

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life

by Barbara Kingsolver

About the Book

Author Barbara Kingsolver and her family abandoned the industrial-food pipeline to live a rural life—vowing that, for one year, they'd only buy food raised in their own neighborhood, grow it themselves, or learn to live without it. Part memoir, part journalistic investigation, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is an enthralling narrative that will open your eyes in a hundred new ways to an old truth: You are what you eat.

Praise for the Book

"Delectable . . . steeped in elegant prose and seasoned with smart morsels about the food industry."

— CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"[This] is a book that, without being preachy, makes a solid case for eating locally instead of globally."

— RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

"Engaging...Absorbing...Lovely food writing...[Kingsolver] succeeds at adopting the warm tone of a confiding friend."

— CORBY KUMMER, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"Folksy and smart. . . . Cogent and illuminating . . . this book captures the pulse of the farm and the deep gratification it provides."

— JANET MASLIN, NEW YORK TIMES

"An impassioned, sensual, smart and witty narrative...Kingsolver is a master at leavening a serious message with humor."

— ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

"Faithful, funny, and thought-provoking...Readers-whether vegetarian or carnivore-will not go hungry, literally or literarily."

— BOOKPAGE

Courtesy of HarperCollins

About the Author

Literature Resource Center

Barbara Kingsolver

1955-

Personal Information: Family: Born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, MD; daughter of Wendell R. (a physician) and Virginia (a homemaker; maiden name, Henry) Kingsolver; married Joseph Hoffmann (a chemist), April 15, 1985 (divorced); married Steven Hopp; children: (first marriage) Camille; (second marriage) Lily. Education: DePauw University, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1977; University of Arizona, M.S., 1981, and additional graduate study. Politics: "Human rights activist." Religion: "Pantheist." Hobbies and other interests: Music, hiking, gardening, parenthood. Memberships: Amnesty International, National Writers Union, National TV Turnoff, Environmental Defense, PEN West, Phi Beta Kappa, Heifer International, Green Empowerment. **Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2004.

Writings

- *The Bean Trees* (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Homeland and Other Stories* (includes "Homeland," "Islands on the Moon," "Quality Time," "Covered Bridges," "Rose-Johnny," and "Why I Am a Danger to the Public"), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1989.
- *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (nonfiction), ILR Press (Ithaca, NY), 1989, with new introduction, 1996.
- *Animal Dreams* (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Another America/Otra America* (poetry), Seal Press (Seal Beach, CA), 1992, 2nd expanded edition, 1998.
- *Pigs in Heaven* (novel) HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1993.
- *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.
- *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel*, HarperFlamingo (New York, NY), 1998.
- (Author of foreword) Joseph Barbato and Lisa Weinerman Horak, editors, *Off the Beaten Path: Stories Place*, Nature Conservancy (Arlington, VA), 1998.
- *Prodigal Summer*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2000.
- (Editor, with Katrina Kenison, and author of introduction) *The Best American Short Stories, 2001*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2001.
- *Small Wonder* (essays), illustrated by Paul Mirocha, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands* (nonfiction), photographs by Annie Griffiths Belt, National Geographic Society (Washington, DC), 2002.
- (Author of foreword) Norman Wirzhar, editor, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2003.

Contributor to anthologies, including *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1988*, edited by S. Ravenel, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1988; *New Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing*, edited by Russell Martin, Penguin (New York, NY), 1992; *The Single Mother's Companion: Essays and Stories by Women*, edited by Marsha R. Leslie, Seal Press (Seattle, WA), 1994; *Mid-life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Remainders*, edited by Dave Marsh, Viking (New York, NY), 1994; *Journeys*, edited by PEN-Faulkner Foundation, Quill & Bush (Rockville, MD), 1994; *Heart of the Land: Essays on Last Great Places*, edited by Joseph Barbato, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1994; *I've Always Meant to Tell You: Letters to Our Mothers*, edited by Constance Warlow, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1997; and *Intimate Nature: The Bond between Women and Animals*, edited by Linda Hogan, D. Metzger, and B. Peterson, Ballantine (New York, NY), 1998. Contributor of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to numerous periodicals, including *Calyx*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Heresies*, *Mademoiselle*, *McCall's*, *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *Redbook*, *Sojourner*, *Tucson Weekly*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Progressive*, and *Smithsonian*. Reviewer for *New York Times Book Review* and *Los Angeles Times Book Review*.

Media Adaptations

Most of Kingsolver's novels have been adapted as audiobooks.

"Sidelights"

Best-selling author Barbara Kingsolver infuses her writings with a strong sense of family, relationships, and community. Kingsolver draws her characters from middle America--the shop owners, the unemployed, the displaced, the homeless, the mothers and children struggling to survive--and depicts how, by banding together, these seemingly forgotten people can thrive. As a firm believer in human dignity and worth, Kingsolver fills her works with themes of inspiration, love, strength, and endurance. Many critics have applauded her tenderness toward her characters and praise her insight into human nature, political repression, and ecological imperatives. In *New York Times*, Janet Maslin cited Kingsolver for her "sweet, ennobling enthusiasm for every natural phenomenon" as well as for an "overarching wisdom and passion."

Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, was published to an enthusiastic critical reception in 1988. The novel focuses on the relationships among a group of women and is narrated by Taylor Greer, a young, strong-willed Kentucky woman who leaves her homeland in search of a better life. During her westward travel, Taylor unexpectedly becomes the caretaker of a withdrawn two-year-old Cherokee girl named Turtle. Eventually the two settle in Arizona, where they find "an odd but dedicated 'family' in Tucson," the author once explained. Included in this clan are Lou Ann Ruiz, a dejected

mother whose husband has just left her, and Mattie, a warmhearted widow who runs the Jesus Is Lord Used Tires company. According to the author, "a new comprehension of responsibility" motivates Taylor to help Mattie shelter refugees from politically turbulent Central America.

