

# **The Lacuna**

## **by Barbara Kingsolver**

### About the Book

Born in the United States, reared in a series of provisional households in Mexico—from a coastal island jungle to 1930s Mexico City—Harrison Shepherd finds precarious shelter but no sense of home on his thrilling odyssey. Life is whatever he learns from housekeepers who put him to work in the kitchen, errands he runs in the streets, and one fateful day, by mixing plaster for famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. He discovers a passion for Aztec history and meets the exotic, imperious artist Frida Kahlo, who will become his lifelong friend. When he goes to work for Lev Trotsky, an exiled political leader fighting for his life, Shepherd inadvertently casts his lot with art and revolution, newspaper headlines and howling gossip, and a risk of terrible violence.

Meanwhile, to the north, the United States will soon be caught up in the internationalist goodwill of World War II. There in the land of his birth, Shepherd believes he might remake himself in America's hopeful image and claim a voice of his own. He finds support from an unlikely kindred soul, his stenographer, Mrs. Brown, who will be far more valuable to her employer than he could ever know. Through darkening years, political winds continue to toss him between north and south in a plot that turns many times on the unspeakable breach—the lacuna—between truth and public presumption.

With deeply compelling characters, a vivid sense of place, and a clear grasp of how history and public opinion can shape a life, Barbara Kingsolver has created an unforgettable portrait of the artist—and of art itself. *The Lacuna* is a rich and daring work of literature, establishing its author as one of the most provocative and important of her time.

### Praise for the Book

“Rich...impassioned...engrossing...Politics and art dominate the novel, and their overt, unapologetic connection is refreshing.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

“Compelling...Kingsolver’s descriptions of life in Mexico City burst with sensory detail—thick sweet breads, vividly painted walls, the lovely white feet of an unattainable love.”

— *The New Yorker*

*Courtesy of Harper Collins*

## About the Author

Title: Barbara Kingsolver

Known As: Kingsolver, Barbara Ellen; Kingsolver, Barbara

American Writer ( 1955 - )

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## Personal Information

Born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, MD; daughter of Wendell R. (a physician) and Virginia (a homemaker) Kingsolver; married Joseph Hoffmann (a chemist), April 15, 1985 (divorced); married Steven L. 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." **Avocational 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. **Addresses:** Home: VA. Agent: Frances Goldin, 57 E. 11th St., New York, NY 10003.

## Career

University of Arizona, Tucson, research assistant in department of physiology, 1977-79, technical writer in office of arid lands studies, 1981-85; freelance journalist, 1985-87; writer, beginning 1987.

## Awards

Feature-writing award, Arizona Press Club, 1986; American Library Association awards, 1988, for *The Bean Trees*, and 1990, for *Homeland*; citation of accomplishment from United Nations National Council of Women, 1989; PEN fiction prize and Edward Abbey Ecofiction Award, both 1991, both for *Animal Dreams*; Woodrow Wilson Foundation/Lila Wallace fellow, 1992-93; D.Litt., DePauw University, 1994; Book Sense Book of the Year Award, 2000, for *The Poisonwood Bible*; National Humanities Medal, 2000; Book Sense Book of the Year Award and James Beard Foundation Award, both 2008, both for *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*; recipient of honorary degrees from Centre College, 2007, and Duke University, 2008; Orange Prize for Fiction, 2010, for *The Lacuna*.

## Works

## Writings

- *The Bean Trees* (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1988, new edition with related readings, EMC/Paradigm (St. Paul, MN), 2004.
- *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* (novel), HarperFlamingo (New York, NY), 1998.
- (Author of foreword) Joseph Barbato and Lisa Weinerman Horak, editors, *Off the Beaten Path: Stories of 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 Wirzba, editor, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2003.
- *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Lacuna* (novel), Harper (New York, NY), 2009.

