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## ***BOOK REVIEW***

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Barbara Kingsolver: *Prodigal Summer*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

Barbara Kingsolver's genre is fiction that relates humans to the other forms of life that share their local environment, without fictionalizing the environment or the forms of life. Her characters are connected with the web that surrounds them. Scarcely a paragraph passes without a sense of that connection. This is true of all her writing, most notably *Animal Dreams* and *The Poisonwood Bible*, but *Prodigal Summer* is thus far the masterpiece of the genre.

Let no one who has not read Kingsolver think that she is afflicted with the pathetic fallacy, an anthropomorphizer, or a sentimental advocate of animal rights. One of her characters, Deanna, through whom Kingsolver speaks, says "I don't love animals as individuals — I love them as a whole species." (p. 177) But she does not love feral cats, who have kittens in the woods and decimate bird species. Again, she doesn't hate cats as cats, or cats as predators. Predators are her favorite animals. ("Predators," by the way, is the title of a third of the chapters in the book.) She hates cats as "fake animals," an introduced species that devastates the ecosystem, similar to chestnut blight and kudzu vines. Hers is not love of individual animals, nor indiscriminate love of species, but love of ecosystemic integrity.

The ecosystem that Kingsolver chooses is "Zebulon County" in the region where Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky meet. The name is taken from a town that exists in that country which the author knows well — she grew up in Kentucky and owns a farm in the southern Appalachians. The species that give most character to the novel, other than the memorable humans, are coyote, chestnut tree, and luna moth. Each of them provides a theme for one of the three stories that are interwoven to create the whole.

One of these strands, "Predators," involves Deanna Wolfe, a Zebulon native and Forest Service guard who has a degree in wildlife biology, having written her thesis on coyotes. She has discovered that a

coyote family has moved into the hills near her lonely guard station, and likes this, because although people think of western places like Wyoming when they hear the word “coyote,” the animal is a predator that has extended its range into the Appalachians, fitting into the ecological niche left by the extirpated red wolf. Deanna’s life is severely complicated when she takes a lover named Eddie Bondo, a Wyoming sheep rancher who came in for the Mountain Empire Bounty Hunt specifically to kill coyotes. Their argument over the roles of coyotes as sheep-killers and maintainers of ecosystemic balance interweave the emotion of their sexual attraction with their intelligent commitment to the issues on both sides. It is the keystone passage of the book.

In another strand, “Moth Love,” Lusa Maluf Landowski, who as a woman with mixed Arab and Jewish parentage is an outsider, has married Cole Widener, member of a well-established and numerous local family and heir to the tobacco farm. She met him at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, where she was an entomology major. When her husband is killed in an accident while riding a tractor, she decides to stay on the land, to the consternation of her sisters-in-law. She gives up tobacco farming, however, to raise goats for the northeastern ethnic market. As she learns the difficulties of transition from crop farming to herding, with some help from her teenage nephew Rickie, she also makes her way through the intricacies of family relationships. There are ghosts in the homestead, and pheromones in Lusa’s dreams of a lover who takes the form of a giant luna moth. Cole’s sister Jewel is dying of cancer, and Lusa gets to know Jewel’s tomboy daughter Crys and sensitive son Lowell by exploring the farm’s insect and plant world with them. Here, as in the entire novel, people and environment are shown in relationship on every level, symbolic, psychological, economic, and sexual.

The third strand, “Old Chestnuts,” is the tale of widower Garnett Walker, a retired vocational agriculture teacher whose dream is to restore the chestnut tree to the American landscape, producing trees from seed that represent successive crosses between the few survivors of the chestnut blight and resistant Chinese chestnuts, hoping to end up with an American chestnut that will resist the disease. In spite of his obsession with genetics, he is a fundamentalist who rejects the idea of evolution. His land abuts that of Nannie Rawley, an old lady who never married her child’s father, and who raises organic apples, one variety of which she calls “Rachel Carson.” She objects to the powerful insecticides that drift over on the wind when Garnett has his Japanese beetles sprayed, as well as the herbicides the county broadcasts along the roadside. Their conversations — and letter writing — constitute for

the reader a delightful anthology of two people talking past each other, but also explore some of the great issues of the environmental dialogue in America.

The three strands cross one another on the human level, as one might expect in a small rural community. They also cross where humans relate to the environment — the coyotes are eventually seen by and reacted to by most of the characters. Kingsolver writes the last chapter from the standpoint of the female coyote without in any way giving human attributes to the animal. Few writers can succeed at that, but she does. The coyote appears to be alone in the landscape, but the author concludes, “Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end” (p. 444).

An environmental historian reads *Prodigal Summer* with admiration for the author’s ability to reflect how the landscape has changed over the years and generations. Majestic chestnuts which once shared a dominant role in the forest are gone; when they started to succumb to the blight, farmers cut them all down, even the living trees, thinking they might as well use them since they would die anyway. This prevented the few resistant trees from surviving and reproducing to form a new, blight-defying forest. Carolina parakeets had evolved as consumers of cockleburs, the numerous flocks of birds keeping the plant in check, but with the extinction of parakeets, cockleburs lacked that check and spread weedily. Introduced species propagated as original ones declined and disappeared. Honeysuckle, like kudzu and two-thirds of the weeds, not to mention the Japanese beetle, is an invasive exotic. Hillsides plowed for tobacco eroded into spreading gullies. After the keystone predator in the local ecosystem, the wolf, disappeared, the opportunistic coyote moved into the vacant niche.

The ecosystem is in an incessant state of change, and humans are the most potent agents of change. The most prominent characters in *Prodigal Summer* want to resist or reverse human-induced changes that they regard as destructive. Deanna wants to stop the crusade against coyotes, Lusa and Nannie denounce the use of insecticides, and Garnett wants to bring back the chestnut. But Garnett spends his money for ever more efficient poisons which he hopes will wipe out the Japanese beetles. In fact, they are just as efficient at killing off the beetles’ enemies, and the beetles multiply faster. Lusa is happy that the ravenous exotic goats she has introduced are keeping the aggressive exotic weeds down. Deanna would shoot a cat to keep it from killing

birds in her forest, even while, against all her own sympathy, recognizing the right of the native blacksnake to eat the fledgling phoebes in the nest under her roof. It is not that we resist change per se, but that we choose the kinds of change that we will force upon nature.

Kingsolver presents the dilemma through very human situations without advocating an answer, although she clearly thinks some choices are informed by ignorance. In their wisest moments her characters are torn by ambiguity. In other moments they may be unambiguous but wrong. The book has been on the bestseller lists for a number of weeks, and it is to be hoped that one reason for its success is the way in which the author energizes these issues. — **J. Donald Hughes**