
High Tide in Tucson by Barbara Kingsolver

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AWARD(S)

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.

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Family: Born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, MD; daughter of Wendell R. (a physician) and Virginia (a homemaker; maiden name, Henry) Kingsolver; married Joseph Hoffmann (a chemist), April 15, 1985 (divorced); married Steven 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." Hobbies and other 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: Agent: Frances Goldin, 57 East Eleventh 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, 1987--.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

- *The Bean Trees* (novel), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1988.
- *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: A Novel*, HarperFlamingo (New York, NY), 1998.
- (Author of foreword) Joseph Barbato and Lisa Weinerman Horak, editors, *Off the Beaten Path: Stories 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.

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- Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands (nonfiction), photographs by Annie Griffiths Belt, National Geographic Society (Washington, DC), 2002.
- (Author of foreword) Norman Wirzhar, editor, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 2003.

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; *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 Reminders*, 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've Always Meant to Tell You: Letters to Our Mothers*, edited by Constance Warlow, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1997; and *Intimate Nature: The Bond between Women and Animals*, edited by Linda Hogan, D. Metzger, and B. Peterson, Ballantine (New York, NY), 1998. 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 *New York Times Book Review* and *Los Angeles Times Book Review*.

Gale Database: Contemporary Authors

An interview with Barbara Kingsolver

Critic: Robin Epstein

Source: *The Progressive*, Vol. 12, No. 9, February, 1996, pp. 33–7

In a chapter in her new book of wide-ranging essays, *High Tide in Tucson*, Barbara Kingsolver describes a trip to Phoenix's Heard Museum with her daughter, Camille, who was five years old at the time. One of her hopes for the visit, she writes, is that Camille will shed the notion that Native Americans are people that lived a long time ago, an idea she picked up from the dominant culture even though it contradicted her own experience with Tohono O'odham and Yaqui playmates. Thanks to the museum's mission of appreciation for modern Native American life as well as history, Camille gleans some understanding of Native American reality outside spaghetti westerns. Indians, she tells her mother as they leave the museum, are people who love the Earth, and like to sing and dance and make a lot of pretty stuff to use. Then she adds, And I think they like soda pop. Those guys selling the fry bread were drinking a lot of Cokes.

Barbara Kingsolver's work takes readers on a similar journey. It makes real the daily lives lived by people who are seldom presented with all their smarts and sorrows. Among the people we meet in Kingsolver's

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novels (all published by HarperCollins) are, in *The Bean Trees*, working-class white women from Appalachia and Central Americans fleeing death squads; in *Animal Dreams*, Mexican-American grandmothers fighting to save the river that nourishes their town's orchards, a garden-pest hotline worker who joins the Sandinistas' agricultural efforts in Nicaragua, and a part-Apache train engineer with a penchant for cockfighting; and in *Pigs in Heaven*, a Cherokee lawyer who tries to resolve a conflict over a child adopted out of the tribe.

Thanks to her gift for creating characters we care about, for giving them voices that situate them firmly in time and place, and for taking them through plots that unfold inside their hearts and minds as well as out in the world, Kingsolver has been nominated three times for the ABBY award, a booksellers' prize that goes to the author they most love to recommend to customers.

She is also the author of *Homeland*, a collection of short stories (HarperCollins again); *Another America/Otra America*, a book of poems in English and Spanish (Seal Press); and *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (ILR Press), an oral history of the women in three small towns who for eighteen months sustained a picket against the Phelps Dodge Copper Corporation despite arrests, evictions, and excoriation from some union bosses and some men in their communities who thought they should stick to making tortillas.

In early December, I spent a day with Barbara Kingsolver in Sabino Canyon on the outskirts of Tucson. Though I had only been in Arizona all of two days, I thought I had figured out the weather hot during the day and cold at night. It was daytime, so I didn't wear many layers. Well, I didn't know from canyons. I shivered as we rode the Forest Service tram that takes you in. Though she had hoped we would stay in the v of the mountains, near the running water that reminds her a tiny bit of the landscape of her childhood in Kentucky, Barbara agreed right away to hike a short distance up the slope to where the sun would reach us faster. We found a suitable rock just off the trail and plopped ourselves down to talk. Nourished by good conversation and Barbara's homemade raisin bread, I warmed up in no time.

Q: Some of the essays in your new book read like a kind of *Feminine Mystique* for a new generation. Were you especially trying to reach women with the information in those essays? I wonder whether they've prompted some heated dining table conversations between women and the men in their lives.

