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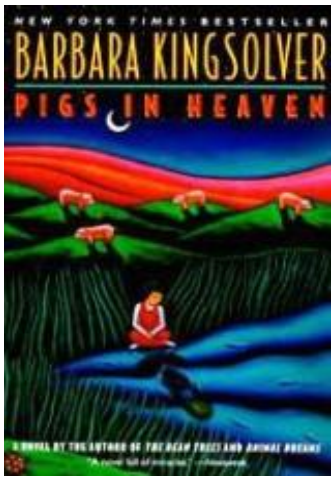
Pigs in Heaven

by Barbara Kingsolver



About the Book

> We don't think of ourselves as having extended families. We look at you guys and *think* you have contracted families.
>
> - Annawake Fourkiller in **Pigs in Heaven**

"Women on their own run in Alice's family." So thinks Alice Greer, sixty-one years old, as she is about to leave her second husband, Harland; and the novel appears to offer no argument against this. She, her daughter Taylor, and Taylor's informally adopted daughter, Turtle, all seem fated to lives uncomplicated by relationships with men. But simplicity is gone forever when Taylor and Turtle (who is Cherokee) appear on TV by a coincidence of fate, and come to the attention of Annawake Fourkiller, a lawyer for the Cherokee nation. Taylor finds herself in a conflict between her own and what she thinks of as Turtle's best interests, and those of the tribe. Citing the Indian Welfare Act, which states that all adoptions of Native American children must be authorized by their tribes, Annawake detrmines to try to invalidate Turtle's adoption. Meanwhile, fearing that she will lose her daughter, Taylor takes Turtle and flees Arizona, leaving behind her devoted boyfriend, Jax. Along the way to resolution of this seemingly irresolvable conflict, many lives are changed.

-1993 Los Angeles Book Award for Fiction
-1994 Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association Award

Kingsolver on Pigs in Heaven:

"Every book I write begins with a question. With Pigs in Heaven the question had to do with ideas of community and individualism, and how we can integrate those very different -- sometimes even antagonistic--senses of value. Living in the West, I've seen many real-life cases of Native American kids who've been taken outside their tribes to be raised by

non-native parents, and whose tribes later want them brought back. The way these cases are played out in the media is very telling. The mainstream media focus on the adoptive mother and child; that's a holy icon, literally, in our culture. The news stories ask, how can it be in the best interest of this child to lose its children? When you think about it, those questions are coming from very different assumptions about what is most important in this world. What's best for the individual? What's best for the group? Those questions seem to pass each other in the air. I began to wonder if there was any point of intersection in that dialogue. I decided to try to write a story that would compel you to think, and laugh, and really love both sides of that particular fight.

Discussion Guide

1. When Annawake first meets Taylor, she states the book's central problem this way: "There's the child's best interest and the tribe's best interest, and I'm trying to think of both things." What is Turtle's best interest -- in Taylor's view? in the tribe's view? in your view? Did the book change the way you might respond to such a case if you read about it in the newspaper? Do you think the events of the novel relate at all to the complexities of interethnic adoptions in general? Particularly in a racist society?

2. What motivates Taylor when she runs away? What motivates Annawake's pursuit of Taylor? How do you feel about these two women? In what ways are they similar? How do they change, and why?

3. Talking to Annawake, Jax poses the question: "How can you belong to a tribe, and be your own person, at the same time? You can't. If you're verifiably one, you're not the other." (chp. 15, "Communion"). Are there ways to reconcile the claims of individuality and those of the group? Does the novel suggest any of them? What does Alice discover, for instance, during the stomp dance (in Chp. 26, "Old Flame")? How do the values of the Cherokee community described here differ from those of dominant U.S. culture, particularly around this question of community vs. individualism?

4. The novel seems to suggest that cultural emphasis on independence, mobility, and self-reliance can lead to loneliness and alienation. How do individual characters -- Alice, Barbie, Rose, Cash, Taylor, Jax -- reflect this view of independence as isolation? Do you agree with the novel's judgement? How have you, or people you know about, been affected by the cultural celebration of "self-reliance?" Do you think men and women relate differently to this cultural value?

5. In explaining why it's important for the tribe to get Turtle back, Annawake tells Alice, "We've been through a holocaust as devastating as what happened to the Jews, and we need to keep what's left of our family together" (Chp. 27, "Family Stories"). How does the novel go about demonstrating the validity of this comparison? How do you feel about it? How should people living today deal with histories of oppression?

6. The title, Pigs in Heaven , refers to the Cherokee legend about the six bad boys that got turned into pigs before their mother's eyes. Annawake tells this story -- in two entirely different ways -- on page 87 and again on page 313. How does this story, in its two versions, demonstrate the book's theme, and Annawake's growth? In what other ways do pigs enter the story, as symbols of renegade individualism and community spirit?

7. How -- physically and spiritually -- does povery affect people's lives? How does poverty affect Taylor? Does this novel offer a judgement on poor people? On our society's attitudes towards poor people?

8. The novel is divided into three sections: Spring, Summer, and Fall, written in English and Cherokee. What significance for you is there in the fact that the novel is structured according to the cycles of nature, ending during harvest, just short of winter?

9. When Cash shoots his TV at the end, it's a rather complex image. If you think about the other scenes in which TVs and TV-watching figure, or how TV may be said to function in the U.S. culture at large, what possible meanings might his gesture have?

10. Occasionally, readers have felt that Kingsolver's heroines and endings are idealized -- that is, too good to be true. How do you feel about this criticism? First of all, would you agree that this is so in Pigs in Heaven ? Second, do you think that good fiction ought not to idealize its characters or situations?

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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