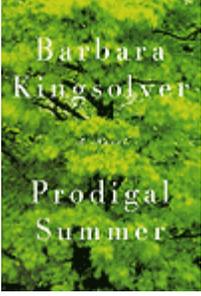


Prodigal Summer by Barbara Kingsolver



If Rachel Carson (1907–1964), whose book *Silent Spring* (1962) inaugurated the current environmental activist movement, had written a novel, it might have resembled *Prodigal Summer*. Set in the small farms of southern Appalachia, this novel is built around a triple plot, each strand of which parallels the other and all of which eventually merge. The strands are interwoven, each title appearing ten times: “Predators,” “Moth Love,” and “Old Chestnuts.”

The initial plot, “Predators,” involves a U.S. Forest Service worker named Deanna Wolfe, a native of rural Zebulon County on the Virginia–Kentucky–Tennessee border. A 47-year-old loner and committed environmentalist, Deanna wrote her master’s thesis on the importance of coyotes to ecosystems. Ironically, she falls prey romantically to a younger man, a Wyoming sheep rancher and predator hunter, Eddie Bondo. She attempts to teach him the error of his killing ways. In the second plot, “Moth Love,” Lusa, an entomologist from Knoxville, Tennessee, and hence an outsider (in various ways—her parents are Jewish and Palestinian), is widowed and left to run the family farm in this marginal area. Her major conflict involves her deceased husband’s several difficult sisters. The third plot strand, which offers up much of the humor in the book, pits 75-year-old Nannie Rawley, who operates a successful organic garden and apple orchard, against the nearly eighty year-old Garnett Walker III, widower and retired vo-ag teacher at the local high school. Although he aspires to produce a disease-resistant breed of the American chestnut that once flourished in the region, Garnett represents traditional and creationist values.

The triple-plot covers three generations, and via the subplot that involves Lusa with her niece and nephew, a fourth, albeit less rigorously. This novel celebrates the full environmental agenda, from the importance of species diversity to support of natural pest control, as opposed to insecticides. At the same time Kingsolver offers a range of human love stories from the erotic to the familial and perhaps the platonic as well.

Author Information



Born in 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, [Barbara Kingsolver](#) grew up in rural Kentucky raised by parents described in her website as “tolerant of nature study” but “intolerant of television.” Although she entered DePauw University on a piano scholarship, Kingsolver graduated with a degree in biology in 1977, after which she traveled in Europe, moving to Tucson, where she earned her master’s degree in ecology and evolutionary biology in 1981 from the University of Arizona. She spent about four years as a science writer for the university and a couple of years as a freelance journalist before her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, was published in 1988 and was praised for being both “funny” and “inspiring.” In an interview Kingsolver declared she has “a commitment to accessibility” and an implied “contract with the reader” to entertain. At the same time, she is an active environmentalist and is committed to literature as “a tool for social change.” Her other novels include *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). Among her books of nonfiction are *Small Wonder* (2002) and her most recent title, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), which she wrote with her husband, Steven L. Hopp, a professor of environmental sciences, and her nineteen year-old daughter Camille. After 25 years in Tucson, she

has moved with her family, including daughter Lily, to a farm in southwestern Virginia. In 1997 she was presented the Bellwether Prize for Fiction in support of social change.

Discussion Questions

1. Kingsolver carefully weaves her plots so that the three stories tend to interrupt each other. Another way of structuring the novel might have been to set it up in three distinct, independent parts. What advantages do you see in the structure as it stands? Do you find yourself, perhaps inevitably, preferring one plot or set of characters over the others? Do you think you bring more of your own experience and identity to one of the story lines than to the others?
2. The word “programmatically” is a term now used in literary criticism to identify (usually in a negative sense) any text that seems steered by an agenda, perhaps to the point of being propaganda-like. Could that be said of *Prodigal Summer*? Do you think Kingsolver takes some risks in airing her political views as they pertain to the environment and religion? Who might she be likely to offend, and how?
3. At various places, particularly in the latter third of the novel, Kingsolver has her three female protagonists (Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie) speak out directly or otherwise on evolution and on the scientific vision generally. Opposition, either overt or subtle, is expressed mostly by the males, Eddie, old Garnett, and (to a lesser extent) Rickie. What do you make of this debate, currently in the news? Does Kingsolver present both sides adequately and fairly?
4. Reflecting on the “sides” as drawn up in #3, do you see this as a “gendered” novel in some ways? Does Kingsolver treat the male of the species evenhandedly? Do you think men would enjoy this novel very much, or at all? Which man in this book do you consider to be the most admirable?
5. In one of her most clever moves, perhaps, Kingsolver decides to tell the last chapter of her novel from a female coyote’s point of view. Do you think this technique works? How did you respond? Do you think she has successfully resolved the three plotlines by the end of the book?
6. In her letter to that “sanctimonious old fart,” Garnett, Nannie Rawley writes, “Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads,” and “The world is a grand sight more complicated than we like to let on” (216). These statements might be said to express the “point” of this series in a nutshell. So this is not a question, really, but an invitation: Reflect and comment.