

*The*  
POP LIT BOOK CLUB



READING

*Barbara Kingsolver*

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BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Lynn Marie Houston and Jennifer Warren

The Pop Lit Book Club

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## POP CULTURE IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S WORK

Kingsolver explores a few key themes in all of her works that involve the realm of politics, but her work does not heavily reference popular culture. Her characters' engagement with contemporary culture tends to be influenced by their struggles—the hardships in women's lives, the search for community, indigenous oppression—and their moments of celebration are quiet, philosophical ones.

### ACTIVISM

Many of Kingsolver's characters are fighting for a social cause. In *Pigs in Heaven*, Mattie is fighting for the rights of illegal immigrants and Taylor is struggling to take care of a young Native American girl who has been abused. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah is fighting for human rights and for African independence against colonial forces, while Adah makes medicine and medical research her personal crusade. In *Animal Dreams*, Hallie goes to assist Nicaraguan farmers in their struggle against the U.S.-supported contras. In *Prodigal Summer*, various female characters are dealing with issues of environmental conservation. This novel commemorates the work of Rachel Carson, a noted environmental activist from the 1960s and author of *Silent Spring*, through the naming of Nannie Rawley's daughter who is born with Down's syndrome,



presumably due to insecticides used in the area. Kingsolver values the activism of these heroines, showing that their sacrifices are necessary to help make the world a better place.

### ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Some of Kingsolver's characters are connoisseurs of the art world. In her short story "Bereaved Apartments," Kingsolver creates a character who is knowledgeable about art but who uses that knowledge to steal other people's property. In *Animal Dreams*, folk art helps save a local community from the devastating pollution of a mining corporation; by making piñatas out of peacock feathers to sell, Codi and the Stitch and Bitch Club draw attention to the historical legacy of their town Grace and capture the interest of national media.

### CONSUMERISM

Kingsolver writes in *Pigs in Heaven* about a clash of cultures between Native Americans and Western culture. She characterizes Western culture as obsessed with consumption. Tourists in the story buy Indian trinkets in order to possess Native American culture, even though the trinkets are mass produced and not reflective of Indian traditions. Kingsolver attributes the poverty of the Cherokee Nation to Western greed, while the Cherokee themselves do not emphasize "purchasing power" and instead judge themselves through their focus on community and tradition.

### FASHION

In *Pigs in Heaven*, Taylor's boyfriend Jax practically worships her. When he admits his excessive emotions for her, he also comments on how most of her clothes fit into just two drawers. Kingsolver here is commenting on the frivolous nature of fashion in forming a woman's identity and self-worth. Jax likes Taylor for the person she is, not the clothes she wears. Barbie, another character in that same novel, has become obsessed with making herself into the doll Barbie. When Taylor sees her making a skirt, she comments on how flimsy it is and that it couldn't be washed without falling apart. Barbie retorts that it is a costume. Kingsolver's heroines dress for comfort.

*The Poisonwood Bible* also shows Kingsolver's disdain for women who are too concerned with fashion. Rachel Price is defined by her fantasies of sweater sets and complaints about her wardrobe. She says that

she would have sold her "soul for a dry mohair sweater and a can of Final Net hairspray." Although she had been living in an area of Africa where people are regularly on the brink of starvation, she is still primarily concerned with her ability to look pretty. In the story, Rachel's character stands for Western selfishness and arrogance. Both Barbie and Rachel represent shallow and superficial values through their obsessions with fashion and body image.

### FOOD AND GARDENING

In *Prodigal Summer*, a great deal of attention is devoted to different components of the food chain. The story analyzes predators, herbivores, and the delicate ecosystem they cohabit. Many of Kingsolver's novels feature characters who grow their own food or who have extensive gardens, including *The Bean Trees* and *Prodigal Summer*. Other stories feature characters who give advice about gardening, such as Hallie in *Animal Dreams*. Many of these characters have a background in the biological sciences mirroring Kingsolver's own training in this area. In her nonfiction work *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Kingsolver shares anecdotes about her own gardening experiences as her family grows more of their own food in order to eat more locally.

### MUSIC

One of the main characters in *Prodigal Summer*, Deanna Wolfe, lives by herself, isolated in the woods. When someone asks her if she misses anything from civilization, she remarks that she misses music. When bad weather conditions frighten her, she turns to her radio to distract her.

In a performance at the 1992 American Booksellers Association Convention in Anaheim, California, Kingsolver played keyboard with a band composed of authors which was named The Rock Bottom Reminders. She joined Dave Barry, Stephen King, Amy Tan, and others to cover hits like "Dock of the Bay," "Louie Louie," "Gloria," "These Boots Are Made For Walkin'," "Teen Angel," "Chain of Fools," "Leader of the Pack," "Nadine," and "Money." She then toured with the band for two weeks. Kingsolver writes about her experiences as part of The Rock Bottom Reminders in an essay entitled "Confessions of a Reluctant Rock Goddess" published in her collection *High Tide in Tucson*. The money raised by the music group was donated to campaigns to increase literacy.