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; *Peace Prayers: Meditations, Affirmations, Invocations, Poems, and Prayers for Peace*, edited by Carrie Leadingham, Joann E. Moschella, and Hilary M. Vartanian, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1992; *Women Respond to Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection*, edited by Kay Leigh Hagan, Pandora (San Francisco, CA), 1992; *Dreamers and Desperadoes: Contemporary Short Fiction of the American West*, edited by Craig Lesley, Laurel (New York, NY), 1993; *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 Should Have Stayed*

*Home: The Worst Trips of Great Writers*, edited by Roger Rapoport and Marguerita Castanera, Book Passage Press (Berkeley, CA), 1994; *Mothers: Twenty Stories of Contemporary Motherhood*, edited by Katrina Kenison, Farrar Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 1996; *I've Always Meant to Tell You: Letters to Our Mothers*, edited by Constance Warlow, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1997; *Intimate Nature: The Bond between Women and Animals*, edited by Linda Hogan, D. Metzger, and B. Peterson, Ballantine (New York, NY), 1998; *Literature and Society: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Nonfiction*, Pamela J. Annas and Robert C. Rosen, Prentice Hall (Upper Saddle River, NJ), 2000; *Three Minutes or Less: Life Lessons from America's Greatest Writers*, by Pen/Faulkner Foundation, Bloomsbury Publishing (London, England), 2000; *Western Women's Reader: The Remarkable Writings of Women Who Shaped the American West, Spanning 300 Years*, edited by Lillian Schlissel and Catherine Lavender, HarperPerennial (New York, NY), 2000; *My Favorite Fantasy Story*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Daw Books Inc. (New York, NY), 2000; *Child Honoring: How to Turn This World Around*, edited by Raffi Cavoukian and Sharna Olfman, Praeger (Westport, CT), 2006; *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, edited by Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney, Trinity University Press (San Antonio, TX), 2006; *After the Bell: Contemporary American Prose about School*, edited by Maggie Anderson and David Hassler, University of Iowa Press (Iowa City, IA), 2007; and *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2007. 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 the *New York Times Book Review* and the *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 the *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.*, adding 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, the book includes 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 writing *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 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 the *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." Karen Karbo wrote in the *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 best seller. 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 Orleanna, 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 Orleanna 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* contributor 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 first of three segments of *Prodigal Summer* introduces 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 includes Spanish translations of her poems within the same volume. Reviewer Lorraine Elena Roses, commenting in the *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: Essays from Now or Never*, 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 L. 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."

In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, Kingsolver recounts the year that she and her family spent living on her husband's farm in Southern Appalachia. During this time, they committed themselves to living a more natural, sustainable existence that involved growing much of their own food and purchasing the rest from local sources. She was prompted by a desire to leave a smaller mark on the fast-declining environment that had become a concern to both Kingsolver and her husband, a biologist. Kingsolver's book serves as part how-to guide, part cookbook, and part memoir, discussing the efforts that she and her family made to alter their lifestyles. In addition to discussing the ins and outs of providing meals on a daily basis, Kingsolver recounts her daughters' experiences as well, such as nine-year-old Lily's decision to sell both eggs and chickens in order to save money for her own horse, an endeavor that she soon finds simplified if she refuses to name the chickens; easier to kill them that way. There are also

lessons in economics for the adults, as Kingsolver comes to appreciate the back-breaking effort involved in producing quantities of healthy produce. It serves to explain why organic food is more costly at the local grocery store than the non-organic variety. Reviewing for *New Statesman*, Alice O'Keeffe remarked of the book: "Kingsolver's argument is not that we should all switch off our PCs and head for the fields (though she does make that option sound attractive). Rather, she demonstrates why some knowledge of where food comes from is fundamental to any person's--and therefore any society's--well-being." Nina Planck, writing for *Publishers Weekly*, concluded that "this practical vision of how we might eat instead is as fresh as just-picked sweet corn."

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* Web site 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-dollar 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.

## Further Readings

### Further Readings About the Author

#### Books

- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 55, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1989.
- Kingsolver, Barbara, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2007.

#### 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.
- *Booklist*, August, 1998, Donna Seaman, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 1922.
- *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 1989, Bill Mahin, review of *Homeland and Other Stories*.
- *Christianity Today*, January 11, 1999, Tim Stafford, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 88.
- *Earth Island Journal*, winter, 2002, Piers Moore Ede, review of *Small Wonder*, p. 45.

