



The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

About the author:

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955, and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books, in order of publication, are: *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Homeland* (1989), *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike* (1989), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Another America* (1992), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), *Prodigal Summer* (2000), *Small Wonder* (2002), *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands, with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt* (2002), *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), *The Lacuna* (2009), and *Flight Behavior* (available Nov. 6, 2012). She served as editor for Best American Short Stories 2001. Her books have been translated into more than two dozen languages, and have been adopted into the core literature curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the nation. She has contributed to more than fifty literary anthologies, and her reviews and articles have appeared in most major U.S. newspapers and magazines.

Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th Century by Writers Digest. In 2000 she received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. Critical acclaim for her books includes multiple awards from the American Booksellers Association and the American Library Association, among many others. *The Poisonwood Bible* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Orange Prize, and won the national book award of South Africa, before being named an Oprah Book Club selection. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* won numerous prizes including the James Beard award. *The Lacuna* won Britain's prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work.

Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize for Fiction, the nation's largest prize for an unpublished first novel, which since 1998 has helped to establish the careers of more than a half dozen new literary voices. Through a recent agreement, the prize has now become the PEN / Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction.

She has two daughters, Camille (born in 1987) and Lily (1996). Her husband, Steven Hopp, teaches environmental studies. Since June 2004, Barbara and her family have lived on a farm in southern Appalachia, where they raise an extensive vegetable garden and Icelandic sheep. Barbara believes her best work is accomplished through writing, raising her children, and being an active citizen of her own community. She is grateful for the good will and support of her readers.



Source: Author's website (<http://www.kingsolver.com>)

About this 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.

The novel is set against one of the most dramatic political chronicles of the twentieth century: the Congo's fight for independence from Belgium, the murder of its first elected prime minister, the CIA coup to install his replacement, and the insidious progress of a world economic order that robs the fledgling African nation of its autonomy. Against this backdrop, Orleanna Price reconstructs the story of her evangelist husband's part in the Western assault on Africa, a tale indelibly darkened by her own losses and unanswerable questions about her own culpability. Also narrating the story, by turns, are her four daughters—the self-centered, teenaged Rachel; shrewd adolescent twins Leah and Adah; and Ruth May, a prescient five-year-old. These sharply observant girls, who arrive in the Congo with racial preconceptions forged in 1950s Georgia, will be marked in surprisingly different ways by their father's intractable mission, and by Africa itself. Ultimately each must strike her own separate path to salvation. Their passionately intertwined stories become a compelling exploration of moral risk and personal responsibility.

Dancing between the dark comedy of human failings and the breathtaking possibilities of human hope, *The Poisonwood Bible* possesses all that has distinguished Barbara Kingsolver's previous work, and extends this beloved writer's vision to an entirely new level.

Source: Author's website (<http://www.kingsolver.com>)

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 Orleanna 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?

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- eBook (1) via OverDrive