Barbara Kingsolver  
(8 April 1955 – )

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Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983 (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press/New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1989; revised, 1996);  
Homeland and Other Stories (New York: Harper & Row, 1989; London: Virago, 1990);  
Another America/Otra América, with Spanish translations by Rebeca Cartes (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992; enlarged, 1998);  

“Going to Japan,” in Journeys, PEN-Faulkner Foundation (Rockville, Md.: Quill & Brush, 1996);  

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—UNCOLLECTED:  
FICTION  
NONFICTION  
“Everywoman’s Answer to Octopussy: The Modern Romance,” Tucson Weekly, 21-27 August 1985, pp. 1-3;

“What We Eat and They Don’t: The Hunger Connection,” Tucson Weekly, 9-15 October 1985, p. 2;


“A Conversation with Milosz,” Tucson Weekly, 4-10 March 1987, p. 7;


Barbara Kingsolver renews the Western literary landscape by debunking the myths of individuality and self-determination. Her heroines lead meaningful lives by relying on compromise and community. Kingsolver’s work reflects the real West in which she lives—a West populated by people with different values, histories, and worldviews. Her devotion to social justice and her commitment to activism shape her vision. As she writes in High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never (1995), “Good art is political, whether it means to be or not, insofar as it provides the chance to understand points of view alien to our own.” The points of view of single mothers, Guatemalan refugees, children, and even a hermit crab are among those Kingsolver presents to her readers. She has enjoyed both critical acclaim and wide readership and has been nominated four times for the ABBY (American Booksellers Book of the Year) award by booksellers. She is a writer of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, but as she told interviewer Donna Perry, if she had to categorize herself by genre, she would pick storytelling.

Barbara Ellen Kingsolver grew up in rural Carlisle, Kentucky, and counts Southern writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner among her earliest literary influences. Born on 8 April 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, she is the daughter of a county physician. Her youth was spent immersed in both the storytelling culture of Appalachia and the scientific culture of her father’s profession. When she was in the second grade, she moved to Africa with her family, where her father worked for almost a year as a physician in the Congo. In Africa she began her lifelong habit of keeping a journal. “What I feel,” Kingsolver told interviewer L. Elisabeth Beattie, “is that writing is the thing that makes my experience real to me.” In 1982, twenty years after beginning her first journal, Kingsolver finally wrote there, “I am a writer.” Wendell Roy and Virginia Lee Henry Kingsolver, her parents, instilled in Barbara and her siblings, Rob and Ann, a love for reading and a respect for the natural world. Biochemistry, Kingsolver insists, can be as poetic as William Shakespeare. In high school English classes, however, Kingsolver learned that literature was about great men fighting great conflicts: man against nature, man against man, man against himself. Not until 1982, when Kingsolver read Stisho and Other Stories, published that year by Bobbie Ann Mason, did she realize that everyday people such as the rural folk with whom she grew up were worthy subjects of serious literature.

Although she was a prolific writer in her youth, Kingsolver told David King Dunaway that “it never crossed my mind that I’d be a writer when I grew up because I really didn’t think of writing as a profession. I didn’t think of books as having been written by people like me.” She did, however, consider a career as a classical pianist, a result of a youth spent virtually without television and with parents who had wide-ranging musical tastes. Kingsolver went to DePauw University in Indiana on a music scholarship, but after realizing how scarce jobs were for pianists she switched her major to something more practical—biology.

During her junior year of college, Kingsolver left Indiana to live and work in Greece and France as an archaeologist’s assistant. She returned to DePauw briefly, graduated magna cum laude in 1977, and then returned to France, where she lived until her work visa expired. During those and the following years she earned her living variously as a copy editor, typesetter, biological researcher, and translator.

When Kingsolver returned to the United States, she settled in Tucson, Arizona. In 1981 she earned a master’s degree in ecology and evolutionary biology from the University of Arizona. She also became active in ecological and humanitarian causes, including the Sanctuary movement to assist Central American refu-
gees. In her early twenties Kingsolver met Joseph Hoffmann, a chemist, to whom she was married from 1985 until 1992. Together they had one child, Camille. Kingsolver sought a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology but left academia in favor of a scientific writing position with the Office of Arid Lands Studies at the University of Arizona.