- *Entertainment Weekly*, November 5, 1999, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, "Kingsolver for a Day," p. 75.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1995, review of *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*, p. 1080.
- *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 Wonder*, p. 30.
- *New Republic*, March 22, 1999, Lee Siegel, "Sweet and Low: The Poisonwood Bible," p. 30.
- *New Statesman*, July 16, 2007, Alice O'Keeffe, "The Growth Industry," p. 63.
- *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, Jack Butler, review of *The Bean Trees*, p. 15; June 11, 1989, Russell Banks, review of *Homeland and Other Stories*; June 27, 1993, Karen Karbo, review of *Pigs in Heaven*, p. 59; October 18, 1998, Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Going Native"; November 5, 2000, Jennifer Schuessler, "Men, Women and Coyotes."
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- *Publishers Weekly*, August 10, 1998, review of *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 366; October 2, 2000, review of *Prodigal Summer*, p. 57; March 26, 2007, Nina Planck, review of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, p. 75.
- *School Library Journal*, August, 1992, Deanna Kuhn, review of *Another America/Otra America*, p. 192.
- *Time*, 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.
- *Washington Post Book World*, September 2, 1990, Ursula LeGuin, review of *Animal Dreams*.
- *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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- *Book Page*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (April 12, 2004), Ellen Kanne r, "Barbara Kingsolver Turns to Her Past to Understand the Present," interview.
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- *NewsHour Online*, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/> (November 24, 1995), David Gergen, interview with Kingsolver.
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## Author Interview

### Kingsolver's latest novel is a powerful mix of art, politics and identity

Interview by Amy Scribner

In the pantheon of popular fiction, Kingsolver is queen. Or close to it. Consider this: she is among the first Barbaras to pop up in a Google search, trailing only a few well-known names such as Streisand, Bush and Boxer. In the two decades since the release of her first novel, *The Bean Trees*—which was published the day her daughter, now a college graduate, started to walk—Kingsolver has amassed an avid following of readers. They've devoured both her fiction and nonfiction, including best-selling novels *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Prodigal Summer*, and 2007's nonfiction meditation on local, sustainable eating, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

"They really are readers from every age, from middle school to 100," Kingsolver says in a recent phone interview with BookPage from her farm in southwest Virginia. "I can't tell you how often I hear, 'I grew up reading you.' I think, really? Has it been that long?"

With her new novel, **The Lacuna**, that following is likely to grow. It's the epic story of Harrison William Shepherd, a young boy whose Mexican mother takes him back to her home country in the 1930s after splitting with his father, a Washington, D.C., bureaucrat.

With his mother more focused on snagging a rich husband than on raising a son (he wryly calls one of her conquests "Mr. Produce the Cash"), Harrison is left mostly to his own devices. With little formal education and even less parental supervision, he finds himself working as a cook in the home of mercurial artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, then as a secretary to the exiled Leon Trotsky. It's a tumultuous time both politically and artistically, prompting Harrison to grapple with his own identity—his art, his sexuality and the meaning of truth. Finally, when Trotsky is assassinated, Harrison flees back to the United States, settling in North Carolina to find his own voice, only to become the target of a McCarthy-esque "un-American activities" investigation.

The novel is a brilliant mix of truth and fiction, history and imagination, presented as a compilation of Harrison's journals, along with newspaper clippings and other notes that make for a compelling and utterly believable read.

The lacuna of the title is an underground sea cave, which links one beach to a hidden place. It's an idea that has intrigued Kingsolver since she read a short story about lacunae years ago.

"I'm a bit claustrophobic, so the idea of sea caves is sort of horrifying and fascinating to me," Kingsolver says. "I kept thinking about tunnels and passageways, missing pieces and things you don't know about people."

While living with his mother and her latest lover, a wealthy Mexican oilman, Harrison finds such a cave: "Inside the tunnel it was very cold and dark again. But a blue light showed up faintly like a fogged window, farther back. It must be the other end, no devil back there but a place to come

up on the other side, a passage. But too far to swim, and too frightening.”

For Kingsolver, this book was her exploration of that “in between” space where pieces are missing and the truth is hidden. She also set out to probe the question: Do artists have a responsibility to address social issues and express their opinions?

“For as long as I’ve been a published writer, I’ve been asked a certain kind of question—the legitimacy of addressing political content in art,” she says. “It’s always struck me as odd. Questioning authority, issues of class and gender, this is completely integral to art in other places, but here there’s something funny about that. I had this notion that art and politics had gotten a divorce in this country and never really finished the mediation. We have this ‘Don’t question what it means to be an American. Don’t draw pictures of it, don’t write about it.’ ”

So Kingsolver started digging, and found herself deep into the archives of both the New York Times and several Mexican newspapers, sifting through thousands of photographs and pieces of art and, eventually, traveling to Mexico.