Kingsolver: I think so. I've heard about a few. I've heard from women who said, I gave this to my husband with underlines. But when I'm writing I don't really think, *Who's going to read this?* I don't feel my books are mainly for women. When students ask, *Is this a chick book?* I say, *Moby Dick* is a whale book, but I don't think only whales should read it.

You know, John Updike writes about penises and lusting after women, and he's really one of the most male writers that I read. His point of view is so deeply male. And when he's writing, does he think, *Oh, women aren't going to be able to relate to this?* I don't think it crosses his mind. So there's a role model for me, right?

I do think we can learn a much from reading the perspectives of people we are not. I can learn a lot

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from John Updike. I'm never going to have a penis in my whole life, so I can read John Updike and I can get some clue. I mean, that's sort of reductionist, but that male ego that's his focus, that's the eye of his storm, is very interesting. It's kind of heady to read it and get a glimpse of what it would be like to live in the eye of that storm instead of dancing around it all the time saying, Are you OK? Are you OK?

I grew up learning about women by reading men and becoming convinced at a pretty early age that they were getting a lot of it wrong. I felt usurped by *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. But a lot of people did it right, too. Look at *Anna Karenina*; look at *Emma Bovary*. So I will never say men have no right to represent women. That would be absurd. What I will say is I think our first responsibility, and also our first treasure as writers, is to represent ourselves. So women are always dead center in my novels. And my novels are about the things women most think about, like keeping our children fed, and how to manage on not very much income. I think it's important to do that, because it's not traditionally been the main stuff of literature. And it needs to be.

A lot of what I also do is tell people, Look, you're noble. The things you do in your life, from day to day to day, which you have probably never thought of as the stuff of literature, are heroic. And if it's not you, it's your mother, or your neighbor, or your sister. And think about that. Think how wondrous that is. I think it really might be the main thing I do. And that's crossing a new street. It's looking at yourself and looking at heroism in a new way. Forget about Power Rangers, Power Mongers, Power Bombs, Power Suits, for just one minute of your life. All those icons we associate with power are hard to leave behind. It's hard to build a new iconography of heroism, but that's kind of my bailiwick. I owe that to the people I grew up with.

Q: Do you mean your family or your community?

Kingsolver: Both. Just to see people survive. Survival itself, in certain circumstances, is heroic. To live through mean times without becoming mean-spirited is heroic. I saw a lot of that.

Q: In the new book, you explore our anti-child policies on the political level, and imply we also have some anti-child practices on the family level.

Kingsolver: The terrible twos is an excellent example. I asked all my Latino friends, How do you translate terrible twos? What? they said. There's no terrible twos. They didn't even know what I was talking about. Not only is it not in their language, it's not in their thinking. To define individuation from the parent as terrible is an anti-child mindset. Now, I'm not saying it's not difficult to have a two-year-old, but it's a cultural difficulty. We expect our two-year-olds to fit smoothly into adult schedules.

I think the reason that my friend Carmen was battled when I said terrible twos is that the children in her household don't have to trench a clock. They're with her or there's other people in the household. There's this troupe of kids coming in and out, and always adults to take care of them. They don't have to get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, and get strapped into the car seat by 7 o'clock, which is a schedule that would make any two-year-old cranky. Think about if you had to crawl around and play with blocks all day. You'd be cranky; you'd be a terrible whatever-you-are.

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And that's not the fault of the parents. Obviously many, many mothers have no choice but to bundle their kids off to daycare, so I'm not blaming them. What I'm saying is our culture doesn't make allowances for kids; it doesn't give parental leave. Children are an aberration in late capitalism. They're also a liability, because they're not productive. So that's why capitalism treats them like toxic waste.

Q: Where did you get the desire to learn about different cultures?

Kingsolver: I went to school with African Americans and whites. It was a segregated town. When I went to first grade, it was an all-white school. Second grade, the kids who had gone to school in the CME church came down to our school. I remember thinking. They must be so scared, and wanting to ask, but being afraid. Marilyn and Karen were the two African-American kids in my class. I wanted to be friends with them and I didn't know how. I was a little bit scared, not because my parents said, Stay away, nothing like that. Just that I knew that they came from a different world, and I knew that they were outnumbered.

It impressed me, because I was also an outcast. I think one of the great pluses is that I grew up as a social outsider. And that had to do with being really skinny and really tall, and physically not blending in, which is so important in pre-adolescence and adolescence it's sort of the main thing.