Critics responded enthusiastically to *The Bean Trees*, noting the novel's sensitivity, humor, and lyricism. *The Bean Trees* "is as richly connected as a fine poem, but reads like realism," commented Jack Butler in *New York Times Book Review*. "From the very first page, Kingsolver's characters tug at the heart and soul," Karen FitzGerald noted in *Ms.* that "It is the growing strength of their relationships . . . that gives the novel its energy and appeal." And Margaret Randall in *Women's Review of Books* called *The Bean Trees* "a story propelled by a marvelous ear, a fast-moving humor and the powerful undercurrent of human struggle."

Favorable critical reviews also attended Kingsolver's next work, *Homeland and Other Stories*. Comprised of twelve short stories, *Homeland* relates stirring tales of individuals--mainly women--who struggle to find homes for themselves. Reviewers especially praised the title story, which reveals an aged Indian woman's disillusionment when she sees that her beloved Cherokee homeland has been transformed into a tourist trap. Another tale, "Islands on the Moon," shows how a mother and daughter--both single and pregnant--reconcile after years of estrangement. Among the distinctive characters that fill the remaining stories in the collection are a reformed thief striving for an honest living, a resilient union activist, a middle-class wife engaging in a secret affair, and a poor girl who befriends an outcast. Critics applauded Kingsolver's poetic language, her realistic portrayals of human nature, and her genuinely engaging tales. "Of the twelve stories in this first collection," remarked Russell Banks in *New York Times Book Review*, "all are interesting and most are extraordinarily fine." *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Bill Mahin called Kingsolver "an extraordinary storyteller."

While completing *Homeland and Other Stories* Kingsolver also completed *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*, a nonfiction book tracing the role of women during the Phelps Dodge Copper Company labor conflict. A year later, she returned to fiction with *Animal Dreams*, a novel that follows the growth of Codi Noline, an insecure woman who returns to her agricultural hometown of Grace, Arizona, after a fourteen-year absence. Characters' personal conflicts coupled with political struggles form the core of the novel. Codi finds her native community less than ideal: she faces grief, bigotry, disease, and environmental pollution and, through letters from her activist sister, learns of the political brutalities of Central America. Critics called the novel compassionate, humorous, and inspiring and praised Kingsolver's ability to mix commentary on political, social, racial, and personal turmoil. "*Animal Dreams* belongs to a new fiction of relationship, aesthetically rich and of great political and spiritual significance and power," wrote Ursula K. Le Guin in *Washington Post Book World*. "This is a sweet book, full of bitter pain; a beautiful weaving of the light and the dark." *Animal Dreams* is "a complex, passionate, bravely challenging book," maintained Melissa Pritchard in *Chicago's Tribune Books*, the critic going on to call Kingsolver "a writer of rare ambition and unequivocal talent."

In 1993 Kingsolver published *Pigs in Heaven*, a sequel to *The Bean Trees* that takes place three years after Taylor illegally adopts Turtle. In a strange turn of events, Turtle sees a man fall into the spillway of the Hoover Dam during a family vacation. Because of Turtle's insistence, Taylor sees to it that the man is rescued. The two become local heroes and are invited to appear on *Oprah Winfrey Show*. This newfound fame turns out to have unexpected consequences, however, as Cherokee lawyer Annawake Fourkiller sees the show and decides to investigate Taylor's adoption of Turtle. Threatened with losing her daughter, Taylor flees Arizona, beginning a difficult journey of economic struggle and emotional turbulence. Eventually, Taylor's mother Alice joins the pair in their flight, bringing her own wry perspective on life and undergoing her own personal journey.

Travis Silcox, writing in *Belles Lettres*, noted that, "despite its action, the novel suffers from a midpoint flatness." However, he praised Kingsolver's talent for characterization, adding that her "supporting characters enrich the story." Reviewer Wendy Smith likewise commended the novel, concluding in *Washington Post Book World* that "like all of Kingsolver's fiction, *Pigs in Heaven* fulfills the longings of the head and the heart with an inimitable blend of challenging ideas, vibrant characters and prose that sings. . . . It seems there's nothing she can't do." Karen Karbo averred in *New York Times Book Review* that Kingsolver's grip on the material she is writing is both skillful and satisfying: "As the novel progresses, she somehow manages to maintain her political views without sacrificing the complexity of her characters' predicaments." Karbo concluded that Kingsolver is "possessed of an extravagantly gifted narrative voice, she blends a fierce and abiding moral vision with benevolent, concise humor. Her medicine is meant for the head, the heart and the soul--and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily."

While Kingsolver's early novels are typically intimate domestic dramas, 1998's *The Poisonwood Bible* is something quite different: a penetrating exploration of one American family's troubled sojourn in Africa. The novel's sweeping scope and its portrayal of African politics during the cold war marked a thematic departure for the author. It also proved to be a bestseller. In the wake of Kingsolver's success with *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Nation* contributor John Leonard heralded the writer as "at last our very own [Doris] Lessing and our very own [Nadine] Gordimer, and she is, as one of her characters said of another in an earlier novel, 'beautiful beyond the speed of light.'"

With *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver established a prominent place in American letters. The epic tale introduces the Price family--father Nathan, an evangelical missionary, his wife Orleana, and their four daughters. The story begins as the family arrives in the Congo--now Zaire--as missionaries, and events are related from the point of view of Orleana and the four young girls. Quickly it becomes apparent that Nathan Price is a violent fanatic whose mispronunciation of the local language only serves to alienate the African villagers. The Price women struggle against starvation, sickness, and predatory ants while Nathan sinks further and further into zealous madness. His bumbling serves to indict American behavior in Africa in a microcosm, but Kingsolver also explores the violent American intervention in Congolese affairs during the Eisenhower era and the role that intervention played in destabilizing an emerging nation. According to Verlyn Klinkenborg in *New York Times Book Review*, *The Poisonwood Bible* is "a

story about the loss of one faith and the discovery of another. . . . Ultimately a novel of character, a narrative shaped by keen-eyed women contemplating themselves and one another and a village whose familiarity it takes a tragedy to discover."