“The difference between the amateur and the professional researcher is the willingness to get your hands dirty,” says Kingsolver. Reading old papers and historical accounts “is only one kind of research. It doesn’t tell you what anything smells like, and it doesn’t tell you what anything tastes like. You cannot write about a place you haven’t been.”

For that, Kingsolver visited the homes of her subjects, and walked in Mexican jungles to observe howler monkeys and to visit a medicine man. She even read the doodles Kahlo made in the margins of her household ledgers. “I learned a lot about her and how she felt that wasn’t recorded in her journal,” Kingsolver says. “It’s like taking black-and-white film and making it color.”

Such painstaking research meant a nine-year gap between novels, although *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* came out during that stretch. That book on her family’s effort to eat locally attracted a whole new group of fans.

“Some readers informed me they never read me [before *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*] because they can’t bother with fiction,” she says with a chuckle. “Maybe they can be convinced now to give me a try.”

Her family—which includes her husband and two daughters—still tries to adhere to the principles of the book. “We still eat as locally as we possibly can,” she says. “Every year I vow to scale back, but at least it keeps me muscular. You can’t weasel out when it’s time to shear the sheep or weed the tomatoes.”

Living locally is ingrained in Kingsolver. She becomes particularly passionate when talking about the notion of real community versus, say, the online communities created through social media tools such as Facebook.

“I love the fact that my work is meaningful to people, and I appreciate their letters. But a friend, to me, is someone I can call when I’m in trouble, who I can make a casserole for when someone dies,” she says. “I don’t need 3,000 of them. I’m invested in my local community, in being a good friend to my friends. All the rest would be fake to me.”

And authenticity is something Kingsolver is thinking a lot about these days. Despite investing years of research in her latest novel, she admits that along with the rich historical details infused throughout **The Lacuna** come fears about anachronisms seeping onto the pages. “The nightmare of the historical fiction writer is that you have the equivalent of the scene in *Spartacus* where he’s wearing a Rolex,” she laughs.

She needn’t worry. There’s nary a Rolex in sight in **The Lacuna**—just page after page (more than 500 in all) of lush details and probing questions about the purpose of art. **The Lacuna** is both deeply thought-provoking and thoroughly entertaining—which is just how Kingsolver wants it.

“My rule is, as long as I give you a reason to turn every page, it doesn’t matter how long a book is.”

*Amy Scribner writes from Olympia, Washington.*

Courtesy of Book Page, retrieved 7/20/2010 from <http://www.bookpage.com/books-10012443-The+Lacuna>

## Discussion Questions

1. What does Shepherd mean when he says, "The most important part of the story is the piece of it you don't know." And how does this oft stated remark relate to the book's title?
2. What is the significance of the book's title? What does it mean within the context of the novel?
3. Do Shepherd's diaries feel realistic to you? Does he sound like a 12-year old at the beginning...and later a mature man?
4. What prompts Harrison to begin his journals? Why does he write? What does he mean by referring to his notebook as "prisoner's plan for escape"?
5. Describe Shepherd, first as a 12-year-old and, later, as a mature adult. What kind of character is he? How does he change over the course of the novel?
6. How about Shepherd's mother? In what way does her profligate life affect how Shepherd decides to lead his own life?
7. Describe the Riviera/Kahlo household. How does Shepherd see Riviera's influence over Kahlo? Have you seen the movie *Frieda*? If so, does that film influence your reading of *The Lacuna*?
8. How does Kingsolver portray Leon Trotsky in this work? Were you aware of his background and the history of the Russian Revolution before you read the novel? If so, did your prior knowledge color your reading—or did your reading affect your knowledge?
9. Do you find the second-half of the novel, in the US, evocative of a time and place that no longer exists? If so, is that a good or bad thing? If not, what has remained the same? How does Kingsolver present those years?
10. What is Shepherd's relationship with his secretary, Violet Brown? What kind of character is she? Why does she want to preserve Shepherd's memory?
11. What role do the media play in this novel? Is it a fair or realistic portrait? What are the benefits of fame...and what are its costs?
12. Does this book enlighten you about the era of the Red Scare and the McCarthy hearings? Or do you feel this ground has been well tread by many others?

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[http://www.litlovers.com/guide\\_lacuna.html](http://www.litlovers.com/guide_lacuna.html)