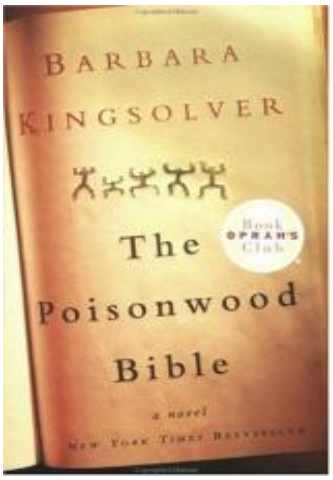
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The Poisonwood Bible

by Barbara Kingsolver



About the Book

God's Kingdom in its pure, unenlightened glory. So fourteen-year-old Leah Price expects when, in the summer of 1959, she arrives in the Congo with her family. Her Baptist-preacher father, Reverend Nathan Price, assigned to Kilanga mission, is determined to enlighten the savages and to rule his family with strict biblical sanction. Leah's twin, Adah, the victim of hemiplegia at birth, limps along and maintains silence. Fifteen-year-old Rachel resents being dropped on "this dread dark shore" far from America's fashions and comforts. Ruth May, five years old, faints. And their mother, Orleanna, readies herself to protect them all from whatever perils may come--from jungle, river, or father and his terrible God. From 1959 through 1998, the Price sisters tell their stories, in alternating narratives that reflect their ages as the years pass and the understandings that they achieve. Those stories--together with Orleanna's retrospective commentaries--reveal the amazing forty-year saga that the Prices and the Congo share. Cultural and spiritual conflicts, confusion and revelation, hunger and pleasure, cruelties and kindness, suffering and love, all combine with the day-to-day life in Africa's villages to enrich this wondrous tale. This is Barbara Kingsolver's most daring, complex, and rewarding novel--a whopping good story told with tender majesty. The wisdom that Rachel, Adah, Leah, Ruth May, and Orleanna wrest from their lives is also ours.

Discussion Guide

1. What are the implications of the novel's title phrase, the poisonwood bible, particularly in connection with the main characters' lives and the novel's main themes? How important are the circumstances in which the phrase comes into being?

2. How does Kingsolver differentiate among the Price sisters, particularly in terms of their voices? What does each sister reveal about herself and the other three, their relationships, their mother and father, and their lives in Africa? What is the effect of our learning about events and people through the sisters' eyes?

3. What is the significance of the Kikongo word nommo and its attendant concepts of being and naming? Are there Christian parallels to the constellation of meanings and beliefs attached to nommo? How do the Price daughters' Christian names and their acquired Kikongo names reflect their personalities and behavior?

4. The sisters refer repeatedly to balance (and, by implication, imbalance). What kinds of balance--including historical, political, and social--emerge as important? Are individual characters associated with specific kinds of balance or imbalance? Do any of the sisters have a final say on the importance of balance?

5. What do we learn about cultural, social, religious, and other differences between Africa and America? To what degree do Orleanna and her daughters come to an understanding of those differences? Do you agree with what you take to be Kingsolver's message concerning such differences?

6. Why do you suppose that Reverend Nathan Price is not given a voice of his own? Do we learn from his wife and daughters enough information to formulate an adequate explanation for his beliefs and behavior? Does such an explanation matter?

7. What differences and similarities are there among Nathan Price's relationship with his family, Tata Ndu's relationship with his people, and the relationship of the Belgian and American authorities with the Congo? Are the novel's political details--both imagined and historical--appropriate?

8. How does Kingsolver present the double themes of captivity and freedom and of love and betrayal? What kinds of captivity and freedom does she explore? What kinds of love and betrayal? What are the causes and consequences of each kind of captivity, freedom, love, and betrayal?

9. At Bikoki Station, in 1965, Leah reflects, "I still know what justice is." Does she? What concept of justice does each member of the Price family and other characters (Anatole, for example) hold? Do you have a sense, by the novel's end, that any true justice has occurred?

10. In Book Six, Adah proclaims, "This is the story I believe in . . ." What is that story? Do Rachel and Leah also have stories in which they believe? How would you characterize the philosophies of life at which Adah, Leah, and Rachel arrive? What story do you believe in?

11. At the novel's end, the carved-animal woman in the African market is sure that "There has never been any village on the road past Bulungu," that "There is no such village" as Kilanga. What do you make of this?

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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