But also my family was different. My parents just expected me to do things like read books big, good books and one day go to college. Nobody else I knew had that sort of expectation. Nobody in my class was going to college. Everybody kind of had the plan. They'd get married and they'd have kids and they'd stay right there. There was something in my training that was telling me, You're going to go away.

Q: And then you lived for a while in Africa as a kid?

Kingsolver: Yes, my dad was a physician, and he wanted to go where he could be extremely useful. So we ended up living in St. Lucia for a while in a convent hospital, and we lived in Central Africa. The people in our village had not seen white kids. I had really long hair that I could sit on, and people didn't think it was hair, because hair doesn't look like that, and they'd try to pull it off. My mom would explain to me, They're not trying to hurt you. They just think you're wearing something weird on your head and they're trying to get you to quit showing off.

Q: So you were an outsider?

Kingsolver: Very much. I got a real extreme look at what it's like to be a minority. It was an enormous adventure that let me know at the age of seven that there's a great big old world out there that I don't know anything about, that I'm going to see, and that I'm going to know if I can.

Q: Was your connection to small-town life one of the things that led you to write *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*, about the small towns of Morenci, Ajo, and Clifton?

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Kingsolver: Yes, even though I didn't grow up in a mining county. Nicholas County is not mining, it's agricultural. It's a tobacco town, so it's deeply depressed. Times have been tough there for as long as I've known about, and I think they're tougher still now that tobacco doesn't have the economic base it did. So, there are all these divisions. There was black and white. There was merchant and farmer. That was a very clear distinction in my school. The popular kids the ones with new clothes every year were the merchants' kids, the ones whose parents owned the dime store or the men's clothing store, or were the county attorney. And then all the other kids were farm kids, and they didn't get to wash their hair every night because they didn't necessarily have hot water. They had to walk through mud to get to the school bus, so they had mud on their shoes.

I was in that group, not because we were farmers but because we lived in the country, and my parents didn't believe in new clothes. They didn't value spending lots of money on superficial things, which of course really irritated me when I was fourteen. But I somehow lived through that and learned to appreciate it.

So in high school I learned about class, and I didn't even know the words. I never read Marx until I was about eighteen, but the first time I read Grundrisse and Capital I said, I know this stuff. I grew up with this stuff. Kentucky is such a laboratory of class consciousness because you have really oppressed workers shoulder to shoulder with big capital, which is not something you see necessarily in other parts of the country. Maybe the rust belt, maybe the auto belt, though I still don't know if it's as clear as mining bosses and the way they sort of own their workers wholesale. So it's very clear whose side everyone's on. And add to that, Nicholas County is right in between, it's sandwiched.

Q: You see the wealth of Lexington?

Kingsolver: It's just one county away. Nicholas County holds a really interesting geographic position between the wealth of Lexington and the poverty of Appalachia, and people define themselves depending on which way they're facing. In our county we didn't have a swimming pool, not in the whole county. And we would go to Lexington once in a while, and pass through these horse farms. And there was a horse farm where I swear this was true the horses had a swimming pool. It was for therapy or something. I remember driving by that every time and smashing our faces against the glass of the window and hating those horses for being so rich. It was so unfair.

Q: One thing that comes through so much in your writing is that people, like those you grew up with in Nicholas County, can understand power. I guess some liberal people would say they know that, but they don't really believe it at a gut level.

Kingsolver: That's really wrong. That's a huge underestimation. I think certainly in Kentucky people understand class and power relations. And that's why Kentucky and Arizona, too has a history of radical class action, and radical labor organizing. And that's of course what drew me to the strike.

My first national publication was in *The Progressive* and it was about the strike. I started going down there with a friend of mine, Jill Fein. We were activists and organizers and we went there in solidarity

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with the strikers. I figured I'd write about it, but I didn't at first have an assignment. I loved *The Progressive*, so I wrote a query. We wrote the article together and they published it and it was an enormous thrill when it arrived. Seeing it in print was even more important than the check. There it was, with the photograph we'd taken of the women on the picket line. I remember just standing by the mailbox holding it in my hand and thinking, All over the country people are reading about this. That's the power of being able to get the word out. After bonegrinding years as an activist, a door opened. I got some sense of the possibilities and of the power of this kind of writing. It was really a turning point for me.

Q: Some people criticize your work as being too political. They try to erect a huge wall between art and politics. There's this idea that political art is bad, and that a divider between the two can actually exist. Where does this idea come from?

