more years. "Not more." Deanna's practised self-deception - that she can continue in this isolation - falls apart with the sudden arrival of a man, Eddie Bono, who wakes her up to her animal,

fundamentally biological, desires.

Kingsolver says she never writes about herself, or indeed about anyone she has known. "I feel like I have to put a banner on the front of my books saying, 'This is not me. These are not my parents.' People always want to believe that writers are writing about themselves. I am not." It's a bit disingenuous this, and a bit overemphatic. If what she is saying is that we, as humans, as individuals, have to recognise we are not supremely important, then it is at the level of the individual that we grasp this point. And there's a certain self-importance in saying that the importance of the message is to grasp that we are not important. Individualism may even be Nature's cleverest trick. To put it another way: animals don't write books

Prodigal Summer, by Barbara Kingsolver, is published by Faber on December 1, priced pounds 17.99. To order a copy at the special price of pounds 14.99, plus 99p UK p&p, freephone Guardian CultureShop on 0800 3166102.

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