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Homeland and Other Stories

by Barbara Kingsolver



About the Book

> Remember that story," she often commanded at the end, and I would be stunned with guilt because my mind had wandered onto crickets and pencil erasers and Black Beauty.

"I might not remember," I told her. "It's too hard."

Great Mam allowed that I might think I had forgotten. "But you haven't. You keep it stored away," she said. "If it's important, your heart remembers."

I had known that hearts could break and sometimes even be attacked, with disastrous result, but I had not heard of hearts remembering. I was eleven years old. I did not trust any of my internal parts with the capacity of memory. -Gloria St. Clair in **Homeland**

In these twelve tender and humorous stories, Kingsolver creates a series of memorable characters, mostly women who are barely scraping by, but whose inner lives are rich and deep as they struggle to make sense of their lives. In the midst of poverty, abandonment, or loss, these women are determined to articulate for themselves what it means to be who they are, and in so doing, assert the significance of their lives. The more remarkable of these tales evoke the legendary and visionary qualities of myth. Among these is the title story, a story Russell Banks called "pure poetry," written in a language so exquisite that "no synopsis can do it justice." In it, the narrator describes a childhood memory of her family's trip to her grandmother's homeland, Cherokee, Tennessee, so that Great Mam could see it before she died. What they see are ugly, depressing results of the violent destruction of the Cherokee past; against these losses, the grandmother's storytelling becomes a form of genuine cultural preservation. In "Rose-Johnny" a ten-year-old girl confronts the sexual and racial complexities of the South in the figure of a strange woman. Another story, "Why I am a Danger to the Public," is about the sharp-tongued Vicki Morales, a crane operator in a New Mexico mining town, who, at great risk, leads a wildcat strike. At once realistic and idealistic, these stories suggest that humans are both poignantly fragile, but also,

luckily, resilient.

-1990 American Library Association Best Books of the Year

Kingsolver on the Characters in her Fiction

"I write about people who may not automatically command respect because of their positions in life. They aren't people who are normally thought to be the stuff of literature. They're not heroes. They're the single mom who lives next door to you and runs over to ask if you'll watch her baby while she takes her cat to the vet because it just swallowed mothballs. They're two women in a kitchen, not the three muskateers. Beginning with the understanding that they are not automatically invested with greatness, I want them to tell their own stories, in their own words. I want your sympathy -- I want you to listen to these people and to believe them and to understand the value of their lives. That's why I rely so heavily on the first-person narrative. Even if hese characters don't have flashy vocabularies, they still have poetic thoughts. And there's no way you, the reader, will ever know that unless I let you inside their minds."

Discussion Guide

1. A number of these stories deal with mother-daugther relationships. What are some of the very different kind of mother-daughter bonds that occur in various stories (both positive and negative)? What different themes are explored in these relationships?

2. One theme of these tales is the deliberate destruction of the past, on a personal level and a cultural level. How does this annihilation of the past affect specific characters in the present? What do these stories suggest about what is happening in the world?

3. Why do you think the story "Homeland" might have been chosen to be the title story in this collection? Would you have chosen a different one, on the basis of its strength or theme that unifies the collection?

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

"There is a moral toughness in her characters -- a determination to find value and meaning in a world where value and meaning have all but disappeared -- that one sees in real people everywhere but rarely in recent American short stories. Like [Grace] Paley and Raymond Carver, Ms. Kingsolver mixes argot with aphorism, sexual frankness with delicate high-mindedness, the purely personal with class-consciousness. This is an interesting and ingratiating style, miles from the high cool of minimalism, but just as carefully wrought, and it seems especially suited to, and respectful of, the lives she wishes to dramatize, which are the lives of people unlikely to read the stories of Grace Paley or Raymond Carver or, for that matter, Barbara Kingsolver herself."

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