

## Flight Behavior

by Barbara Kingsolver

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### About the Book

FLIGHT BEHAVIOR transfixes from its opening scene, when a young woman's narrow experience of life is thrown wide with the force of a raging fire. In the lyrical language of her native Appalachia, Barbara Kingsolver bares the rich, tarnished humanity of her novel's inhabitants and unearths the modern complexities of rural existence. Characters and reader alike are quickly carried beyond familiar territory here, into the unsettled ground of science, faith, and everyday truces between reason and conviction.

Dellarobia Turnbow is a restless farm wife who gave up her own plans when she accidentally became pregnant at seventeen. Now, after a decade of domestic disharmony on a failing farm, she has settled for permanent disappointment but seeks momentary escape through an obsessive flirtation with a younger man. As she hikes up a mountain road behind her house to a secret tryst, she encounters a shocking sight: a silent, forested valley filled with what looks like a lake of fire. She can only understand it as a cautionary miracle, but it sparks a raft of other explanations from scientists, religious leaders, and the media. The bewildering emergency draws rural farmers into unexpected acquaintance with urbane journalists, opportunists, sightseers and a striking biologist with his own stake in the outcome. As the community lines up to judge the woman and her miracle, Dellarobia confronts her family, her church, her town, and a larger world, in a flight toward truth that could undo all she has ever believed.

FLIGHT BEHAVIOR takes on one of the most contentious subjects of our time: climate change. With a deft and versatile empathy Kingsolver dissects the motives that drive denial and belief in a precarious world.

### Discussion Guide

1. What is the significance of the novel's title? Talk about the imagery of flight. How is it represented throughout the story?
2. How do the chapter titles relate both to scientific concepts as well as the events that unfold within each chapter itself?
3. Describe Dellarobia. How is she of this mountain town in Tennessee and how is she different from it? How are she and her family connected to the land and to nature itself? How are they disconnected? How does this shape their viewpoints? How does she describe herself? Do you agree with her self-assessment?