Getting paid to be a writer gave her the confidence to begin freelancing, at first for local newspapers and magazines and then for such national publications as The Nation, The Progressive, The New York Times, and Smithsonian. Through her writing Kingsolver was able to bring together her love of science and her love of the humanities. She continued her journal writing and produced “lots and lots” of poetry. In 1981, to her astonishment, she won a poetry contest sponsored by the University of Arizona and gave her first public reading. In 1983 Virginia Quarterly Review accepted her first “decent” fiction, a short story called “Rose-Johnny,” which was later collected in Homeland and Other Stories (1989).

“By the early eighties,” Kingsolver told Beattie, “I was starting to find my vein, pay attention to where I’d come from and listen to the voices that were really in my ear, and write things that had a little bit of emotional resonance.” Major influences on her writing include her rural childhood, with its exposure to storytelling, community, and social responsibility; her love and respect for the natural world; and her scientific background. Her work is deeply rooted in a sense of place, whether she is depicting rural Kentucky, the Belgian Congo, or the arid Southwest where she lives with her husband, ornithologist and musician Steven Hopp, and her daughters, Camille and Lily.

While pregnant with Camille, Kingsolver suffered from insomnia and as a result began writing a novel. She worked exclusively at night, in the closet of her tiny one-room cottage so she would not disturb her sleeping husband. Her doctor suggested she do something hateful such as scrubbing her bathroom tile, so as not to reward her sleeplessness—but instead she stayed awake crafting The Bean Trees (1988). Within twenty-four hours
of delivering her daughter she had a book deal with Harper and Row.

Kingsolver's first novel was highly acclaimed. Jack Butler wrote for The New York Times Book Review of 10 April 1988 that "The Bean Trees is as richly connected as a fine poem, but reads like realism. It is the Southern novel taken west." Like many stories in the Western American literary canon, The Bean Trees is a narrative of self-renewal brought about by a journey west. Self-named protagonist Taylor Greer leaves her Kentucky home in search of a new identity and an escape from what she sees as the inevitable future for a Pittman County girl: early pregnancy and marriage. Unlike the traditional Western hero, however, what Taylor finds is not independence, but dependence, not self-determination, but strength in community.

Kingsolver's debt in The Bean Trees to Doris Lessing and other women writers for whom friendship and connectedness are central narrative goals is obvious. Taylor builds a family from unlikely sources. Having been reminded by her mother of the Greer family's Cherokee heritage, her "ace in the hole," Taylor decides to explore the Cherokee Nation. Stopping at a roadside cafe, she is given an unlikely gift: a Native American child who she later finds out has been sexually abused. Having no choice, Taylor drives westward with Turtle—so named because of her fierce grip.

Throughout The Bean Trees Kingsolver works for both accessibility and complexity. Her imagery is obvious but rarely heavy-handed. Taylor and Turtle arrive in Arizona at sunrise on the second day of the new year. Once in Tucson they meet Mattie, the owner of Jesus is Lord Used Tires, an auto shop that serves as a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Taylor's makeshift family grows to include her elderly neighbors, Edna and Virgie Mae; Lou Ann, a fellow single mother from Kentucky; and Esperanza and Estevan, refugees fleeing their native Guatemala. The characters, according to Karen Fitzgerald in the April 1988 issue of Ms., "tug at the heart and soul. It is the growing strength of their relationships...that gives the novel energy and appeal."

Kingsolver's characters are the working-class poor because those are the people she knows and cares about. Although her father was an educated physician, he chose to focus on healing rather than making money. As a result many of his patients paid him with vegetables from their garden, or not at all. Kingsolver grew up among people such as Taylor, who had limited opportunities beyond high school. Being true to Taylor's voice, Kingsolver admitted to Perry, was often difficult; she found it challenging "to describe scenery that Taylor had never seen before or thoughts that Taylor maybe never thought before from that small vocabulary."

A mark of Western writers is an attentiveness to the natural world, and Kingsolver is no exception. Her favorite reading material, she declared to Beattie, is the Burpee's Seed Catalog. The predictability, the "life force," and the "living story" of the natural world is comforting to Kingsolver and to many of her characters, including Taylor and Turtle. It deeply affects the human community of The Bean Trees. The novel is named not only for Turtle's first word, "bean," but also for the model of community Taylor learns from the natural world. While reading to Turtle from the Horticultural Encyclopedia, Taylor uncovers the central metaphor of the novel:

wisteria vines, like other legumes, often thrive in poor soil, the book said. Their secret is something called rhizobia. These are microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots on the roots. They suck nitrogen gas right out of the soil and turn it into fertilizer for the plant. "It's like this," I told Turtle. "There's a whole system for helping out the plant that you'd never guess was there." I loved this idea. "It's the same as with people. The way Edna has Virgie, and Virgie has Edna...and everybody has Mattie..."

