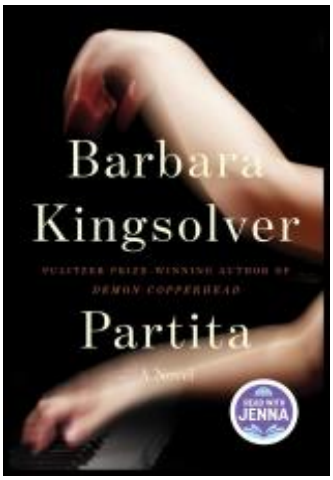
Partita

by Barbara Kingsolver



About the Book

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of DEMON COPPERHEAD, a story of a brief, passionate, life-changing love affair, wrapped up in what might be the greatest romance of all: our eternal human longing for art and beauty.

Livia Cable has made her peace with her marriage and modest livelihood in the farm country where she grew up, until a shocking phone call from an old lover shakes her to the core. Decades earlier, this man knew her as Livia Bohusz, a music conservatory student estranged from her home and family, uncertain of anything except her passion for music and promise as an extraordinary pianist. His request to see her again stirs up ghosts she?s kept at bay for a lifetime.

Shifting between past and present, Livia?s decision to meet or reject the reunion means confronting step by step, in memories framed as musical dances, the experiences of childhood loss, abandonment, self-immolating passion, and perilous attachment to a man who broke her belief in love and ruptured the course of her life.

With razor-sharp acuity and deep affection, Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Kingsolver?s unforgettable new novel reflects on class barriers, the risks of ambition, and the timeless, life-changing power of art.

Discussion Guide

1. Livia, the main character of Barbara Kingsolver?s PARTITA, describes a partita as ?a composition made of a lot of parts with different paces and moods? and says that ?the artist?s work is to make them all add up to something that feels whole? (p. 95). Were you already familiar with this term before reading the book? If so, how did it set your expectations for your reading experience? If not, how do you feel about the title now?

2. When we meet Livia, she has just heard from Sigurd, her former lover of nearly 30 years ago, who wants to meet with

her again while he is in the area dealing with a medical diagnosis. The contemporary plotline takes place over the seven days in which Livia is debating whether or not to meet with him. How does this short timeline and decision-making process allow you to understand Livia and the gravity of her potential reunion with Sigurd? Now that you know their history, would you have agreed to meet with him?

3. In Livia?s present-day chapters, we learn that her mother has died, leaving her not only with her grief but with a hoarder?s house to contend with, full of everything from random newspaper clippings and programs from Livia?s performances to duplicates of every gift her mother had ever bought for anyone. How does the overpacked house symbolize the more emotional inheritance that Livia?s mother has left behind? How do Livia?s discoveries in her mother?s house change and upend her opinion of her mother?

4. PARTITA is divided into two timelines: one set in 1989 as Livia attends the Indiana University School of Music and meets Sigurd, and the other nearly 30 years later when she hears from her former lover again. Compare the time periods in which Livia finds herself: the oil spills and Marxist revolutions of 1989 vs. the 2000s, when many of her students identify as queer and movements like Black Lives Matter are taking place. How do Livia?s settings affect her beliefs, interpretations and experiences?

5. In her older years, Livia has developed a close friendship with Mickie Barnes, her sister-in-law, a brilliant woman who also was one of the few people from their hometown to seek a higher education, especially one away from home. What does the women?s friendship provide to each of them in terms of intellectual stimulation and support? What do you make of their discussions of their students, many of whom come from dysfunctional, abusive homes or backgrounds of addiction?

6. Of Livia?s four great heartbreaks --- her mother?s abuse, her brother?s suicide, and Sigurd?s abandonment, which leads to her career-ending injury --- which do you think affects her the most? Which is responsible for her best or worst traits? Do you think that by the end of the book, she is able to reconcile these major tragedies with the woman she has become?

7. In trying to heal from her tragedies and protect her loved ones, adult Livia has become a woman with several secrets, some of which are not revealed until the end. Do you judge her for these omissions, or do you find them necessary to her survival? How do you think they weigh on her, and how does Sigurd?s return lighten or worsen that weight?

8. Livia offers readers something of a musical education, clarifying terms and recommending composers and songs through her internal monologue and her dialogue with others. Now that you have some familiarity with musical terms, discuss Kingsolver?s aim in dividing and titling chapters into terms like *prelud*e, *toccata, da capo* and *al fine*. How do the chapters themselves reflect Livia and her relationship with music?

9. Kingsolver indicates that a Listening List of musical compositions important to the novel appears in an afterword, with accompanying page numbers so that you can listen to each song while reading its relevant scene. Did you listen to the playlist? If so, how did it affect your reading experience? What does the playlist?s inclusion say about the intersection of literature and music, or of life and art?

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.

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