Kingsolver: I'm not sure. My personal theory is it has a lot to do with McCarthyism. Because if you go back before the 1950s you find great political writers like Steinbeck, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Henry Thoreau. And then that stopped; things just sort of ground to a halt in the 1950s.

I don't know whether it's cause or effect. I don't know whether it was because of McCarthyism, or whether there was some evil humus in this country from which sprang Joe McCarthy and people who supported him and this idea that art and politics should separate themselves. For whatever reason, it's with us now and we haven't recovered from that time.

Q: What can we do about it?

Kingsolver: It's being done to us. Artists are losing the minuscule amount of support that we had. The NEA, I heard Christopher Reeve say when he was in town years ago, gives out each year less money than the money for military band uniforms. So, there wasn't an enormous amount of public or federal support for artists to begin with, and it's dwindling. And there's a hue and cry, and artists are looking around and saying, Why doesn't the public support us?

Well, I have a clue about that. Look to some of the poorest countries in Latin America. They revere their poets. Their poets do not starve. They elect their poets to public office. Their poets are talking about important stuff. Their poets have their finger on the pulse of the human-rights situation, the core of economic oppression, where it's going and where it's coming from. They write about power relations and the common good. They write about all of this stuff that in the United States many artists avert their faces from as being too political. Well, if we write and paint and film things that people understand to be vital to their lives, we'll get public support. Any artistic commission that has Jesse Helms on it is scary. Censorship of any kind is scary. But I don't think we're really talking about censorship here. I think we're talking about a responsiveness of artists to their public that's sort of waning.

Q: It's waning, but it has the potential to come back?

Kingsolver: I think if artists can speak of things that matter, then they will be supported. I feel like I say stuff that people really don't want to hear. I write about child abuse, and about sexism and racism and il-

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legal immigration laws, and I think, Nobody's going to read about this, and yet, they do. I think that you can say difficult things, but do it artfully, and you'll be heard.

Q: And the critics may say, Oh, this is too political, but people are reading the books.

Kingsolver: The gatekeepers of art are the ones who are saying this is too political. I don't hear that from many people. One letter in 100, or even less, will say. I don't think you should be writing about this stuff.

I think we also have in this country a rare phenomenon in which people are very uneducated about art. I think the average African in Africa, let's say the average citizen of Cameroon, understands more about the art of Cameroon than the average Tucsonian understands about the art of Tucson. Understanding and appreciating art is something you learn from other people who do it, and historically it's been part of oral tradition. You appreciate stories because you sit around in groups where people tell them. You appreciate dance because you participate. You grow up seeing other people moved to tears by the events, and you learn what that's about.

Q: Do you think the people who criticize your work are people who already know about the issues and have decided they're on the other side? Or are they people who have so much of their personal and professional identities invested in the idea that they don't take stands that they feel threatened by the fact that your characters do?

Kingsolver: Both. Usually when people say, You're too political, what they mean is, I don't agree with you. In *High Tide in Tucson*, I wrote about that anecdote at the mall, where the managers decided that the people passing out yellow ribbons and We Kick Butt bumper stickers were not political, and the people who were passing out anti-war propaganda were political. That's come to be a significant definition of the word political in this country, and it's something I don't agree with. The people who have panned my work as being political are people who are not on my side, so I feel kind of proud of that.

Q: Do you think the popularity of your fiction speaks to people's hunger for the acknowledgment of the political in their lives, in addition to the fact that they're drawn in by the great stories and great characters?

Kingsolver: Yes. I don't think it's necessarily things people would define as political, although sometimes it is, explicitly. I hear from activists who say, We've been trying and trying to tell people about Nicaragua and finally what a relief to pick up a book that does it, a real book that people are reading.

Q: You've said a novel can move people in a way a newspaper article can't, because it gets in their heart and because they can't switch to the sports pages. But your new book is nonfiction. Did you want to speak in your own voice instead of through your characters?

Kingsolver: I've been writing essays all along, but to write a book of them that all added up to something was really wonderful. This is a really scary thing to say, but it has worried me at times that my work is so popular. Sometimes I think, Are they just reading the love story and didn't notice the part about

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Guatemala? I think people do, on some level, understand the politics of my fiction. Even if only to be awakened to the possibility that the government is doing something not right in Central America and maybe they'll be more open to reading stuff that's more explicitly about that subject. Or sort of an attitude about the environment, or an attitude about women that comes through. You can hear on the left sometimes an elitism of unpopularity. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, Well, I write, but my work will never be popular because it's so political, and I think, Well, am I chopped liver? Are you saying that I sold out, or what?

