

The Bean Trees

The Author

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955. She grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field," in the part of eastern Kentucky that lies between the opulent horse farms and the impoverished coal fields. It never occurred to Kingsolver that she could become a professional writer. Growing up in a rural place, where work centered mainly on survival, writing didn't seem to be a practical career choice.

Kingsolver left Kentucky to attend DePauw University in Indiana, where she majored in biology. She also took one creative writing course, and became active in social justice organizations. Before and after graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in Europe. In the early eighties, she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she received a Masters of Science degree. She also enrolled in a writing class taught by author Francine Prose, whose work Kingsolver admires.

During her college years and after living in Greece and France, she supported herself in a variety of jobs: as an archaeologist, copy editor, X-ray technician, housecleaner, biological researcher and translator of medical documents. After graduate school, a position as a science writer for the University of Arizona soon led her into feature writing for journals and newspapers. Her articles have appeared in dozens of newspapers and magazines in North America and abroad. In 1986 she won an Arizona Press Club award for outstanding feature writing, and in 1995, after the publication of *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from her alma mater, De Pauw University.

Kingsolver credits her careers in scientific writing and journalism with instilling in her a writer's discipline and broadening her "fictional possibilities." Describing herself as a shy person who would generally prefer to stay at home with her computer, she explains that "journalism forces me to meet and talk with people I would never run across otherwise."

From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write.

Kingsolver says:

"A novel can educate to some extent," she told *Publishers Weekly*. "But first, a novel has to entertain--that's the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I'll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the

people I grew up with--who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue--to read my books."

The Work

Marietta Greer spent her childhood in rural Kentucky determined to do two things: avoid getting pregnant and escape rural Kentucky. At the start of the novel, she has headed west in a beat-up '55 Volkswagon, changing her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. By the time two tires give way in Tucson she has with her a stunned, silent three-year-old Cherokee girl who was, literally, dropped into her arms one night. She has named the child Turtle, for her strong, snapping-turtle-like grip. In Tucson Taylor finds friendship and support in Lou Ann Ruiz, a fellow Kentuckian and single mother, with whom she and Turtle share a house. Her newfound community also includes Mattie, who runs a safe house for political refugees in the upstairs rooms above her auto repair shop. The novel's theme of fear, flight, homelessness, and finding sanctuary within a community are present in Taylor's struggle to find a place where she belongs, and the more urgent plight of two Central American refugees, Estevan and Esperanza. These fellow travelers help one another create new lives and redefine the meanings of home and family.

-1989 School Library Journal Best Books of the Year

- 1989 American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults

Discussion Questions

1. The Bean Trees deals with the theme of being an outsider. In what ways are various characters outsiders? What does this suggest about what it takes to be an insider? How does feeling like an outsider affect one's life?
2. How and why do the characters change, especially Lou Ann, Taylor, and Turtle?
3. In many ways, the novel is "the education of Taylor Greer." What does she learn about human suffering? about love?
4. How is the power of friendship evoked in this novel? (Taylor and Lou Ann; Mattie and Taylor; Mattie and Estavan & Esperanza)
5. Compare Lou Ann and Taylor. Contrast the two women.
6. How is Taylor able to care for an abused child?
7. Each character in this novel has faced important choices and has had to live with those choices. How does this apply to Taylor? Estavan and Esperanza? Mattie?
8. Barbara Kingsolver feels that politics are personal. How does she incorporate this view into her book? Do you think the politics are woven into the story or does it become preachy?
9. Flowers and vegetables are flourishing in the story. What do these growing plants symbolize?
10. Discuss the humor in the novel.