Kingsolver animates *The Poisonwood Bible* with recollections of time she herself spent in the Belgian Congo, several years later than the 1963 setting of her novel. To quote Michiko Kakutani in *New York Times*, the "powerful . . . book is actually an old-fashioned nineteenth-century novel, a Hawthornian tale of sin and redemption and the 'dark necessity' of history." Kakutani added that the tale grapples with "social injustice, with the intersection of public events with private concerns and the competing claims of community and individual will." In *Nation*, Leonard likewise called *The Poisonwood Bible* "a magnificent fiction and a ferocious bill of indictment. . . . As in the keyed chords of a Baroque sonata, movements of the personal, the political, the historical and even the biological contrast and correspond. As in a Bach cantata, the choral stanza, the recitatives and the da capo arias harmonize. And a magical-realist forest sings itself to live forever."

Though the majority of reviewers applauded Kingsolver for her work in *The Poisonwood Bible*, there were a few dissenters. *Christianity Today* correspondent Tim Stafford maintained that Kingsolver "offers a cartoonish story of idiot missionaries and shady CIA operatives destroying the delicate fabric of the Congo, like bulldozers scraping their way through the forest jungle." Critics who were not won over by the novel were rare, however. More reflective of the majority view, a *Publishers Weekly* critic described the book as "a compelling family saga, a sobering picture of the horrors of fanatic fundamentalism and an insightful view of an exploited country." In *Booklist*, Donna Seaman commended *The Poisonwood Bible* as an "extraordinarily dramatic and forthright novel. . . a measureless saga of hubris and deliverance." A *Time* reviewer felt that the author's female characters "carry a story that moves through its first half like a river in flood." And in *Progressive*, Ruth Conniff praised Kingsolver for "writing a moving book that makes [political] ideas both personal and timely. Kingsolver is a terrific fiction writer."

Prodigal Summer is similar to Kingsolver's earlier novels in its sense of place and its more intimate scope. Three story lines gradually converge as residents of southern Appalachia respond in various ways to the wealth of nature surrounding them. According to Jennifer Schuessler in *New York Times Book Review*, readers of *Animal Dreams* and *The Bean Trees* "will find themselves back on familiar, well-cleared ground of plucky heroines, liberal politics and vivid descriptions of the natural world."

The three segments of *Prodigal Summer* introduce Deanna Wolfe, a wildlife biologist who seeks to protect a clan of coyotes from a poacher who eventually becomes her lover. Another segment is devoted to the predicament of Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, a Palestinian-Jewish hybrid housewife who must stake a claim to her piece of Appalachia after her husband dies. The final segment introduces a pair of feuding neighbors, traditional farmer Garnett Walker and his organic opponent Nannie Rawley, whose search for common ground ends in unstated affection for one another. Gradually the three separate plots weave together toward an ending that affirms the power of nature. Maslin,

in her *New York Times* review of *Prodigal Summer*, deemed the work "an improbably appealing book with the feeling of a nice stay inside a terrarium." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also felt that readers would respond "to the sympathy with which [Kingsolver] reflects the difficult lives of people struggling on the hard edge of poverty." Michael Tyrell, writing in *Us*, suggested that, despite some passages that read like "overzealous lectures on ecology," *Prodigal Summer* excels in its "spirited, captivating heroine."

Kingsolver's 1992 book *Another America/Otra America* proved to be somewhat of a departure. Composed of original poetry, it also includes Spanish translations of her poems within the same volume. Reviewer Lorraine Elena Roses, commenting in *Women's Review of Books* on the presence of the translations, stated that "it's clear from the outset that Kingsolver feels a deep connection to the Spanish-speaking lands that begin before the Rio Grande and stretch all the way to the windswept limits of Tierra del Fuego." Kingsolver's poems explore her feelings about Latino human rights activists, Latin American victimization, and North American prejudices. *School Library Journal* contributor Deanna Kuhn called the book a "powerful collection." While praising Kingsolver's technical skill, Roses questioned whether "lyrical poetry [can] bear the weight of politics," but concluded that Kingsolver's poems "will appeal primarily to those who seek to commemorate and mark political occasions."

In *High Tide in Tucson*, published in 1995, Kingsolver offers opinions on a myriad of topics, from motherhood to the effect of the Gulf War. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic, while finding fault with the author's "hit-or-miss musings" and "smarmy self-reflections," commended Kingsolver's facility with nature writing. A second essay collection, *Small Wonder*, collects twenty-three essays on a variety of topics. While many essays were published previously, the book includes three written in collaboration with Kingsolver's husband, Steven Hopp. Subject matter ranges from the Columbine High School, Colorado, shootings to television, the homeless, and the difficulties of writing about sex. Judith Bromberg pointed out in *National Catholic Reporter* that *Small Wonder* came about after Kingsolver was asked to respond to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States. She wrote five responsive essays in one month, all of which are included in this collection. Bromberg noted that, whether written before or after September 11, the essays "reflect [the event's] enormous reality and either draw meaning from it or attempt to lend some clarity to it." Piers Moore Ede commented in *Earth Island Journal* that Kingsolver's essays serve as "compelling, provocative . . . meditations" on how the event changed the world, and commended the author for having the courage to suggest that the attacks were perhaps a political protest against the "American Way."

Kingsolver has described herself as "a writer of the working class" who views her art as a daily job. "My idea of a pre-writing ritual is getting the kids on the bus and sitting down," she said in a *Book Page* online interview. Elsewhere in the same interview she outlined her goals as an author. "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," she said. "All that precisely describes everything I've ever written."

As an extension of her belief in literary fiction as a force for social change, Kingsolver has established and funded the Bellwether Prize. Awarded biennially, the prize consists of a \$25,000 cash payment and guaranteed publication for a novel manuscript by an author who has not previously been widely published. The goal of the Bellwether Prize is to promote writing, reading, and publication of literary fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships.