I felt that I did at this point in my life have a chance to be more direct. Everything in *High Tide in Tucson* I think I've said before behind the mask of fiction, but this time I stepped out from behind the mask and said, I, Barbara Kingsolver, believe this. And it sold more in the first four months than all six of my other books combined in their first four months.

Q: So you're probably reaching people who haven't heard about these issues from your perspective before.

Kingsolver: I have to think so. I can't get over that I get to do this. It also comes with a certain responsibility. You know you get handed in your life this chance to go all over the country and talk and talk and talk, and answer and answer and answer questions, and go on McNeil/Lehrer and national shows. I would much rather not do that. I would much rather stay home and bake bread and write another book. That's what I do. That's what I love. And I do have my limits. I'll do it for a few months after a book comes out, and try to make the most of that time.

The reason that I do it at all is that I can still remember how recently it was that I was cranking out leaflets about the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Plant, or whatever was the crisis of the week in Tucson, Arizona. And I don't mean to demean these crises; they are all very real.

It's very hard to criticize this country, our domestic or our foreign policy, or our attitude, or our Americanism. And so, given the chance to do that, given this strange moment that I have, little old socialist me, to go talk to David Gergen and be in everybody's living room, I have to do it. And I have to do it right. I have to say the important stuff, not just smile and nod and say, Oh, yes, I have written another book.

Q: I don't imagine you have time to crank the mimeographs anymore.

Kingsolver: No, and it wouldn't be a good use of my time. But I'm still involved locally. It used to be I was the one who would organize the events. Now I go to them. Or I'll go and read a poem. They put my name on the list to draw a different crowd. I find that I can be an effective activist in very different ways, but I feel like I still believe exactly the same things I did when I was twenty.

Q: It seems to me that as disparate as they are, all the essays in the new book fit together. What's the unifying theme?

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Kingsolver: I didn't title the book, Barbara the Marxist Takes on Life, but that's what it is. Let's face it. I steered clear of the M word, because people are so ignorant. Even though we're a secular state, we're deeply religious about the religion of America. We rely on so many things on faith, without having to have any evidence. Like this belief about how anyone can make it in America if you're smart and you work hard. Well, for how many generations now has that been untrue? In some families, a lot. And in almost all families, my generation is not as well off as our parents, even though we worked just as hard, and more of us got more of an education than they did. It's staggering to me to read statistics of how many people in this country live in poverty: 20 percent of kids, right? Yet turn on the television and you still see rich people idolized. Popular culture reflects a population that still identifies with the ruling class.

Q: You weave your scientific training into your writing, which is pretty unusual.

Kingsolver: There's this whole realm of natural history metaphors and symbols you can use if you know about them that gives a kind of freshness to your writing, because most writers haven't studied science. People think it's sort of funny that I went to graduate school as a biologist and then became a novelist, but the process is so similar. What I learned is how to formulate or identify a new question that hasn't been asked before, and then to set about solving it, to do original research to find the way to an answer. And that's what I do when I write a book. It's very similar. I think I might be a lot more process-oriented than a lot of writers are. I've never talked with another writer about process who does it exactly the same way I do it. It used to make me certain I was doing it wrong. Now I just figure it's as good as any way. It works for me.

Q: In the essays you let on that there have been days when you didn't think you could keep going, when you questioned your abilities as a writer.

Kingsolver: I still have them. Beginning a book is really hard. I'm trying to begin one now and I just keep throwing stuff away and thinking, Can I do this? I don't think I'm smart enough. But it has to be hard. You have to have a reverence for the undertaking. And I think reverence implies a certain lack of self-esteem, doesn't it?

Q: If you're reverent towards something, you feel...

Kingsolver: Lowly. You feel daunted and unworthy. But in this age of glorifying the individual and self-esteem, I think there's something healthy about being daunted. Cockiness doesn't lend itself to good writing. It really doesn't.

Q: How was your recent book tour?

Kingsolver: This book tour just took me from city to city to city, into hotel rooms out of whose windows I would look and see the same skyline. One of the things that was psychologically and emotionally tiring was that it was all city, and I was surrounded continually by people who took their city so seriously. I don't mean just their city, like, Oh, this is Pittsburgh. But people who look around at the city and say,

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This is what's real. For me, this is what's real. [As she said this, she gestured emphatically to the saguaro-studded canyon rising all around us.] We're just a blink in the eye of this. We haven't been around very long, and we're probably not going to persist. And it's sort of laughable that we take all of our stuff so seriously. We've had two hundred-year floods here in the last ten years, and both times the city was completely cut off, for days and days. You couldn't go anywhere. It was roaring water. And some things happened that were deeply reinforcing on the human level. For the first day you're still trying to get to work, or get to your appointments, and then slowly you give it up, and you realize that this whole schedule all these things in our date book are just little scratches on the surface of this old Earth, and she doesn't much care.

