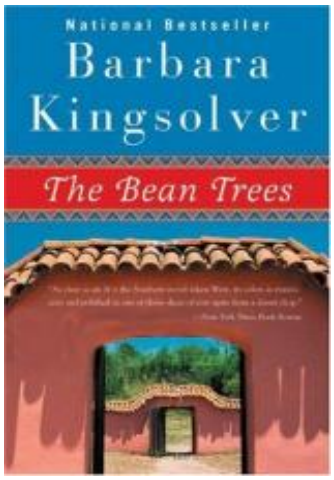
The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver



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 is the author of 10 bestselling works of fiction, including the novels UNSHELTERED, THE BEAN TREES and THE POISONWOOD BIBLE, as well as books of poetry, essays, creative nonfiction, and COYOTE'S WILD HOME, a children?s book co-authored with Lily Kingsolver. She also collaborated with family members on the influential ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE: A Year of Food Life.

Kingsolver?s work has been translated into more than 30 languages and has earned a devoted readership at home and abroad. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has received numerous awards and honors including the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel, DEMON COPPERHEAD, the National Humanities Medal, and, most recently, the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She lives with her husband on a farm in southern Appalachia.

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 Tim

The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver

Publication Date: March 29, 1989
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 240 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060915544
ISBN-13: 9780060915544