Futher Reading About the Author

Books

- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 55, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1989.

Periodicals

- *African Business*, March, 1999, Christy Nevin, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 56.
- *Belles Lettres*, fall, 1993, Travis Silcox, review of *Pigs in Heaven*, pp. 4, 42.
- *Bloomsbury Review*, November-December, 1990.
- *Booklist*, February 15, 1992, p. 1083; August, 1998, Donna Seaman, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 1922.
- *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 1988; June 23, 1989; July 11, 1993, p. 3.
- *Christianity Today*, January 11, 1999, Tim Stafford, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 88.
- *Cosmopolitan*, March, 1988.
- *Courier Journal* (Louisville, KY), April 24, 1988.
- *Earth Island Journal*, winter, 2002, Piers Moore Ede, review of *Small Wonder*, p. 45.
- *English Journal*, January, 1994.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, November 5, 1999, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, "Kingsolver for a Day," p. 75.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1995, p. 1080.
- *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1988; April 24, 1988.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, July 16, 1989, September 9, 1990; July 4, 1993, pp. 2, 8.
- *Ms.*, April, 1988, Karen Fitzgerald, review of *The Bean Trees*.
- *Nation*, January 11, 1999, John Leonard, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 28.
- *National Catholic Reporter*, March 19, 1999, Judith Bromberg, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 13; Judith Bromberg, review of *Small Wonders*, p. 30.
- *New Republic*, March 22, 1999, Lee Siegel, "Sweet and Low: The Poisonwood Bible," p. 30.
- *New Statesman*, December 10, 1993.
- *Newsweek*, July 12, 1993.
- *New Yorker*, April 4, 1988.

- *New York Times*, October 16, 1998, Michiko Kakutani, "No Ice Cream Cones in a Heart of Darkness;" November 2, 2000, Janet Maslin, "Three Story Lines United by the Fecundity of Nature."
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 10, 1988, p. 15; June 5, 1988; June 11, 1989; January 7, 1990; September 2, 1990; June 27, 1993, p. 59; October 15, 1995, p. 21; October 18, 1998, Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Going Native;" November 5, 2000, Jennifer Schuessler, "Men, Women and Coyotes."
- *Progressive*, February, 1996, p. 33; December, 1998, Ruth Conniff, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 39.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 31, 1990, p. 46; January 27, 1992, p. 93; August 7, 1995, p. 449; August 10, 1998, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 366; October 2, 2000, review of *Prodigal Summer*, p. 57.
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- *Time*, September 24, 1990; November 9, 1998, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 113.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), August 26, 1990, Melissa Pritchard, review of *Animal Dreams*.
- *Us*, October 30, 2000, Michael Tyrell, review of *Prodigal Summer*, p. 49.
- *USA Today*, October 11, 1990.
- *Utne Reader*, July-August, 1993.
- *Washington Post Book World*, September 2, 1990; June 13, 1995, p. 3; October 8, 1995, p. 13.
- *Women's Review of Books*, May, 1988, Margaret Randall, review of *The Bean Trees*; July, 1992, Lorraine Elena Roses, review of *Another America/Otra America*, p. 42.

Online

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- *KYLit Web site*, <http://www.english.eku.edu/services/kylit/> (December 5, 1994), George Brosi, "Barbara Kingsolver."
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Author Interview

Barbara Kingsolver Does Something Great for Her County. She Eats It.

Dave Weich, Powells.com

After twenty-five years in the Arizona desert, in 2004, Kentucky-bred Barbara Kingsolver moved back to the Appalachians, to a Virginia farm just hours from her childhood home. Family called. "Returning," she explains in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, "would allow my kids more than just a hit-and-run, holiday acquaintance with grandparents and cousins."

But Kingsolver adds, "There is another reason the move felt right to us, and it's the purview of this book. We wanted to live in a place that could feed us: where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground."

The typical food in an American supermarket has traveled considerably farther than some people do in a year of vacations. Consider the impact of those miles on fuel consumption, or the effect that chemical preservatives and industrial processing have on our health, not to mention what this long haul paradigm does to local economies and to our grasp of what food really costs, what food *is*.

For one year, the author's family pledged to eat only what it could procure from within an hour of its home. Meats, vegetables, grains, you name it.

After eleven previous books — bestselling novels, short stories, essays, and even a volume of poetry — *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* marks yet another departure for Kingsolver. Her first full-length nonfiction narrative, and it's a family project besides. Husband Steven Hopp contributes informative sidebars that supplement Kingsolver's narrative and point out sources of additional information. Daughter Camille pens a short personal essay at the end of each chapter, offering seasonal recipes and weekly meal plans. Third-grade Lily starts an egg and poultry business.

"As we come around to being more mindful of our carbon footprint, being more thoughtful about the fuel we use as consumers, food is a natural place to begin," Kingsolver explained a week before publication. "Food is the rare moral arena in which the choice that's best for the world and best for your community is also the best on your table."

Dave: Alongside the benefits that a locally procured diet bestows on consumers and their communities, the idea of what you call "trying to reduce the miles-per-gallon quotient of our diets in our gasoholic world" becomes a major theme of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

Barbara Kingsolver: As we got deeper into this project, it did surprise us that everything comes back to that. So many different issues come back to roost in our refrigerators or on our pantry shelves. The way we eat determines how we use the world.

I suppose that should be obvious from an animal point of view. Any animal's chief interaction with its habitat is foraging, is what the animal eats. We've stopped thinking of ourselves as animals, though. We forget that three times a day we're animals again.

In just about the last generation, we're consuming the world, via our diets, in a whole new way. We have come to believe we're entitled to eat absolutely anything from any corner of the world at any time of the year. We've forgotten that there's any other way to eat.

Dave: Early in the book, you write that Tucson "might as well be a space station where human sustenance is concerned." And it's true that to look at a place like Phoenix or Las Vegas, geographies that clearly were not meant to sustain a large population, can be disheartening. But meanwhile, we entirely take for granted that no population is sustaining itself locally. The lack of water just happens to be easier to recognize.

