

The Bean Trees

(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. Analyze the "women's world" in which *The Bean Trees* takes place.
5. How do the characters in *The Bean Trees* demonstrate that the role of women in America in the twentieth century has changed?
6. List the social issues that Kingsolver presents in *The Bean Trees* and explain how these issues affect the lives of the novel's characters.
7. Explain how the struggles faced by the characters in the novel are inspiring.
8. How are the people in Taylor's life interdependent?
9. Why does Taylor participate in the Sanctuary movement?
10. Discuss the ways in which Taylor is a heroic character.
11. One of the novel's themes is the importance of community. Why is community valued?
12. How is the link between rhizobia (the microscopic bugs that live in the roots of legumes, turning nitrogen gas into fertilizer and allowing the plants to



thrive in poor soil) and wisteria vines ("bean trees") similar to the relationships that form between the women in the novel?

13. Compare the settings of Pittman County, Kentucky, and Tucson, Arizona, as Kingsolver describes them. How do these descriptions portray the moods of these places?

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(About the Author)

- Birth—April 8, 1955
- Where—Annapolis, Maryland, USA
- Education—B.A., DePauw University; M.S., University of Arizona
- Awards—Orange Prize
- Currently—lives on a farm in Virginia

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. While her family has deep roots in the region, she never imagined staying there herself. "The options were limited--grow up to be a farmer or a farmer's wife."

Kingsolver has always been a storyteller: "I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story." As a child, she wrote stories and essays and, beginning at the age of eight, kept a journal religiously. Still, 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. Besides, the writers she read, she once explained, "were mostly old, dead men. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself..."

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 the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in widely scattered places. 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.

Kingsolver's fiction is rich with the language and imagery of her native Kentucky. But when she first left home, she says, "I lost my accent.... [P]eople made terrible fun of me for the way I used to talk, so I gave it up slowly and became something else." During her years in school and two years spent 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 numerous articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Nation*, the *New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*, and many of them are included in the collection, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*. 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, DePauw 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 *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.

The Bean Trees, originally published in 1988 and reissued in a special ten-year anniversary edition in 1998, was enthusiastically received by critics. But, perhaps

more important to Kingsolver, the novel was read with delight and, even, passion by ordinary readers. "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."

For Kingsolver, writing is a form of political activism. When she was in her twenties she discovered Doris Lessing. "I read the *Children of Violence* novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that."

The Bean Trees was followed by the collection, *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), the novels *Animal Dreams* (1990), and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and the bestselling *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never* (1995). Kingsolver has also published a collection of poetry, *Another America: Otra America* (Seal Press, 1992, 1998), and a nonfiction book, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 1989, 1996). *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) earned accolades at home and abroad, and was an Oprah's Book Club selection.

Barbara's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), is a novel set in a rural farming community in southern Appalachia. *Small Wonder*, April 2002, presents 23 wonderfully articulate essays. Here Barbara raises her voice in praise of nature, family, literature, and the joys of everyday life while examining the genesis of war, violence, and poverty in our world.

Two additional books became best sellers. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* came in 2007, again to great acclaim. Non-fiction, the book recounts a year in the life of Kingsolver's family as they grew all their own food. *The Lacuna*, published two years later, is a fictional account of historical events in Mexico during the 1930, and moving into the U.S. during the McCarthy era of the 1950's.

Extras

- Barbara Kingsolver lives in Southern Appalachia with her husband Steven Hopp, and her two daughters, Camille from a previous marriage, and Lily, who was born in 1996. When not writing or spending time with her family, Barbara gardens, cooks, hikes, and works as an environmental activist and human-rights advocate.
- Given that Barbara Kingsolver's work covers the psychic and geographical territories that she knows firsthand, readers often assume that her work is autobiographical. "There are little things that people who know me might recognize in my novels," she acknowledges. "But my work is not about me...."
- If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with poetry and fabrication, to create a revelation. If we can't, as artists, improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread. (*Adapted from Barnes & Noble.*)

The Bean Trees

(Reviews)

New York Times

“WHO can be against the things this book is against? Who can help admiring the things this book is for? But reality suffers, though the author's precision remains. At one point late in the book, Turtle experiences a frightening reminder of her early horrors, and much is made of the damage this sort of reoccurrence can do - but then the subject is dismissed. Turtle sails on, basically unperturbed. Taylor is selectively naive, which is real enough; but eventually her areas of ignorance and savvy begin to seem chosen for effect. When, for example, she volunteers for a risky mission near the end of the story, we are given a passage of blatant false modesty. The intent appears to be to portray her as not only heroic but also humble, and it simply isn't credible. The Taylor we have met so far would know very well that she was doing a brave thing.