The wisteria vines on their own would barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles.

As an ecologist, environmentalist, and humanist, Kingsolver constructs a world where human and nonhuman nature coexist. Behind Jesus is Lord Used Tires, for example, Mattie nurtures a "wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. Heads of cabbage and lettuce sprouted out of old tires. An entire rusted-out Thunderbird, minus the wheels, had nasturtiums blooming out the windows."

Kingsolver calls herself a feminist and writes "from a point of view that's unequivocally female." The majority of her characters in The Bean Trees and subsequent novels are women. Kingsolver's female characters perform mundane yet heroic deeds: they feed children, support friends, and restore justice, all foundational acts that sustain community.

In her next book, Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983 (1989), Kingsolver further characterizes the ways that women create and sustain community. As a stringer for several newspapers in the early 1980s, Kingsolver covered the devastating eighteen-month strikes in three southern Arizona Phelps Dodge mining communities. Realizing she had hundreds of hours of taped oral history from a community rarely, if ever, documented, she decided to assemble a book.
Kingsolver had not yet written *The Bean Trees* and was a newcomer to the publishing business. She went to the library, looked through the Literary Market Place, and found the name of her future agent. Kingsolver revealed in her interview with Beattie what drew her attention to the listing for Frances Goldin: “She was independent. What she said about herself was, I do not represent any material that is sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic, or gratuitously violent.” In 1984 Kingsolver sent Goldin a book proposal for *Holding the Line*. Because she was still working as a journalist, Kingsolver had little time to transcribe the tapes and assemble the book. After writing *The Bean Trees* during her insomnia-stricken pregnancy, Kingsolver wrote Goldin once again, asking her to take a look at the manuscript, which she thought might be a novel; Goldin agreed. In 1988, with the publication of *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver achieved the financial security to give up freelancing and finish *Holding the Line*.

The book is both an ethnographic account of a crucial moment in labor history and a story of personal feminist transformation. In 1983 Phelps Dodge rejected a pattern settlement, provoking a confrontation with members of a dozen different miners’ unions and their families. Union workers managed to shut down mining operations, but the confrontation accelerated and Phelps Dodge reopened with the help of the National Guard. A court injunction prohibited miners from striking, and wives, mothers, and daughters established an all-female picket line. Women who previously would not leave the house without their husbands’ permission became vocal activists in order to save their communities. As one housewife-turned-activist reflected, “It’s astonishing even to me how we women have changed...I never felt like I had anything to say worth listening to...It’s the politicization of the community that’s made everything so worthwhile.”

*Holding the Line* thus documents what much of Kingsolver’s fiction and poetry addresses: the process of recognizing the self as part of something larger. The book raises questions of economic decline, gender relationships, and corporate discrimination against Mexican Americans. Reviews of *Holding the Line* were mixed. An April 1991 critique in the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* praises the book as a “stirring, densely documented narrative that works both as drama and social history” and recommends it for undergraduate classes focusing on labor history, women’s history, or minority rights. In the 7 January 1990 issue of *The New York Times Book Review* Page Stegner, Wallace Stegner’s son, faults the book for ignoring the existence of the male characters surely present during the copper strike. The narrator is compelling, he wrote, but would be more so if the women’s political development were contrasted with the men’s. To Perry, Kingsolver defended her narrative point of view: “I hope that people are beyond worrying that a book has to be about men to be important.”

Kingsolver became closely involved with the women in the striking towns and admits sympathy with the strikers’ cause. In the preface to *Holding the Line* she denies the possibility of objectivity, the “myth of journalism,” and insists that every writer throws “his or her own shadow across the page.” Hidden biases, she writes, are more dangerous than obvious ones.