Kingsolver: There are still villages in India and South America, a few places on the planet, where pretty much a hundred percent of what people eat was grown within a few miles of their doorstep. There are still humans who eat that way. Up until about World War II, that's how we ate, too, pretty much. We ate seasonal, local foods; and in winter we ate the foods that were grown where we lived and were put up in summer, mostly by ourselves, against the winter. That has been the way of eating for thousands of years.

This new way of living is a brand new idea that depends on an enormous amount of fossil fuel — for transport, for refrigeration, for processing, for milling, even for growing. Even our agricultural system has shifted over to being petroleum based.

I don't want to pick on Tucson or Phoenix, Arizona, because just about any city acts as a space station, bringing in its food and water, carting out its garbage in little modules. In just a couple of generations, we've forgotten that food still has to be grown somewhere, that food is not a product but a process. And we're controlling those processes through our consumer choices.

We don't have the luxury of forgetting indefinitely because this is not a sustainable proposition. By the time my kids are my age, they're going to look back and say, "You

did what with the last drop of fossil fuels? You pushed a watermelon from Chile to your door so that you could eat it out of season? What were you thinking?"

Dave: Not to be crass, but there's a lot of money to be made by entrepreneurs who can make what you call "locavore" life easier by connecting buyers and sellers in an efficient manner.

We have a great market doing that here in Portland. Have you heard of New Seasons?

Kingsolver: Tell me about it.

Dave: They started in Portland a few years ago. They feature local products. You go to their web site, and there's one section called "Food and Farm News." Another asks, "What's in season?" — but this isn't your 1970s co-op type of arrangement. It's not a health food store, per se. They sell pastries and sugar sodas, for instance. But if you're shopping for produce or meat, and even some dry goods, they source from local growers. The supermarkets serve a mainstream, commercial clientele but as much as possible fill their shelves with local products.

Kingsolver: Which helps guide people to their local sources, and that's the hardest part of the bargain. As I said, we've forgotten even how to speak about foods being in season. When people begin the project of eating locally, they may have to learn, What can I expect in my latitude in May? What's growing here now? When should I expect watermelons if not in February? That's a lot of what our book hopes to address, to help educate people about what to expect and how to begin this project.

And you're right: It's an open market. As people become increasingly interested in returning to their local economies and their local foodsheds, it's great for them to have some assistance in finding local sources. But you don't need somebody to do this for you. You don't need a company to tell you how to buy locally. It's a great adventure to do it yourself. It can be as simple as reading the labels in your grocery store to see which bag of apples comes from Oregon and which bag comes from New Zealand, and then connecting the dots for yourself about how you want to use the last of the world's petroleum. If it's apples and apples, why not go for the local?

A lot of us are becoming aware of the amount of fuel we use every day for things we don't even value that much. A lot of people might eat the New Zealand apple without knowing what a splurge it is. As we come around to being more mindful of our carbon footprint, being more thoughtful about the fuel we use as consumers, food is a natural place to begin. The rewards are immense. Finding local sources brings us better quality food and it begins to cut out more and more of the processed items, which are of course causing all kinds of problems with our health.

Dave: You make a great point in the book: Eating local generally means eating better tasting, healthier food. In that respect, it's not as if you're asking people to make some great sacrifice.

Kingsolver: Exactly, so why not? Food is the rare moral arena in which the choice that's best for the world and best for your community is also the best on your table, the most delicious and healthiest.

Dave: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* was very much a family undertaking. You wrote the book with your husband and daughter. Your youngest daughter plays a role, too. How did the project come together?

Kingsolver: We had thought for years about the idea of a local food sabbatical. We enjoyed so much working in our garden here in Virginia and producing a lot of our food in the summertime that it made sense to dream about a future in which we would grow a whole lot of what we needed and get most of the rest from neighborhood farms.

We dreamed up this project, in which we would spend a year eating locally just to see what that's like. It made sense to us to expand that outward: to do this not just as a parlor game or an exercise for one little family in the great big world but also to examine, every step of the way, its universal elements, to think about what this project really means or could mean to other people, what lessons we could draw from it that could be exciting for other people to read about.

Writing the book also made it more of a public vow. Going into it with a book contract, whether we succeeded or failed we knew we had better come out of it with a pretty good story. And I hope that we did.

Collaborating came about naturally. Steven and I have co-written articles, mostly on subjects having to do with science and natural history. We had talked for years about co-authoring a book of basic biology for non-science readers. At the same time, Camille and I had joked for years about writing a cookbook together because we both love to cook, we love to invent recipes, and we share a passion for simple, elegant recipes that you can throw together in a short amount of time. It dawned on us that this book could be both of those books and more.

Also, it made sense to us that, since the food experiment is a family project, the book should also be a family project. Lily of course wanted to be involved too but she was too young to sign a book contract. She contributed in many other ways.

Dave: I must ask: Why are you dead set on keeping macaroni in your chili recipe?

Kingsolver: Ha! Food culture. It's my mother's recipe. What can I say? Some things just aren't negotiable. It's kind of a family argument.

Dave: Ian McEwan believes that the practice of science is inherently hopeful. Scientists tend to see the world through a lens of progress, he argues. Their mission is to find solutions to problems, which is based on the presumption that there *are* solutions to discover.

So much of what you write straddles the line between science and culture. Many of those cultural subjects, however, are not so hopeful, in and of themselves.

Kingsolver: You're right: The environmental picture can be daunting. It can feel grim. The whole issue of vanishing culture and the simple matter of the vanishing family dinner are sad and maybe even scary subjects. And I mean scary: Look at statistics about type 2 diabetes, or the rampant epidemic of childhood obesity, or the fact that right now we are raising the first Americans to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents — and that's solely a result of what we're feeding them. These are grim facts to face.

Also, food policy in our country is so stacked against the farmers that raise healthy foods, and it so heavily subsidizes commodity crops and processed foods. This is enough to make you sit down at your kitchen table and weep. But why do that when you can cook up something wonderful instead?