Q: How do we build more awareness of that?

Kingsolver: I think urban life is a big part of the problem. If people could just get out and look. And to just sit still and be. Ed Abbey, who was my neighbor, said something that continues to impress me in new ways. I told him I'd been to Zion, and I said, It's enough to make you religious. And he said, Those mountains don't inspire religion. They are religion.

Q: In your new book, *High Tide in Tucson*, in the essay, *The Spaces Between*, you write, I'm drawn like a kid to mud into the sticky terrain of cultural difference. You say, I want to know, and to write, about the places where disparate points of view rub together the spaces between. Not just between man and woman but also North and South; white and not-white; communal and individual; spiritual and carnal.

Kingsolver: The reason I'm attracted so much to those places and those moments is you can learn so much. You go through the world on some kind of search, and you take so much for granted. And when you run up against somebody else who's moving right beside you but looking for completely different stuff, it can stop you in your tracks, and you can start thinking, Why am I looking for this?

So few of us examine our motives and our mythology, the things that we believe in without question. Like humans are more important than any other species. Most people with your background and mine go through their whole lives without questioning that. I am more important than a Kirtland's warbler. Don't even think about it. And, so when you run up against somebody who says. Of course the Kirtland's warbler is just as important as I am, that can throw you for a loop.

In *Pigs in Heaven* I wanted to choose a high-profile event in which a Native American has been adopted out of the tribe and in which that adoption is questioned and challenged. Because it brings into conflict two completely different ways of defining good, of defining value. The one is that the good is whatever is in the best interest of the child; the other is that the good is whatever is in the best interest of the tribe, the group, the community. What I really wanted to do in that book was not necessarily write about Indians. I wanted to introduce my readers to this completely different unit of good and have them believe in it by the end, have them accept in their hearts that that could be just as true as the other.

Q: Your fiction, you've made clear, is not autobiographical, but the essays ...

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Kingsolver: Are. It used to be people thought they knew all about me because they thought I was my characters. Now they do. I didn't really reveal anything that intimate in that book. I included a lot of details about where I live and so forth, only as kind of a springboard to issues or ideas. For example, I wrote about divorce. I didn't really write about my divorce. It seems like I did, but I didn't.

Q: That it happened, yes.

Kingsolver: That was sort of part of the public record already, anyway. Also, we moved right before the book came out, so people think they know all about my house, but they don't.

Q: Including details about your life made the book more accessible?

Kingsolver: That's the idea. It was so much like writing fiction. You use the same techniques. You create characters and you have a plot. All of the essays really are little stories that mean something, and what they end up being about is not the events but some larger ideas. It just happens that I used real people or real events or incidents in my life as the starting points. You can't just put the ideas there. You have to put clothes on them and make them walk around. I keep coming back to the term creative nonfiction to describe this book, because it really was more creative writing than journalism. You can look at the same event fifty different ways, so the story I chose to tell from a particular event was the creative part.

Q: The choosing how to tell it?

Kingsolver: And, I suppose before that, deciding what it means. What can you make of someone telling you, Love it or leave it, bitch? That can be at the starting point of a lot of different stories.

Q: In that same essay you came back and said that that guy could think critically.

Kingsolver: I speculate that if I asked him, Do you think patriotism means turning your back on evidence that your country has done immoral acts? I think he would say, No. Then he'd say, Prove it. I think my country right or wrong is not such a common slogan as my country always right, and by God I want to believe that, and so don't mess with me, don't confuse me with the facts.

Q: But it's suspect to be a writer whose purpose in part is to change the world.

Kingsolver: Oh, yeah. And it's funny that I still shock people when they say, Why do you write? and I say, Well, to change the world. It's like heresy. It's like absolute heresy for an artist to say that. That's why I say it. Seven or eight years ago I couldn't.

Q: You couldn't?

Kingsolver: I thought it, but I couldn't admit it because I was afraid of not being taken seriously. Now I'm pretty confident of being taken seriously. Shocking but true. And so I feel I have an obligation to tell truths like that. You like what I write? Well, get this: I'm a pinko and I want to change the world.



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