Taylor Greer from *The Bean Trees* wanted to tell every story in *Homeland*, Kingsolver declared in her interview with Perry. “She had such a strong voice,”
Kingsolver added, "because she talks a lot like me and the people I grew up with... so I deliberately put her in the closet, and I moved out." This move not only anticipates *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), the sequel to *The Bean Trees*, but also allows *Homeland* to offer a variety of points of view. A middle-class male biology teacher, a working-class mom, and a Chicana striker—whose character reads like a composite of the many women Kingsolver met while researching *Holding the Line*—all narrate stories about one of the central themes in Western literature: the tension between forced and chosen migration.

In the title story, lauded by reviewers as the strongest of the collection, Gloria St. Clair tells how she and her coal-miner father, mother, and two brothers take Great Mam, their Cherokee great-grandmother, to visit her birthplace before she dies. The family arrives in Cherokee, Tennessee, only to find it has become a tourist trap with "pictures of cartoon Indian boys urging us to buy souvenirs." Gloria begins to understand the moral complexity inherent in history: "I had a sense of something gone badly wrong, like a lie told in my past and then forgotten." Before a depressing picnic and a long drive home, Great Mam tells her great-granddaughter, "I've never been here before." The story depicts the destruction of a people's past, but still it manages to end hopefully by suggesting continuance of culture through story. Great Mam tells Gloria how Cherokees viewed the world before Anglo colonization, and Gloria tells her reader, "Homeland," a story Kingsolver rewrote every year for fifteen years, explicitly represents her reasons for being a writer: "I hope that story tells the burden and the joy and the responsibility of holding on to the voices that are getting lost."

Kingsolver's training in biology and fascination with the natural world are obvious in the character development and imagery throughout *Homeland*. In "Blueprints," which was first published as "The Lost Language of Love" in the May 1989 issue of *Mademoiselle*, Lydia, a junior-high school teacher who is struggling to maintain a relationship with her live-in lover, is deeply aware of her kinship with nonhuman nature: "She leaves town and walks through the hemlock forest, content to be among the mosses and beetles... The bugs, and the plants too, are all related to her in a complicated family tree that Lydia can describe in convincing detail." Another story, "Covered Bridges," is narrated by a middle-aged gardener and professor of botany whose wife is severely allergic to bee stings. Like many other narrators in *Homeland*, the gardener constantly muses on his relationship to place and the natural world. He questions, for example, "the fleeting certainty that I deserved the space I'd been taking up on this earth, and all the air that I breathed."

The central questions in *Homeland*, concerning how people are bound to each other and to place, anticipate Kingsolver's second novel, *Animal Dreams* (1990). Kingsolver told Beattie that she begins every novel with an important question and writes her way toward a resolution. The question that led to the creation of *Animal Dreams* was:

Why is it that some people are activists who embrace the world and its problems... while other people turn their back on that same world and pretend that it has no bearing on their lives? Why is it, moreover, that these two kinds of people can occur in the same family?

*Animal Dreams* also grows out of Kingsolver's conviction that the personal is political and that her job as a writer of fiction is, simply put, to change the world.

The characters in *Animal Dreams*, like those from Kingsolver's earlier fiction, are people who have been traditionally considered "marginal" in canonical literature. Codi and Hallie are sisters who grew up in Grace, Arizona, surrounded by a vibrant Mexican American culture but never quite fitting in. Both sisters are deeply connected to the natural world:

Hallie and I... divided the world in half, right from childhood. I was the one who went in for the instant gratification, catching bright, quick butterflies, chlorophyll-laden leaves and placing them in a Mason jar and pinning them onto typewritten tags with their Latin names. Hallie's tastes were quieter; she had time to watch things grow. She transplanted wildflowers and showed an aptitude for gardening. At age ten she took over the responsibility of the Burpee's catalogue.

For her part, Hallie, a pest-control hotline operator and gifted gardener, goes to Nicaragua to aid farmers. Codi unwillingly returns to Grace to take care of their father, town physician Homer Noline, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