Perhaps the problem is one of over manipulation. At the same time the characters faded on me, I started to see the images and the plot coming. And the story began to feel a bit like an upbeat novel for teen-agers -because, although it considers true and terrible realities, only certain resolutions are permitted.

On the other hand, "The Bean Trees" is still a remarkable, enjoyable book, one that contains more good writing than most successful careers. I'd definitely urge you to read it - if only to prove to yourself that it has one less flaw than a certain reviewer might think.”

Los Angeles Times

Sure, you could say that there are a couple of places in "The Bean Trees" where the author hits you on the head with a plot point or two. You could be the kind of person to whisper snidely, "Isn't the author just a little bit on the nose here, letting her lowly bean tree actually turn out to be the spectacular wisteria? And isn't her metaphor about the invisible networking of unattractive root systems here just a little bit forced?" But if you were that kind of person there wouldn't be much hope for you—you'd be a poor sort of pernickety noodle, good only for working on budget committees in orphanages that malnourish their charges—you'd be a regular creep.

Only a Dickensian villain could fail to like this book. "The Bean Trees" is so open, so upfront about what's bad in the world, so matter of fact about what a mess we are in, that it leaves you open-mouthed and smiling.

Doesn't Hang Back

This author, this Barbara Kingsolver, just doesn't hang back: "What's with everybody always trying to get rid of the Indians?" Kingsolver has her heroine, Taylor Greer, ask, rhetorically, almost at the end of this novel, and she drives a couple of Guatemalan refugees from Tucson, Ariz., over on into Oklahoma some place, so that they might once again begin to be marginally safe.

Kingsolver doesn't start or stop with "What's with everybody always trying to get rid of the Indians?" She's also just about *had* it with child pornography, and wife beating, some school kids being a whole lot poorer than other school kids, the homeless, child molestation, and the overriding fact that the people who are supposed to be taking care of this stuff are all out somewhere, either getting indicted for this-or-that, or getting their pictures taken for the local society pages, or stashing away their ill-gotten gains in their numbered Swiss accounts. It doesn't matter what the rich folks, the white folks, the "haves" in our society are doing—they're *not* taking care of their responsibilities.

The Bean Trees

(Enhancement)

Does a New Environment equal a New Life, a New Hope, New Chance or Outlook on Life?

Eastern Kentucky stretches from the Appalachian coal mines to the blue grass fields of the central region. This area is referred to as the Cumberland Plateau. Kentucky was the 15th state admitted to the union in 1792. Local climate has humid, warm summers and cold, rainy winters.



Points of interest: Hwy 23 Country Music Museum; Coal Miners Museum; Mountain Homeplace (Re-creation of 19th Century Community); Apple Festival; Swift Silver Mine Festival; Red River Gorge; Natural Bridge State Resort Park.

Sanctuary Movement – The Sanctuary Movement was a religious and political campaign in the United States that began in the early 1980's to provide safe haven to Central American refugees fleeing civil conflict. The movement was a response to federal immigration policies that made obtaining asylum difficult for Central Americans. At its peak, Sanctuary involved over 500 congregations in the U.S. which, by declaring themselves official 'sanctuaries', committed to providing shelter, protection, material goods and often legal advice to these refugees.



Tucson, AZ – County seat of Pima County. Home to the University of Arizona. City is 108 miles south of Phoenix and 60 miles north of the Mexican border. The Spanish founded Tucson as a military fort, Presidio San Augustin del Tucson, in 1775. It was part of the state of Sonora when Mexico won

independence from Spain in 1821. In 1853 the U.S. gained 19,670 square miles of Mexican territory in the Gadsden Purchase. Tucson was capital of Arizona Territory in 1867-1877. Arizona became a state in 1912.

Points of interest: Wild west town of Tombstone famous for its 'Gunfight at the OK Corral'; Bisbee a mining town near the Mexican border; Saguaro National Park.



Wisteria is a genus of flowering plants in the legume family that includes 10 species of woody climbing vines that are native to China, Korea, Japan and the eastern United States. Some species are popular ornamental plants. Wisteria climb by winding their stems around any available support. They can climb as high as 66 feet... and can spread out 33 feet laterally. The world's largest known wisteria is in Sierra Madre, California, measuring more than an acre in size and weighing 250 tons. It was planted in 1894.

Wisteria... is very hardy and fast growing. It can grow in fairly poor-quality soil, but prefers fertile, moist and well drained soil. It thrives in full sun. Wisteria has nitrogen-fixing capability (provided by Rhizobia bacteria in root nodules), and thus mature plants may benefit from added potassium and phosphate, but not nitrogen.



The seeds of all wisteria species contain high levels of the wisteria toxin and are especially poisonous.