I was raised to be a very practical person. It's interesting that you equate it to a training in science. I myself would go further back and claim that my persistently optimistic outlook has to do with the place and time where I was raised. I grew up in a community of farmers who faced every day as a problem to tackle and solve by evening, and they mostly did. You cannot be a farmer without being extremely optimistic and hopeful and resilient.

Those are the people I grew up among. I was shocked when I left my childhood community of farmers and went out into the world to discover that our culture as a whole doesn't have much respect for farmers or even much room for thinking about farmers.

That was part of my mission in this book, too, to address that rural-urban antipathy, to take it by the shoulders and give it a hard look and ask some questions about where that has led us. What's the use of that mild disdain for rural culture and farming when we really can't eat without farmers?

Dave: That reminds me of another thread in the book, which considers our detachment from the actual source of what we eat and the knowledge we lose without proximity.

In *Prodigal Summer*, you write at length about moths, which brought me back to a favorite childhood memory. In the middle of the woods in Maine, at night, I'd turn off all the lights outside our house and turn on all the lights inside. Within just a few minutes, the screen door would be covered with moths. You could stand within inches of them, inside the screen, and compare one to the next up close, all the different shapes and colors.

Kingsolver: The world is teeming with life. Even our houses and apartments have more nonhuman life in them than most of us would care to admit, especially if you get down to the microscopic level. And yet it's peculiar that we think of ourselves as entirely separate from the natural world. We pretend that biological laws don't apply to us, that the laws of science apply to the rest of nature; nature is something we can look at before we come back to our work and forget all about it. That set of presumptions is coming back to haunt us.

We do, as you say, live in a world of moths. We live in a world of complex interactions between microbial life and soil, between plankton and their marine habitat. We ignore those interactions at our peril. We ultimately don't have the option of fouling our nest beyond repair. We depend on our habitat and food chain, like it or not, human though we may be.

One thing we really wanted to talk about in this book is what it's like to reengage both as a mental exercise and a spiritual exercise, if I may say, to reengage with the systems that sustain our lives — not just the people but the animals and the plants that sustain us — and re-envision a world in which we're not top-heavy hominids walking around all alone but in fact surrounded by life on which we depend.

Dave: When I think of great American rural literature, Steinbeck comes to mind. Another book I think of is *Giants in the Earth*. What comes to mind for you?

Kingsolver: Great rural fiction? About two thousand books by Wendell Berry, for starters. I'm a big Wendell Berry fan and have been for my whole reading life.

Dave: What would be the book to start with, if someone hasn't read Berry's work?

Kingsolver: If you're looking for a novel, maybe *Jayber Crow*. That's pretty recent, but they're all wonderful. If you're looking for nonfiction, maybe *What Are People For?*. And you'll go from there, I promise.

It's funny: Rural literature used to be a respectable domain. It wasn't even a genre. Thomas Hardy wrote what we consider great novels, which were about people who milk cows. Nowadays, literature that is focused on rural subjects is marginalized; it's rarely

respected because we've shifted so drastically in our culture toward valuing urban concerns.

Dave: I know that you took a trip to Africa when you were young. Clearly it influenced your writing of *The Poisonwood Bible*. I have a bumper sticker here on my desk. It's part of a new campaign by Lonely Planet. It says: "Do something great for your country. Leave."

Kingsolver: Yes. I agree with that. And then come back and see your country through new eyes.

It's so important to remember that many of the problems we seem to find insurmountable in this country at the moment have already been solved in many other countries. Health care is a perfect example. Do yourself a favor — get sick in Europe and find out what free, efficient health care is like. We could do that here, and we will when we generate the good will and the common sense, both in the same day.

Reducing our fossil fuel use and our carbon emissions is another problem that is being seriously addressed by many other countries. We don't have to feel terrified by the possibility of using less fuel. I hear so many things, rather awful things, such as drilling under the Arctic Refuge, wrecking our last bits of wilderness for the sake fossil fuels. And even worse, I hear these things justified by the sentence, "Unless we want to give up our American way of life." Well, it's a large, vague threat, but in fact the American way of life is an ever-shifting terrain. It's been changing rapidly for all of my life and many lifetimes before. And it's going to keep changing.

We are going to give up things. We don't have the option. But food is a domain in which we can rejoice on this score because giving up jet-traveled foods, a fossil fuel-driven industrial food pipeline, is a pretty happy way to go — or so we found in my family. We enjoyed stepping away from that pipeline so much that we didn't even note the day when our calendar year of local food ended. It didn't even matter to us. I just looked up at the end of April and thought, *Wow. We did it.* We have a whole new way of looking at food and we're never going back.

Dave: That's typical of addictions, once you've wean yourself off. After a year of this lifestyle, it's not surprising that you didn't hanker to jump right back to your old habits. But your comment about the American way of life begs the question: Are you still ranked seventy-fourth on the list of one hundred people who are destroying our country?

Kingsolver: I have no idea. I'm wondering if maybe this book will nudge me closer to the front, but I bet Jimmy Carter is moving just as fast as I am. I know he's going to stay ahead of me.

Dave: Back to *The Poisonwood Bible*: How did you approach the prospect of writing in so many different voices? Did you simply write one chapter after another, one voice and then the next, or did you stick with a particular narrator and then place sections in their proper order?

Kingsolver: That was a specific challenge in *Poisonwood Bible*, to individuate those different narrators' voices. I wanted them to be so distinct that, after a few chapters, the reader would be able to pick up the book and open it to any page, read a couple sentences, and know who was narrating. That was very important. I didn't want the reader to be confused.

Also, for thematic reasons, I wanted each of those narrators to have its own very solid moral center. How I did it? It involved spending a lot of time at my computer. I did a lot of writing before I started the book. I wrote hundreds of pages that I ended up throwing away, just practicing getting the voices to sound distinct.