The narrative develops in a nonlinear fashion, blending memories, dreams, letters, and present events. *Animal Dreams* is a complex postmodern story that explores the relationships among memory, truth, and experience. Like Leslie Marmon Silko, Kingsolver relies on the power of stories to effect change. Events in the novel are interpreted and given importance in a variety of ways by different characters. Grace, a fictional town that resembles Clifton, one of the sites of the Phelps Dodge copper strikes that Kingsolver knew well, suffers from environmental degradation as a result of mine tailings; orchards suffer from fruit drop; and Grace's river, as Codi discovers with her high-school science class, has a pH that "came in just a hair higher than battery acid." A familiar concern of Kingsolver's unfolds as the
Well, but I can also get nostalgic for the childhood of Laura Ingalls Wilder, until it dawns on me that not once, in any of those Little House books, does she discuss the real meaning of life without plumbing on howling cold prairie nights. Every epoch has its ups and downs, and there's no point in wishing my own were any different. The lot I drew in history was to belong to the generation of women groomed implicitly for wifehood, but who have ended up needing to win their bread rather than bake it. I've always been happy enough to do it, though now that I'm also sole [supporter] of my child, I occasionally wake up at night in a cold sweat on account of it; no part of my upbringing ever prepared me to hold this position. But it's a blessing, I think, to my girl, who is growing up convinced that women belong in the halls of discovery, production, and creation--messy enterprises{,} all. It wouldn't even occur to her to doubt it. We've spent far more time together making kites and forts and scientifically mounted bug collections than working on hospital corners, and if her bed doesn't even get made, I'm the last to notice. Sluethood has its privileges, for children too.

Housework, like the Buddha, takes many forms, depending on what is in your heart as you approach it. I personally am inclined to approach it the way governments treat dissent: ignore it until it revolts. If life were a different house of cards, though, and if
narrative develops: Codi begins to recognize herself as a part of the larger forces of family, community, and, finally, a political universe where atrocities in Nicaragua affect people living in Grace. Codi, with the help of a group of women who call themselves the Sticht and Bitch Club, networks to save Grace and becomes the kind of practical hero Kingsolver is known for creating.

In Animal Dreams Kingsolver refuses to settle for one point of view or one dominant ideology. She interweaves contemporary and traditional Mexican American worldviews throughout the novel. Day of the Dead is celebrated by the oldest members of the Sticht and Bitch Club and the youngest child of Emelina, Codi’s high-school friend and new neighbor. Kingsolver’s admiration for Pueblo culture is clear in the character of Loyd, a railroad man Codi dated in high school. Loyd fosters Codi’s newfound ecological awareness by introducing her to Pueblo customs.

Indeed, ecology both spiritually and intellectually informs Kingsolver’s own worldview. In order to research Animal Dreams, Kingsolver read doctoral dissertations on kinship relations and visited a pueblo to further her knowledge of traditional Keresan cultural myths. Aspects of many native cultures, she believes, can remind Anglo-Americans of kinship with the natural world. Her training as a biologist further solidifies her sense of the interdependence of all creatures.

Animal Dreams, like The Bean Trees and Pigs in Heaven, is a deeply political novel. Kingsolver does not “inject” politics into her storytelling; she writes from what she perceives to be her place in a world of injustice. She rejects the idea that language can be separated from the political. Class, race, and gender discrimination; environmental degradation; and political inequities are realities that cannot be ignored. In an interview with Robert Epstein, Kingsolver mused that critics and other literary gatekeepers may reject her novels because they are “too political,” but only one letter out of one hundred Kingsolver receives from readers complains about the political nature of her art.

Animal Dreams won many accolades: the PEN/USA West Fiction Award, the Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction, and the Arizona Library Association Book of the Year award. Novelist Jane Smiley, reviewing Animal Dreams for the 2 September 1990 issue of The New York Times Book Review, notes the complexity involved in weaving together various points of view but ultimately praises Animal Dreams and its author: “Barbara Kingsolver is one of an increasing number of American novelists who are trying to rewrite the political, cultural and spiritual relationships between our country’s private and public spheres.”

The same can be said of Kingsolver’s book of poetry, Another America/Otra América (1992), a conversation between North and South America. Many of the poems reflect ways in which the two continents view each other. Chilean poet Rebeca Cartes, whom Kingsolver met through joint readings and Sanctuary fund-raisers, translated Kingsolver’s poems into Spanish. Each of the poems in the volume is a story; each poem critiques a social ill to which Kingsolver is exposed. The “little steam vents of the pressure cooker,” as Kingsolver calls her poetry, deal with homophobia, racism, colonialism, and sexism. The poetry in this volume revolves around a favorite theme of Kingsolver’s: the American cultural myth of individuality.

