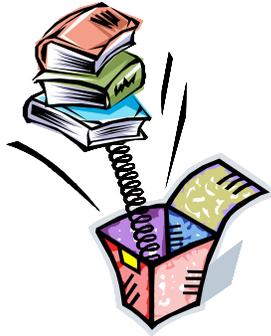


**WHITTIER PUBLIC
LIBRARY**

Sponsored by the
Friends of the
Whittier Public Library

Whittier Public Library's

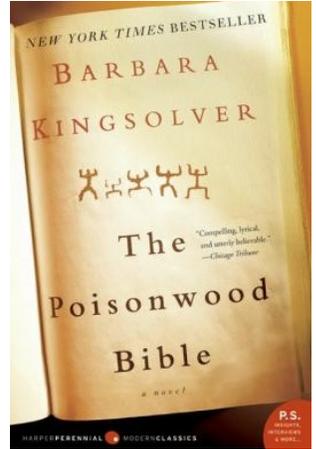


Book Club in a Box

THE POISONWOOD BIBLE

About the Book

The Poisonwood Bible is a story told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. They carry with them everything they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it -- from garden seeds to Scripture -- is calamitously transformed on African soil. What follows is a suspenseful epic of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa.



Contents

About the Book	1
About the Author	1-2
Further Reading	2
Discussion Questions	3

About the Author



When Barbara Kingsolver won a *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for *Pigs in Heaven* after receiving the 1991 PEN West Award for *Animal Dreams*, her arrival as a serious writer of contemporary American fiction could hardly be questioned; what is not immediately apparent, perhaps, is the breadth of knowledge and experience in the author who brought these works to life. Kingsolver is the daughter of a physician, she married a chemist, and she has worked as a research assistant in the department of physiology at the University of Arizona. She received a B.A. (magna cum laude) in 1977 from DePauw University and an M.S. in 1981 from the University of Arizona, and has pursued further graduate study since then. From 1981 to 1985, she was employed as a technical writer in arid land studies, and from 1985 to 1987, she worked as a freelance

journalist before devoting herself to full-time writing in 1987. This background subtly invigorates *Animal Dreams* and *Pigs in Heaven* as Kingsolver adeptly coordinates the intricacies of plot lines that move across ecological, ethno-biological, and regional backdrops.

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

Kingsolver links the plots of *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* through the narrative of Taylor Greer and the Cherokee infant she initially befriends and later adopts, Turtle (named for her tenacious grip on her newfound mother). In these two novels Kingsolver introduces the primary themes that resound through her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry: the importance of children, the necessity for and intricacies of finding respect for different ethnic worldviews, and the overwhelming joy that accompanies seizing a life full of challenge based on one's dreams. Kingsolver's characters invariably opt for the challenges of love created amidst the tensions of intercultural relationships.

This tension of choosing a life amid differing cultural commitments is particularly evident in *Animal Dreams*. Codi Noline searches for a committed path of her own, even as she steadfastly denies doing so. Codi discovers this path in her ability to help the residents of her father's hometown, Grace, confront the consequences of industrial pollution. It is an easy association to see Kingsolver's own emerging human rights activism in Codi's process of deciding to help the city of Grace fight the threat of pollution. Kingsolver enables Codi to dream herself beyond the demons of her own outcast childhood by discovering in herself the will to fight this external enemy. From Loyd Peregrina, a Pueblo Native American, Codi learns the following in an answer to the question, "What do . . . animals dream about?":

I think they dream about whatever 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 live a sweet life.

