

THE POISONWOOD BIBLE

by Barbara Kingsolver

In her novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver extends her formidable literary talents with a large-scale fictional narrative set amidst the political turmoil of post-Colonial Africa. Yet, while working on a larger canvas than in past books, Kingsolver nonetheless draws on her finely honed talents for characterization and observation, to create an intimate portrait of one family's tragic confrontation with the unstoppable forces of nature, history, and hubris.

The Price family of Bethlehem, Georgia, arrives in Kilanga, Congo in 1959 as Baptist missionaries. The patriarch, Nathan, is a silver-tongued tent revival preacher who has dragged his wife and four daughters to this squalid African outpost for the exalted purpose of bringing salvation to the natives. Unyielding in his faith, and blind to the surrounding realities of the Congolese culture, Reverend Price refuses to acknowledge the complete and utter failure of this enterprise.

The women of the family, however, have their own individual perspectives, which they lend as the five narrators of the novel. Orleanna, as wife and mother, quickly realizes that her husband's nearly insane zeal will not protect her daughters from the endemic problems of sickness and hunger. The eldest daughter, Rachel, resents being rent from her carefree American teenage life, and maintains a superior detachment from the black-skinned human beings that inhabit her new world. Conversely, the youngest, Ruth May, at only five, has not yet been imbued with narrow prejudices, and she connects with the village children in ways impossible for the adults.

The middle daughters are twins, Leah and Adah. At the start, Leah adores her father, and strives to aid him in his crucial, onerous work among the villagers. Adah, however, despises all that her father represents. Born with damage to one hemisphere of her brain, she is a strangely intelligent child, though physically handicapped and mute by choice. Her unusual ability to read and think backwards, and her propensity for spying, allow her to share an unusual interpretation of events.

Minor inconveniences mount in to life-threatening situations for this pristine American family unaccustomed to the hardship that surrounds them. Then, as the tension and bloodshed of the struggle for national independence spill over from the cities into the countryside, it becomes patently clear the Prices are no longer welcome or safe in Kilanga. But Nathan, refusing to heed the warnings of his superiors, decides his family must stay. It is a decision that will have unspeakably tragic consequences that will irrevocably change each of their lives.

In some ways, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a departure for its best-selling author, whose earlier novels have embraced more intimate stories set within the regional confines of the United States. Yet familiar Kingsolver themes - the clash of cultures, the attainment of self awareness, the struggle to overcome stifling conventions, the preservation of heritage - still resound in this ambitious and towering indictment of imperialism and unchecked cultural arrogance.

Synthesizing her widespread knowledge of history, science and anthropology, and tempering it with characteristic insight and wit, Barbara Kingsolver has written her most accomplished novel to date.

Barbara Kingsolver On *The Poisonwood Bible*

"When I was researching this book, looking through old magazines, I got a window into the mentality of the post-World War II era which... was a time of booming prosperity in the United States. New suburban homes. All kinds of new ways of living... I mean, anything that was jet age or atomic was great... And that's what these characters believe in. That was their religion, apart from Christianity. Their religion was modern technology, new and shiny and great. And that didn't work in the Congo...And it was, in a sense, the seal of their doom."

"The setting of this book is steeped in racism. The white characters in this book who go from the American South to Africa have come of age in a time of segregation, ... And so naturally they carried that racism with them into the Congo. Even though they arrived in a place where they were an extreme minority, they still carried a sense that they were better people or somehow more important people than those around them."

"No one imagined that the people of the Congo were every bit as smart and sophisticated in their own ways for living in their own places as we were. It was just unthinkable."

"The way people live in the Congo is probably almost unimaginable to most Americans. It's hard to imagine living without electricity, without automobiles, without roads... No radio. No television. Very few people read or write. A lot of Americans might look at that as an absence. A great lack of things... That's something I wanted to write about. It has to do with this attitude of arrogance. This blindness."

"This is a book about taking responsibility, really, and finding redemption. We have to live with this..."

"The book ends with the words "Walk forward into the light." Don't forget that this

was done on our behalf in our names. But take it. Use it. Make the future something different. Something better on account of it."

Note: This novel was an Oprah Summer Read and the above information is from Oprah's website.