The book begins with a series of poems about alienation and ends with a section on political activists who have reclaimed their world. Two poems, “This House I Cannot Leave” and “Ten Forty-Four,” deal with rape. Often the American cultural attitude is that victims deserve their fate. As Kingsolver explained to Perry, in these two poems she chose to go public with a personal trauma in order to “serve people whose pain is still in the closet and who need the support of community.”

While themes of conversation and conflict are evident in many of these poems, they are most fully developed in Pigs in Heaven, the sequel to The Bean Trees. The reference to the pigs in the title is found in the myth Cherokee lawyer Annawake Fourkiller tells Taylor Greer’s musician boyfriend, Jax. When six boys refuse to do their work, they are transformed into pigs and then become the constellation known as the Pleiades. The message is to put community first. The myth makes concrete the American conflict that is central to the novel: the rights of the individual versus the needs of the community.

The community in question is the Cherokee Nation, and the individual is Taylor Greer. Taylor and Turtle become heroes after saving a man who they saw fall into a spillway at Hoover Dam. Together they appear on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Taylor tells Oprah’s extensive audience, which includes Annawake, how she found and adopted the abandoned and sexually abused Turtle in Oklahoma. Annawake, disturbed by the events that led to the adoption of her twin, Gabriel, into a white family—an action subsequently made illegal by the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act—begins to investigate Taylor’s story. The Indian Child Welfare Act, Annawake tells Taylor in Taylor’s run-down but comfortable Tucson home, gives tribes the final say over their children’s custody. Taylor asks Annawake how returning Turtle to the Cherokee tribe would be in the child’s best interest. “How can you think it’s good for a tribe to lose its children?” Annawake counterposes, adding, “There’s the
child's best interests and the tribe's best interest, and I'm trying to think of both things."

Pigs in Heaven, like The Bean Trees, is punctuated by a road trip. Taylor and Turtle flee Tucson, and Taylor works a series of odd jobs before realizing the difficulty of motherhood without community support. She also comes to recognize the importance of Turtle's Cherokee heritage. The conflict between the individual and the community is resolved by a joint-custody arrangement—a resolution that caused some controversy among reviewers of the novel. Some critics appreciated Kingsolver's clear vision, while others felt the author relied on a pat formula of sentimental political correctness. Nearly all agree, however, on Kingsolver's continuing commitment to the political issues familiar to many of her readers. Pigs in Heaven is about the difficulty of single motherhood, the development of community consciousness, adoption, abuse, ethnic identity, and poverty.

Living in the Southwest, Kingsolver became aware of many cases involving the Indian Child Welfare Act. She told Perry that white adoption of Indian children had long been a form of cultural genocide and that real cases caused her to examine the cultural codes that lead people to value individuality or community. Kingsolver began reading court transcriptions and speculating on the point of intersection between the two worldviews. Although she had previously never considered writing a sequel to The Bean Trees, Kingsolver admitted to Perry "that I'd set up a perfect situation in an earlier novel. Also, I realized with embarrassment that I had neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about this Native American kid being swept off the reservation... It was something I hadn't thought about, and I felt I needed to make that right in another book."

Writing Pigs in Heaven challenged Kingsolver to mature as a novelist. Unlike The Bean Trees, which relies on first-person narration, or Animal Dreams, which alternates between first- and third-person-limited points of view, Pigs in Heaven is written entirely in the third-person omniscient. By making this choice, Kingsolver gives equal weight to the moral authority of both Taylor and the tribe. Responding to criticism that all her previous characters were good and all her conflicts occur offstage (Taylor versus poverty, the Stitch and Bitch Club versus the mine company), Kingsolver forced herself to write about characters in conflict, "on
the page, not off." She also created Barbie, a former waitress obsessed with the Barbie doll and given to larceny. *Pigs in Heaven,* like *Animal Dreams* and *The Bean Trees,* was an ABBY nominee. Kingsolver’s third novel also won the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Prize and the Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Fiction Award.

Kingsolver’s next book, a collection of twenty-five essays, is titled *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (1995). She calls the essays “creative nonfiction” and likens her writing process in composing the essays to that of fiction. “You create characters and you have a plot,” Kingsolver explained to Epstein, adding, “All of the essays are little stories that mean something... You can look at the same event fifty different ways.” The essays are autobiographical and take as their subjects book tours; childhood; patriotism; life in the Canary Islands; her love of books; her critiques of such writers as Henry David Thoreau, Stephen Gould, and Charles Darwin; and her stint as keyboard player in the band Rock Bottom Remainders, which also featured novelists Stephen King and Amy Tan.