## THE NEWS

In *Animal Dreams*, Cody hears about events happening in Nicaragua through letters from her sister Hallie. The American media either does not report these events or does not report them truthfully. When her sister Hallie is taken prisoner, she begins a letter-writing campaign that captures the attention of a newspaper and a brief article appears. Cody is disappointed in the write-up and in the lack of response from the American media. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Orleana Price learns about the U.S. government's involvement in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba through the news coverage of a Senate investigation fifteen years after the fact. On the whole, Kingsolver's work expresses a disappointment with American news coverage.

## TECHNOLOGY AND MEDICINE

In *Homeland and Other Stories*, a short story titled "Jump-up Day" takes place on the island of St. Lucia where a dichotomy is shown between Western medicine and local medicine. With both methods differing greatly, the white doctor's attempts to discredit local healers serves as the central tension within the story that brings the plot into motion.

## TELEVISION

Kingsolver uses the television to make statements about consumerism and capitalism. One of the characters in *Pigs in Heaven* refuses to marry another character because he watches too much television. In order to prove his devotion to her, he shoots his television. In this work, Kingsolver asserts that watching too much television is a method of handicapping people. In *Animal Dreams*, television is partially blamed for the fact that the new generation of children does not want to hear the traditional stories and is not speaking Spanish.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Popular culture is often considered to be fun because it is associated with entertainment. Do you think that Kingsolver's writing is fun and

- entertaining? As a reader, do you have to read her references to popular culture on multiple levels or can they be taken at face value?
- Does Kingsolver use images of popular culture in order to provide commentary on American culture? If so, do you still consider her writing fun?
  - Do Kingsolver's references to popular culture help make her writing more accessible or less accessible to a general audience?

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## BARBARA KINGSOLVER ON THE INTERNET

### OFFICIAL WEB SITES

**Barbara Kingsolver**

<http://www.kingsolver.com>

This is the official Web site for Barbara Kingsolver managed by her publisher, HarperCollins. It offers a biography of Kingsolver with a separate chronology of important dates, a Frequently Asked Questions page, a bibliography, and news about her latest releases and other literary activities. The bibliography not only provides a comprehensive list of her works, but includes awards she has received, a list of interviews she has done, articles and dissertations written about her, workshops she has given, organizations she belongs to, and selection committees she has served on.

This site contains many helpful resources for book clubs and students. It includes a virtual "bookshelf" where visitors can read excerpts from Kingsolver's works and get more information about purchasing them. Additionally, the Web site offers an audio library where visitors can click on links to listen to samples from audio books. There is also a link for reading groups which provides discussion questions about each of her major novels and collections of short stories.

The site also includes information on the Bellwether Prize established by Kingsolver to reward authors producing "literature of social change."



The prize is offered every other year by the National Writers United Service Organization.

#### HarperCollins

[http://harpercollins.com/authors/5311/Barbara\\_Kingsolver/index.aspx](http://harpercollins.com/authors/5311/Barbara_Kingsolver/index.aspx)

Harper Collins maintains another, less comprehensive official web site that contains reading guides for Kingsolver's works, very brief summaries of those works, and discussion questions (the same ones available at <http://www.kingsolver.com>).

#### Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

<http://animalvegetablemiracle.com>

This is the official site for the book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* run by Barbara Kingsolver and her family. This Web site addresses the topic of eating locally and organically. Visitors can find more information about the book (including excerpts); a list of Web resources dealing with such topics as local food, food security, sustainable agricultural practices, food policy, and government agencies; tips on finding local foods at farmers' markets, within community supported agriculture, through gardening at home, or using community gardens, plus special tips for those living in the United Kingdom; stories and pictures from readers from all over the world sharing their experiences with eating locally; and news articles about organic farming and slow food. The recipes included in the book are also provided here, along with meal plans. A link called "a seasonal farm tour" provides some beautiful pictures of Kingsolver and her family working on their farm. An index helps readers find subjects, plant and animal varieties, recipes, and Web sites referenced in the book.

### OTHER RESOURCES

#### The Bellwether Prize for Fiction

<http://bellwetherprize.org>

This site provides more information on the Bellwether Prize founded by Barbara Kingsolver.

#### KYLIT—A Site Devoted to Kentucky Writers

<http://www.english.eku.edu/SERVICES/KYLIT/KINGSLVR.HTM>

This site gives information about Kingsolver's family and their roots in Kentucky.