

Barbara Kingsolver...

archaeologist, copy editor,
x-ray technician, housecleaner,
biological researcher
and translator of medical documents



Compiled by
GRIZÉLL AZAR-LUXTON

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.

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 colour 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.'

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 area, 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 from England. 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 a creative writing course, and became active in social justice organisations. Before and after graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in Europe. 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 college years and after living in Greece and France, she supported herself in a variety of jobs: as an archaeologist, copy editor, X-ray technician, housecleaner,

CONTENTS / INHOUD

Barbara Kingsolver...
Grizéll Azar-Luxton provides insight into this author, cum archeologist, cum copy editor... the list is endless 18

The poisonwood Bible
A discussion by Franschoek Reading Circle's Marion Marsh 20

Realms of ice and snow. Some books about very cold places
An unusual discussion of a wintery topic by Margaret Iskander 22

Realms of ice and snow booklist
Margaret Iskander provides a detailed booklist 24

Aanbevole prenteboeke vir babas en peuters
Lona Gericke se nuttige leeslys 25

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 articles have appeared in dozens of newspapers and magazines in North America and abroad. 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, DePauw 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.'

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. 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

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'

Awards and recognitions

Prodigal summer

The 2002 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (nomination)

The poisonwood Bible

Book Sense Top 10 2003 (Number One)

Independent Publisher Book Awards, Audio Fiction 1999

American Booksellers Book of the Year (ABBY)

Patterson Fiction Prize, The Poetry Centre, 1999

Los Angeles Times Best Books for 1998

New York Times 'Ten Best Books of 1998'

North 49 Books, Canada, Most Valuable Picks for the Fall 1998 Season

Village Voice Best Books for 1998

New York Public Library '25 Books to Remember'

The Orange Prize, Great Britain (short list)

PEN/Faulkner Award (runner-up)

Pulitzer Prize (runner-up)

Pigs in heaven

Los Angeles Times Fiction Prize

Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award for Fiction

Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Fiction Award

American Booksellers Book of the Year (ABBY) (nomination)

New York Times Notable Books

Publisher's Weekly Audio Best of Year

New York Times Bestseller (hardcover, trade paper)

Animal dreams

Pen/USA West Fiction Award

ABBY finalist

Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction

American Library Association Notable Book

Arizona Library Association Book of the Year

New York Times Notable Book

Homeland and other stories

American Library Association Notable Book

The bean trees

Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award

American Library Association Notable Book

ABBY nominee

New York Times Notable Book

Philips Autograph Library, West Chester University, 2000

Additionally

Earth Day Award, KY Environmental Quality Commission 2003

PEN/USA Advisory Board, 2002

John P McGovern Award for the Family, 2002

Physicians for Social Responsibility National Award, 2002

Frank Waters Award, 2002

Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2001

Governor's Award in the Arts, National Award, Kentucky, 2001

National Humanities Medal, 2000

100 Best Writers of the 20th Century, Writers Digest, 1999

'Best Local Author', Tucson Weekly Best of Tucson Awards,

1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 (chosen by city-wide vote)

Louisville's 50 Favourite Novels: **The bean trees**, 1998

National Writers Union, Andrea Egan Award, 1998

Arizona Civil Liberties Union Award, 1998

Honorary Ph.D., DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, 1995

Woodrow Wilson Foundation / Lila Wallace Fellowship 1992

Citation of Accomplishment from the United Nations National Council of Women of the United States, 1989

First Place (Medium Publications, Feature Writing, Short Form),

Arizona Press Club, for her profile of author Regan Forest

(Tucson Weekly), 1985

DePauw University Honor Scholarship, 1973-76

Phi Beta Kappa.

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.'

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, she 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.

The bean trees, published by HarperCollins in 1988, and re-issued in a special ten-year anniversary hardcover edition in 1998, was enthusiastically received by critics. But, perhaps more important to

Kingsolver, the novel has never gone out of print and has been embraced by millions of readers throughout the world. 'A novel can educate to some extent,' she told **Publishers Weekly**. 'But first, a novel has to entertain - that's the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I'll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with - who may not often read anything but the **Sears** catalogue - to read my books.'

For Kingsolver, writing is a form of political engagement. When she was in her twenties she discovered Doris Lessing. 'I read the **Children of violence** novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that.'

Barbara Kingsolver lives with her husband Steven Hopp, and their two daughters, Camille (born in 1987), and Lily (1996). They divide their time between Tucson, Arizona, and a farm in southern Appalachia. When not writing, Barbara gardens, cooks, and enjoys the outdoors with her family; works as an environmental activist and human-rights advocate, and plays hand drums and keyboard with her guitarist husband. Hopp and Kingsolver also co-write essays and articles on natural history, some of which appeared in **Small wonder**.

Given that Barbara Kingsolver's work covers the psychic and geographical territories that she knows first-hand, readers often assume that her work is autobiographical. 'There are little things that people who know me might recognise in my novels,' she acknowledges. 'But my work is not about me. I don't ever write about real people. That would be stealing.'



first of all. And second of all, art is supposed to be better than that. If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with poetry and fabrication, to create a revelation. If we can't, as artists, improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread.'

Sources

www.kingsolver.com

www.bookpage.com