Thematically, *High Tide in Tucson* extends Kingsolver’s interests in family, community, and the environment. In the title essay Kingsolver observes how a hermit crab in her Tucson kitchen responds to a far-off tidal cycle. She uses the event to explore the meaning of home and mobility and of the ecological place of the human animal. Her training as a scientist allows her not only to turn an informed eye toward the relationship between humans and nature but also to inspire vivid use of natural metaphors. In “Creation Stories,” an essay about the sanctity of human, plant, and animal species, she writes of June in Tucson as “the season when every living thing in the desert swoons south toward some faint salt dream of the Gulf of Mexico: tasting the horizon, waiting for the summer storm.”

Many of the essays were previously published in an eclectic array of magazines, including *Parenting, Natural History, Smithsonian Magazine, The New York Times Magazine,* and the *Land’s End* catalogue. Kingsolver collected and revised the essays in order to move from behind the mask of fiction, as she told Epstein: “Everything in *High Tide in Tucson* I think I’ve said before... but this time I stepped out from behind the mask and said, ‘I, Barbara Kingsolver, believe this.’” As in her fiction and poetry, her background as social activist directly influences the essays. For example, “Jabberwocky” describes Kingsolver’s political point of view in art and life. While Kingsolver was protesting the Gulf War in front of the Tucson Federal Building, a man leaned out of his truck and shouted, “Hey, bitch, love it or leave it!” at her. “So,” Kingsolver quips, “I left.”

Kingsolver’s technique is recognizable in terms of the traditional essay. She uses mundane events as vehicles for deeper musings on life. In “Jabberwocky” she manipulates a stranger’s insult to respond to the occasional criticism that her work is “too political” while disparaging the dominant view of the role of art in American culture:

Real art, the story goes, does not endorse a point of view. This is utter nonsense, of course... and also the most thorough and invisible form of censorship I’ve ever encountered. ... I spend a good deal of time defending the possibility that such things as environmental ruin, child abuse, or the hypocrisy of U.S. immigration policy are appropriate subjects for a novel.

Kingsolver has worried that perhaps some readers of her fiction miss the political messages inherent in her work. With *High Tide in Tucson* she felt she “had the chance to be more direct.” In its first four months the collection sold more than any of Kingsolver’s previous books had during the initial months following their publication. To Kingsolver these figures attesting to the popularity of her work validate her commitment, as a writer, to addressing political issues.

Kingsolver’s devotion to social justice through art continues in her novel *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). In this book, zealous, uncompromising Baptist missionary Nathan Price takes his wife, Orleanna, and four daughters to the Belgian Congo in 1959, where they remain through the next three decades of stormy, violent African history. Orleanna and the four girls—teenaged Rachel, twins Leah and Adah, and five-year-old Ruth May—take turns narrating and responding to political developments in the Congo as well as the personal tragedies of the Price family. The novel succeeds as a postmodern example of a multinarrated tale by exposing a variety of points of view.

*The Poisonwood Bible* garnered critical praise in advance of its fall release. A reviewer for the 10 August 1998 issue of *Publishers Weekly* stated that in this “risky but resoundingly successful novel” Kingsolver presents “a compelling family saga, a sobering picture of the horrors of fanatic fundamentalism and an insightful view of an exploited country crushed by the heel of colonialism and then ruthlessly manipulated by a bastion of democracy.” A critic in the 1 September 1998 issue of *Kirkus Reviews* praised the “consistently absorbing narrative” as well as Kingsolver’s skillful blending of the personal and the political: “Kingsolver convinces us that her characters are, first and foremost, breathing, fallible human beings and only secondarily conduits for her book’s vigorously expressed and argued social and political ideas.” A national bestseller, *The Poisonwood Bible* was chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best books of 1998.
In 1997 Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize for Fiction, which recognizes literature of social change. Kingsolver hopes to give American trade publishers an incentive to publish and promote the kind of fiction she most admires—fiction that exposes injustice and explores issues of social responsibility. Kingsolver’s literary contributions as feminist, social activist, environmentalist, and community advocate ensure her an important place in American letters. As a Western writer, she continues to revise the canon and set high standards for her Western American contemporaries.

Interviews:


References: