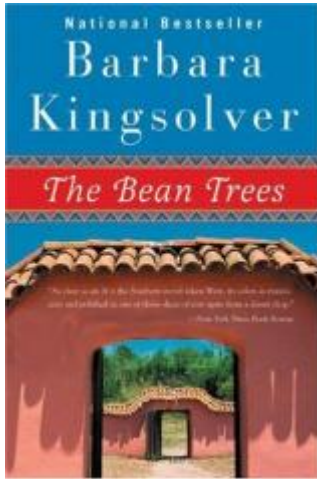


## The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver

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### About the Book

The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles."

- Taylor Greer in **The Bean Trees**

Marietta Greer spent her childhood in rural Kentucky determined to do two things: avoid getting pregnant and escape rural Kentucky. At the start of the novel, she has headed west in a beat-up '55 Volkswagon, changing her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. By the time two tires give way in Tucson she has with her a stunned, silent three-year-old Cherokee girl who was, literally, dropped into her arms one night. She has named the child Turtle, for her strong, snapping-turtle-like grip. In Tucson Taylor finds friendship and support in Lou Ann Ruiz, a fellow Kentuckian and single mother, with whom she and Turtle share a house. Her newfound community also includes Mattie, who runs a safe house for political refugees in the upstairs rooms above her auto repair shop. The novel's theme of fear, flight, homelessness, and finding sanctuary within a community are present in Taylor's struggle to find a place where she belongs, and the more urgent plight of two Central American refugees, Estevan and Esperanza. These fellow travelers help one another create new lives and redefine the meanings of home and family.

-1989 School Library Journal Best Books of the Year

- 1989 American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults

### Kingsolver on **The Bean Trees**:

"I always think of a first novel as something like this big old purse you've been carrying around your whole life, throwing in ideas, characters, and all the things that have ever struck you as terribly important. One day, for whatever reason, you just have to dump that big purse out and there lies this pile of junk. You start picking through it, and assembling it into what you hope will be a statement of your life's great themes. That's how it was for me. It probably wasn't until midway through the writing that I had a grasp of the central question: What are the many ways, sometimes hidden and underground ways, that people help themselves and each other survive hard times?"

### Discussion Guide

**1. The Bean Trees** deals with the theme of being an outsider. In what ways are various characters outsiders? What does this suggest about what it takes to be an insider? How does feeling like an outsider affect one's life?

2. How and why do the characters change, especially Lou Ann, Taylor, and Turtle?

3. In many ways, the novel is "the education of Taylor Greer." What does she learn about human suffering? about love?

#### 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 of 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.

#### Critical Praise

"The question of speech is not merely a matter of style. When Taylor and Lou Ann Ruiz meet, they feel at home with each other because they talk alike ... Back home, Estevan taught English; now he will teach Taylor to see her own words from the viewpoint of an outsider, and thus show her how subtly language is linked to political reality. Another of the major subplots of the book, also associated with language, is the gradual development of a child called Turtle, for whom Taylor becomes responsible. Turtle has been brutalized and does not, for a long time, talk. When she does begin, her first words are the names of vegetables, including, most prominently, beans. There is a stark fine poetry in this talking by naming, and when Miss Kingsolver ties it in with the book's name and the fate of Turtle's mother, the echoes are sonorous indeed." -Jack Butler, New York Times

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