One exercise was to establish a scene and then write it from five different points of view. Another was to write the whole narrative from just one point of view and then go back and choose different sections that I could represent from a different perspective. As I was constructing the novel, I would do things like sorting out the different voices and putting each narrator's entire novel in a pile and then reading through them for consistency.

It's a boring answer: just lots and lots of work. That's why it took more than a decade to write that novel. There were so many challenges both in the research and the writing. But craft is my passion, so when I sit down to write it doesn't feel like work to me.

Dave: In all that time, was there ever a point when you thought you were in over your head?

Kingsolver: Did I realize midway through that I was in over my head? The fact is that I knew years before I started that I was in over my head. In fact I successfully avoided beginning it for nearly ten years while just collecting data, making notes, doing character sketches, doing point of view exercises.

I had a file cabinet of stuff I called "the damn Africa book." It had me by the throat. I felt I had to write it; I could not finish my life without writing this book, but I kept saying, "I can't do this until I'm older and wiser."

It was my husband, Steven, who really nudged me. He didn't put it this way, but he made a case for the fact that I would probably never be old enough or wise enough to write that book so why not get it started while I was still alive. And so I did. What he said, which was actually a kind way to put it, was, "Why don't you start, and when you reach the

point where you can't go any farther, then you'll know that you tried, you'll know that you did what you could."

Once I got started, I was so compelled by this lifelong passion that was driving me to create the story, to set up this moral dilemma and find a way to an answer, that I had to keep going. And so I did.

Dave: Next you wrote *Prodigal Summer*. That book must have presented challenges of its own, even though it's quite different, much closer to home.

Kingsolver: I love a challenge. That's why every book I write is something completely new. But I did feel like I had wrestled the alligator under the water and almost drowned by the time I was finished *Poisonwood Bible*. I really felt chewed up and spit out. I was exhausted. I made a little deal with myself that the next book would feel like coming home. And that's what I did. *Prodigal Summer* flowed like a river. A lot of the narrative issues, the point of view issues, I had already practiced so thoroughly in *Poisonwood Bible* that I had those skills and I felt like I knew what I was doing.

I had other challenges with *Prodigal Summer*, specifically the old science-for-the-people challenge. A lot of biological information is central to that story, thematically its heart. The novel is an explanation of the science of ecology, for anyone who may not know what that is — which is, frankly, most people. Most people think ecology has to do with recycling your pop bottles. It doesn't. It's a field of science in which I happened to go to graduate school and which I feel is very important for all people, including non-scientists, to understand.

To understand how all living systems are connected is probably crucial to whether we get to do another century as a species on this planet. That involved explaining some basic biological phenomena, such as keystone predator, and such as the Lotka-Volterra equations, which explain why when you spray pesticides on a field you end up with more pests the next year. Natural selection and evolution — a lot of people don't understand the basic four steps that explain how species evolve and change over time.

That was the big challenge: to make all of that not just palatable and comprehensible to readers who were not necessarily trained to understand science, but also compelling. I didn't want readers to go to sleep. I wanted them to keep turning pages. What's the obvious answer there? Throw in tons of sex.

Dave: Good thing you figured that out.

I read *Animal Dreams* and *Bean Trees* and [Homeland](#) when I was living in Colorado. For whatever reason — timing and sensibility? — I'll always associate those books with the music of 10,000 Maniacs.

Kingsolver: Oh, good!

Dave: Which of your older books do you hear about most often these days?

Kingsolver: It amazes me that every week I get more letters from people who have read one of my books for the first time or who say, "This one is my favorite." It's always a different one. The new book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, is my twelfth book, so I have an even dozen now and it seems that every one of them is somebody's favorite, which is so gratifying. I want them all to be different. I love that different things find their way home for different people.

In terms of sheer numbers of letters, the most still come from *The Bean Trees*. It's the oldest; it's been out there longest, and there are the most copies of it in circulation, several million at this point, which is astounding. In twenty different languages or something like that. But also because of course adoptions. *The Bean Trees* has now been adopted into the high school and college literature curriculum, so there's a whole new crop of students reading it each year — under obligation, unfortunately, perhaps, for them, but a fair number seem to enjoy it enough to write me and say, "Geez, I generally hate books, but I liked this one." Or something like that.

Dave: For myself, until I read Vonnegut outside of class — someone gave me a copy of *Cat's Cradle* — I never connected to books in such a meaningful way.

I'm thrilled that I read all those classics in high school and college because I don't have the time to go back, but they didn't give me a sense that books could matter to me, personally. I always compare it to music: If you wanted to get a teenager hooked on music, you probably wouldn't play classical for them.

Kingsolver: It depends on the type of teenager, but probably not. Nor should you start with *Romeo and Juliet*. Much as I love that play, it's a big mistake to force it down the throats of teenagers because it's really not about love. It's about in-laws, not something teenagers generally get.

I'm very happy to know that as a living writer, a living *woman* writer no less, I've been adopted into so many high school curricula.

It's true. I'm with you. When I was in school, almost all the books I read were by old dead guys from England. Because of that, I never imagined myself as a writer. I wasn't even in

the running. I certainly was none of those things: old, dead, male, or from England. It *is* wonderful to see curricula loosening up and including, alongside the classics, books written by people who inhabit the same world as their readers.

Dave: And now, with *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, you've gone back to nonfiction.

Kingsolver: It's my first full-length narrative nonfiction, unless you count *Holding the Line*, which is a book very few people have read. It's a nonfiction account of a mine strike in Arizona in 1983, but it's typically classed as an oral history because the narrative is mostly in the voices of people I interviewed.

With that long caveat, I will say that this is my first construction of narrative nonfiction in a book-length piece. This was such a revelation to me because I discovered that narrative nonfiction requires all the same elements as a novel. It's so similar. It needs to be scenic. It needs characters and plot and suspense and resolution. It needs a great ending that will cause people to close the book and sigh deeply and say, "I knew that was going to happen, but that's not what I expected." All of those things that a novel has to have, this book had to have, too.