Kingsolver's novels and poems continue to grip the reader long after the details of the individual characters and plots have faded, because they, like Kingsolver's own life, are grounded in a real world of ecopolitical action. *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* and the more recent *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* and *Small Wonder* admirably present Kingsolver's real-world engagement. In *Holding the Line* Kingsolver unabashedly offers a biased account of the strike against the Phelps Dodge Copper Corporation in Morenci and Clifton, Arizona, in 1983. At the time Kingsolver was working as a freelance journalist, and while *Holding the Line* certainly presents an account of the actual events of a real strike, what comes through even more clearly is Kingsolver's desire to show the unexpected strength of the women who enabled the strike to continue long after the men of Clifton had lost their determination. In this respect Kingsolver calls into question traditional gender roles in the American Southwest and reinforces a tradition of

"machisma" that clearly has echoes in her exclusive use of female leading characters in her fiction. *High Tide in Tucson* is a much gentler collection of stories from her life as she raises her daughter Camille alone. Many of these essays focus on the landscape and culture of the American desert, and most also reflect Kingsolver's extensive training as a biologist. In "Semper Fi," for example, Kingsolver addresses the question of fidelity — first to the relatively mundane world of television football, but ultimately to the pursuit of truth itself in investigations into the pseudoscience conducted by Samuel Morton, who in the nineteenth century used brain volume as a measure of ethnic superiority, and by his intellectual heirs (according to Kingsolver) Robert Herrnstein and Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve* (1994).

In the title essay of *High Tide in Tucson* Kingsolver suggests a maxim that easily links her fiction, poetry, and nonfiction:

In the best of times, I hold in mind the need to care for things beyond the self: poetry, humanity, grace. In other times when it seems difficult merely to survive and be happy about it, the condition of my thought tastes as simple as this: let me be a good animal today.

Olson, Peter D., and Olson Peter D. "Barbara Kingsolver." *Cyclopedia Of World Authors, Fourth Revised Edition* (2003): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *The Poisonwood Bible*, you might like:

At Play in the Fields of the Lord by Peter Matthiessen

Cry, the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene

The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles

We Were the Mulvaney by Joyce Carol Oates

Discussion Questions

1. What are the implications of the novel's title phrase, the poisonwood bible, particularly in connection with the main characters' lives and the novel's main themes? How important are the circumstances in which the phrase comes into being?
2. How does Kingsolver differentiate among the Price sisters, particularly in terms of their voices? What does each sister reveal about herself and the other three, their relationships, their mother and father, and their lives in Africa? What is the effect of our learning about events and people through the sisters' eyes?
3. What is the significance of the Kikongo word *nommo* and its attendant concepts of being and naming? Are there Christian parallels to the constellation of meanings and beliefs attached to *nommo*? How do the Price daughters' Christian names and their acquired Kikongo names reflect their personalities and behavior?
4. The sisters refer repeatedly to balance (and, by implication, imbalance). What kinds of balance—including historical, political, and social—emerge as important? Are individual characters associated with specific kinds of balance or imbalance? Do any of the sisters have a final say on the importance of balance?
5. What do we learn about cultural, social, religious, and other differences between Africa and America? To what degree do Orleana and her daughters come to an understanding of those differences? Do you agree with what you take to be Kingsolver's message concerning such differences?
6. Why do you suppose that Reverend Nathan Price is not given a voice of his own? Do we learn from his wife and daughters enough information to formulate an adequate explanation for his beliefs and behavior? Does such an explanation matter?
7. What differences and similarities are there among Nathan Price's relationship with his family, Tata Ndu's relationship with his people, and the relationship of the Belgian and American authorities with the Congo? Are the novel's political details—both imagined and historical—appropriate?
8. How does Kingsolver present the double themes of captivity and freedom and of love and betrayal? What kinds of captivity and freedom does she explore? What kinds of love and betrayal? What are the causes and consequences of each kind of captivity, freedom, love, and betrayal?
9. At Bikoki Station, in 1965, Leah reflects, "I still know what justice is." Does she? What concept of justice does each member of the Price family and other characters (Anatole, for example) hold? Do you have a sense, by the novel's end, that any true justice has occurred?
10. In Book Six, Adah proclaims, "This is the story I believe in..." What is that story? Do Rachel and Leah also have stories in which they believe? How would you characterize the philosophies of life at which Adah, Leah, and Rachel arrive? What story do you believe in?
11. At the novel's end, the carved-animal woman in the African market is sure that "There has never been any village on the road past Bulungu," that "There is no such village" as Kilanga. What do you make of this?