4. Talk about the characters names—Dellarobia, Preston, Cordelia, Dovey, Ovid Byron, Cub, Bear, Hester. How does the author's choice of nomenclature suit her characters? When you first meet these characters, including Pastor Bobby, what were your first impressions? Were your notions about them challenged as the story progressed?
5. Describe the small town in Tennessee where Dellarobia lives. What are the people like? Are they familiar to you? What is everyday life like for them? What are their major joys and concerns? How you strike a balance between protecting nature when your livelihood depends upon its destruction?
6. Talk about Della's relationships with the various people in her life: Cub, Hester, Pastor Bobby, Dovey, Ovid Byron. What do her experiences teach her about herself and life?
7. How does Della react when she first sees the Monarchs? What greater meaning do the butterflies hold for her? How is she like the butterflies? How does finding them transform her life? Were the butterflies a miracle?
8. As news of her discovery spreads, what are the reactions of her in-laws and her neighbors? How do they view Della? What are their impressions of the scientists and tourists who descend upon their remote town?
9. What does Dellarobia think about her new friends, and especially Ovid Byron? What about the scientists—how do they view people like Della, her family, and her neighbors? Does either side see they other realistically?
10. Cub and his father, Bear, want to sell the patch of forest where the Monarchs are to a lumber company for clear-cutting. What ramifications would this have, not only for the butterflies but for Della's family and her town? Why is it often difficult for people see the long-term effects of their immediate actions? Cub doesn't consider conserving nature to be his problem. What might you say to convince him otherwise?
11. Though she may not have a formal education beside her high school diploma, would you call Dellarobia wise? Where does her knowledge come from? Is she religious? Their Christian faith is very important to many of her neighbors. How does Barbara Kingsolver portray religion, faith, and God in the novel? What are your impressions of Pastor Bobby?
12. "Kids in Feathertown wouldn't know college-bound from a hole in the ground. They don't need it for life around here. College is kind of irrelevant.," Della tells Ovid. Why isn't college important to these people? Should it be? Would you say the people of Feathertown respect education? Why is faith and instinct enough for some people? When she explained this to Ovid, "His eyes went wide, as if she'd mentioned they boiled local children alive. His shock gave her a strange satisfaction she could not have explained. Insider status, maybe." Explain her attitude. Yet Dellarobia also believes that, "educated people had powers." What does she mean by this? How does education empower people? Can it also blind them?
13. After Dellarobia's parents died, what options did she have? She wanted to go to school—and did try—she tells Ovid. "People who hadn't been through it would think it was that simple: just get back on the bus, ride to the next stop. He would have no inkling of the great slog of effort that tied up people like her in the day to day. Or the quaking misgivings that infected every step forward, after a loss. Even now, dread still struck her down sometimes if she found herself counting on things being fine. Meaning her now-living children and their future, those things. She had so much more to lose now than just herself or her own plans." What are the factors that hold back people in Dellarobia's circumstances? How can they be overcome? How is each character's ideas about the future colored by his or her circumstances?
14. **Flight Behavior** illuminates the conflicting attitudes of different classes towards nature and the idea of climate change. How does each side see this issue? Where do they find common ground? Do you believe in global warming or climate change? Explain the basis of your beliefs. How much do you know about both the proponents and opponents in this debate?
15. Why do so many Americans fear or dislike science? Why do so many others fear or dislike religion? What impact do these attitudes have on the nation now and what do they portend for our future?
16. For Dellarobia, "Nobody truly decided for themselves, there was too much information. What they actually did was scope around, decide who was looking out for their clan, and sign on for the memos on a wide array of topics." Do you agree that this is a fair assessment of a divided America? How can we get beyond our judgments and stereotypes?
17. How is media both a help and a hindrance in our understanding of social issues? How does it offer clarity and how does it add confusion? How is the media portrayed in **Flight Behavior**? What impact does it have on Dellarobia and the fate of the butterflies? People are envious that the media pays attention to Dellarobia, yet she says being interviewed was like, "having her skin peeled off." Why are so many people consumed by a desire for fame?

18. Ovid has doubts about his work. "What was the use of saving a world that had no soul left in it. Continents without butterflies, seas without coral reefs, he meant. What if all human effort amounted basically to saving a place for ourselves to park?" he asks Dellarobia? How would you answer him?

19. **Flight Behavior** interweaves important themes: religion and science, poverty and wealth, education and instinct or faith, intolerance and acceptance, How are these themes used to complement each other and how do they conflict? Choose one theme and trace it throughout the novel, explaining how it illuminates a particular character's life.

20. At the end of the novel, Dellarobia recalls when Ovid Byron first met Preston and declared the boy a scientist. "A moment, Dellarobia now believed, that changed Preston's life. You never knew which split second might be the zigzag bolt dividing all that went before from everything that comes next." Have you ever had such a defining moment in your life? Was there a special person who influenced you and helped guide or shift the course of your life?

21. What do you think will happen to Dellarobia, Preston, and Cordelia?

22. What did you take away from reading **Flight Behavior**?

#### Author Bio

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955, and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books have been translated into more than two dozen languages, and have been adopted into the core literature curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the nation. She has contributed to more than 50 literary anthologies, and her reviews and articles have appeared in most major U.S. newspapers and magazines.

Kingsolver was named one the most important writers of the 20th Century by *Writers Digest*. In 2000, she received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. Critical acclaim for her books includes multiple awards from the American Booksellers Association and the American Library Association, among many others. *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Orange Prize, and won the national book award of South Africa, before being named an Oprah Book Club selection. *ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE* won numerous prizes, including the James Beard award. *THE LACUNA* won The Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010.

In 1998, Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize for fiction.

She has two daughters, Camille (born in 1987) and Lily (1996). Her husband, Steven Hopp, teaches environmental studies. Since June 2004, Barbara and her family have lived on a farm in southern Appalachia. Barbara believes her best work is accomplished through writing, raising her children, and being an active citizen of her own community. She is grateful for the good will and support of her readers.

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