The challenge was constructing all of those elements not out of sheer imagination but rather out of the rather limited landscape of what actually happened. And choosing out of the million things that actually happened to us in that year, being very disciplined about selecting only those that moved the story forward and only those that would engage the reader in the right way. In some ways it required more discipline even than writing fiction.

Dave: Did you consciously plan the trip to Italy and the road trip to Montreal to suit your narrative, and maybe to get your family out of Virginia for a few pages?

Kingsolver: It was conscious. We knew from the start that a comprehensive example of local food would have to look beyond our county. Relatively few of our readers live in our county, and we wanted it to be inclusive. We wanted to address the fact that, yes, *local* is different depending where you go, but it's not all that different in terms of the issues and the challenges.

So, yes, we did think ahead of time about how to expand the story both within the country and within the world. And there were other trips that didn't make it into the book; they just didn't work. But it required a fairly rigorous architecture in terms of plotting to work those things in without making them feel nailed on. They needed to flow coherently with the rest of the structure.

All of those creative challenges once again kept me on the edge of my seat. It's funny that with every new book I do the rounds of publicity, and many interviewers will say, "Isn't this a departure?" And that's great. I want every book I launch to be a whole new boat. If I can't keep myself entertained, I'll never keep readers entertained.

Dave: Do you know what's next?

Kingsolver: I sure do.

Dave: What's that?

Kingsolver: A novel. I'm well into it. And you know what? It's a departure.

Dave: Is it really?

Kingsolver: It is.

Dave: Any hints at all? Is it set in North America?

Kingsolver: Oh, twenty questions! Yes, in North America. It takes place in the U.S. and Mexico. I'll call it... "a secret history surprisingly revealed."

Dave: Excellent. You've teased our readers enough. We anxiously await the publication.

Kingsolver: But meanwhile, be sure to read this one.

Dave: A lot of people will, I'm sure. It's a good story, but aside from that there are so many ties into people's communities, whether it be farmers markets or CSAs or education and nutrition...

Kingsolver: It seems that way. I've been through book releases before, but never one like this. It's astonishing to us. Many times we've simply had to stop answering the phone and lock the gates just to catch our breath. The reception has been overwhelming and breathtaking, and the book isn't even out yet. I've never encountered this much media interest, this much popular excitement.

We seem to be launching this book into a country that's ready for it. That makes me so happy and so proud of my fellow citizens. I'm so glad that we are ready to rethink our paradigm about not just what we eat but what we need and what we want to do for the world and for our own communities.

Believe me, three or four years ago when we dreamed up this book and pitched it to our publisher, to their credit they were very excited about it, but I thought, *We're on the moon here. How can we even explain to people why we want to eat local food for a year?* We thought it seemed a little crazy from the larger perspective. It made perfect sense to us, but trying to translate that across a culture gap, we thought that would be the hardest thing to do. What a surprise — we're trendy.

Dave: You didn't even know it.

Kingsolver: We had no idea.

Barbara Kingsolver spoke from her Virginia home on April 24, 2007, a week before the publication of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was your perception of America's food industry prior to reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? What did you learn from this book? How has it altered your views on the way food is acquired and consumed?
2. In what ways, if any, have you changed your eating habits since reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? Depending on where you live—in an urban, suburban, or rural environment—what other steps would you like to take to modify your lifestyle with regard to eating local?
3. "It had felt arbitrary when we sat around the table with our shopping list, making our rules. It felt almost silly to us in fact, as it may now seem to you. Why impose restrictions on ourselves? Who cares?" asks Kingsolver in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Did you, in fact, care about Kingsolver's story and find it to be compelling? Why or why not? What was the family's aim for their year-long initiative, and did they accomplish that goal?
4. The writing of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* was a family affair, with Kingsolver's husband, Steven L. Hopp, contributing factual sidebars and her daughter, Camille Kingsolver, serving up commentary and recipes. Did you find that these additional elements enhanced the book? How so? What facts or statistics in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* surprised you the most?
5. How does each member of the Kingsolver-Hopp family contribute during their year-long eating adventure? Were you surprised that the author's children not only participated in the endeavor but that they did so with such enthusiasm? Why or why not?
6. "A majority of North Americans do understand, at some level, that our food choices are politically charged," says Kingsolver, "affecting arenas from rural culture to international oil cartels and global climate change." How do politics affect America's food production and consumption? What global ramifications are there for the food choices we make?
7. Kingsolver advocates the pleasures of seasonal eating, but she acknowledges that many people would view this as deprivation "because we've grown accustomed to the botanically outrageous condition of having everything always." Do you believe that American society can—or will—overcome the need for instant gratification in order to be able to eat seasonally? How does Kingsolver present this aspect in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? Did you get the sense that she and her family ever felt deprived in their eating options?

8. Kingsolver points out that eating what we want, when we want comes "at a price." The cost, she says, "is not measured in money, but in untallied debts that will be paid by our children in the currency of extinctions, economic unravelings, and global climate change." What responsibility do we bear for keeping the environment safe for future generations? How does eating locally factor in to this?
9. Kingsolver asserts that "we have dealt to today's kids the statistical hand of a shorter life expectancy than their parents, which would be *us*, the ones taking care of them." How is our "thrown-away food culture" a detriment to children's health? She also says, "We're raising our children on the definition of promiscuity if we feed them a casual, indiscriminate mingling of foods from every season plucked from the supermarket." What responsibility do parents have to teach their children about the value and necessity of a local food culture?
10. In what ways do Kingsolver's descriptions of the places she visited on her travels—Italy, New England, Montreal, and Ohio—enhance her portrayal of local and seasonal eating?
11. "Marketing jingles from every angle lure patrons to turn our backs on our locally owned stores, restaurants, and farms," says Kingsolver. "And nobody considers that unpatriotic." How much of a role do the media play in determining what Americans eat? Discuss the decline of America's diversified family farms, and what it means for the country as a whole.

Courtesy of HarperCollins