

BIOGRAPHICAL PAPER
BARBARA KINGSOLVER

By Lee Haas

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955 in Annapolis, MD. At age 2, her family moved to rural east-central, KY. As a child, Kingsolver enjoyed reading and writing, avidly writing for school assignments and entering school essay contests. She also enjoyed music and took piano lessons for many years. In elementary school, she published her first work, an essay entitled "Why We Need a New Elementary School." It gave an exciting account of how a piece of ceiling plaster in her classroom fell and injured her teacher. The essay was published in a local newspaper prior to a successful school bond issue.

On several occasions, Barbara's parents took her and her sister and brother abroad. Their father was a physician, and he occasionally volunteered in 3rd world countries. Sometimes he and his wife took their children along. Kingsolver's most memorable experience was a trip to the Congo in 1963. The family lived in a remote village with no electricity or plumbing, no cars or school. Her father treated illnesses such as smallpox and leprosy.

In 1973, Kingsolver entered DePauw University in Indiana on a piano scholarship but changed her major to biology. Among her elective courses, she took one in creative writing which she loved. She secretly wrote poems and essays in her free time. She was reluctant to tell other students about this hobby because she felt people would think she wasn't serious about biology. At the time, Kingsolver didn't think she could make a career out of writing. It sounded too exotic. It was like saying she wanted to be a concert pianist or a movie star.

After graduation from DePauw, Kingsolver went to Europe where she worked on some archaeological digs and continued to write poems and stories. She returned to the US in 1978 and moved to Tucson, AZ. Her aim was to see another part of the U.S. In Tucson, Kingsolver worked as a lab assistant at the University of Arizona and studied and taught biology. Meanwhile she continued to write stories and poems and was active in social issues. After earning her Masters degree in biology, Kingsolver worked as a scientific writer for the University of Arizona and continued to write poems and articles for magazines and newspapers. By 1985 she was able to live on her freelance work. Her work changed

from scientific writing to investigative journalism and writing about the arts. She married a chemist named Joe Hoffman. Both of them were active in organizations that supported Latin American immigrants.

One of Kingsolver's writing assignments was covering a mining strike in Arizona. Based on that work, she wrote a book about women who were involved in the strike, but she was unable to publish it. Later she wrote a novel, *The Bean Trees*, which was published and gradually became very popular. Several other books followed and the book about the mine strike was published. It was entitled "Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike."

In the 1990's, she wrote five books, including *Poisonwood Bible* (1998) a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In addition, Kingsolver served as editor of *Best American Short Stories*, an annual series published by Houghton Mifflin. She continued to write articles for anthologies, newspapers and magazines. Kingsolver also joined the usage panel for the *American Heritage Dictionary*. She and her husband divorced, and in 1994 she married a biology professor, Steven Hopp. She met him while she worked at a 2-year position teaching biology at Emory and Henry University, a small liberal arts college in southwest in Virginia.

In 1998, Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize to encourage authors of unpublished novels. The award now offers \$25,000 is granted every other year to new writers who have completed a first novel that relates to socially engaged issues. Now the prize is administered by the PEN America Org which promotes free expression and human rights worldwide.

While living on a farm in Virginia, Kingsolver along with her husband and older daughter wrote a memoir about farming and growing one's own food. It was entitled: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and was published in 2007. That was followed by several books about social problems in the US and Appalachia: *Lacuna*, *Unsheltered* and *Flight Behavior*.

Kingsolver believes that a good book is one that provides readers with wisdom. She asserted that when readers pick up a book, they want to learn something they didn't know before. "A writer's wisdom tends to accumulate with age as we survive misfortunes and distill what was useful. So while dancers and athletes peak at age 25, writers have the career advantage of doing our best work in old age."

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Kingsolver said she learned to write by reading books she wished she'd written. All writing counts. “I became a professional by taking any assignment I could get and applying fervent devotion even if the subject was algae production in sewage plants. It's good practice to take an uninspiring subject and try to make it sing on the page.”

Kingsolver maintains that none of her books are autobiographical. “I invent people from scratch with characters that will serve the plot.” She doesn't use real settings in her books. So the village in *Poisonwood Bible* could resemble any number of villages in the Congo. The same with her books set in the U.S. She doesn't want people to be looking for themselves or people they know in her stories. She believes that if she used a real place in her novels, people who live there would know the history of their town and know if things she wrote about really happened.

Since 2004, Kingsolver and her husband have lived in Appalachia on a farm in Virginia where they grow vegetables and raise Icelandic sheep.