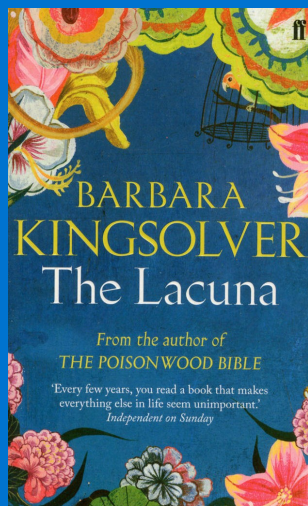


The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver



Author Background

- Birth—April 8, 1955
- Where—Annapolis, Maryland, USA
- Education—B.A., DePauw University; M.S., University of Arizona
- Awards—Orange Prize
- Currently—lives on a farm in Virginia

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955. She grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field," in the part of eastern Kentucky that lies between the opulent horse farms and the impoverished coal fields. While her family has deep roots in the region, she never imagined staying there herself. "The options were limited—grow up to be a farmer or a farmer's wife."

Kingsolver has always been a storyteller: "I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story." As a child, she wrote stories and essays and, beginning at the age of eight, kept a journal religiously. Still, it never occurred to Kingsolver that she could become a professional writer. Growing up in a rural place, where work centered mainly on survival, writing didn't seem to be a practical career choice. Besides, the writers she read, she once explained, "were mostly old, dead men. It was inconceivable that I might grow up to be one of those myself..."

Kingsolver left Kentucky to attend DePauw University in Indiana, where she majored in biology. She also took one creative writing course, and became active in the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in widely scattered places. In the early eighties, she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she received a Masters of Science degree. She also enrolled in a writing class taught by author Francine Prose, whose work Kingsolver admires.

Kingsolver's fiction is rich with the language and imagery of her native Kentucky. But when she first left home, she says, "I lost my accent.... [P]eople made terrible fun of me for the way I used to talk, so I gave it up slowly and became something else." During her years in school and two years spent living in Greece and France she supported herself in a variety of jobs: as an archaeologist, copy editor, X-ray technician, housecleaner, biological researcher and translator of medical documents.

After graduate school, a position as a science writer for the University of Arizona soon led her into feature writing for journals and newspapers. Her numerous articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Nation*, the *New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*, and many of them are included in the collection, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never*. In 1986 she won an Arizona Press Club award for outstanding feature writing, and in 1995, after the publication of *High Tide in Tucson*, Kingsolver was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from her alma mater, DePauw University.

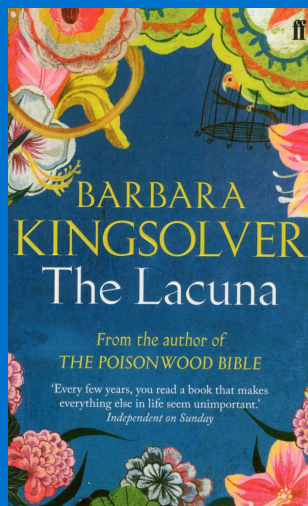
Writing

Kingsolver credits her careers in scientific writing and journalism with instilling in her a writer's discipline and broadening her "fictional possibilities." Describing herself as a shy person who would generally prefer to stay at home with her computer, she explains that "journalism forces me to meet and talk with people I would never run across otherwise."

From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.

The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver



Author Background (continued)

The Bean Trees, originally published in 1988 and reissued in a special ten-year anniversary edition in 1998, was enthusiastically received by critics. But, perhaps more important to Kingsolver, the novel was read with delight and, even, passion by ordinary readers. "A novel can educate to some extent," she told *Publishers Weekly*. "But first, a novel has to entertain—that's the contract with the reader: you give me ten hours and I'll give you a reason to turn every page. I have a commitment to accessibility. I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want the people I grew up with—who may not often read anything but the Sears catalogue—to read my books."

For Kingsolver, writing is a form of political activism. When she was in her twenties she discovered Doris Lessing. "I read the *Children of Violence* novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that."

The Bean Trees was followed by the collection, *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), the novels *Animal Dreams* (1990), and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and the bestselling *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never* (1995). Kingsolver has also published a collection of poetry, *Another America: Otra America* (Seal Press, 1992, 1998), and a nonfiction book, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 1989, 1996). *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) earned accolades at home and abroad, and was an Oprah's Book Club selection.

Barbara's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), is a novel set in a rural farming community in southern Appalachia. Small Wonder, April 2002, presents 23 wonderfully articulate essays. Here Barbara raises her voice in praise of nature, family, literature, and the joys of everyday life while examining the genesis of war, violence, and poverty in our world.

Two additional books became best sellers. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* came in 2007, again to great acclaim. Non-fiction, the book recounts a year in the life of Kingsolver's family as they grew all their own food. *The Lacuna*, published two years later, is a fictional account of historical events in Mexico during the 1930s, and moving into the U.S. during the McCarthy era of the 1950's.

Extras

- Barbara Kingsolver lives in Southern Appalachia with her husband Steven Hopp, and her two daughters, Camille from a previous marriage, and Lily, who was born in 1996. When not writing or spending time with her family, Barbara gardens, cooks, hikes, and works as an environmental activist and human-rights advocate.
- Given that Barbara Kingsolver's work covers the psychic and geographical territories that she knows firsthand, readers often assume that her work is autobiographical. "There are little things that people who know me might recognize in my novels," she acknowledges. "But my work is not about me...."
- "If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with poetry and fabrication, to create a revelation. If we can't, as artists, improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread."

(Adapted from Barnes & Noble.)

The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver

Book Summary

The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver, 2009

HarperCollins

622 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780060852580

Winner, 2010 Orange Prize

In *The Lacuna*, her first novel in nine years, Barbara Kingsolver, tells the story of Harrison William Shepherd, a man caught between two worlds—an unforgettable protagonist whose search for identity will take readers to the heart of the twentieth century's most tumultuous events.

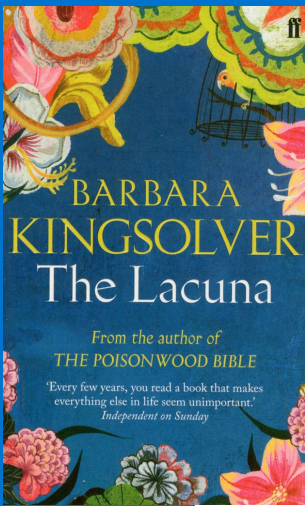
In her most accomplished novel, Barbara Kingsolver takes us on an epic journey from the Mexico City of artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo to the America of Pearl Harbor, FDR, and J. Edgar Hoover. *The Lacuna* is a poignant story of a man pulled between two nations as they invent their modern identities.

Born in the United States, reared in a series of provisional households in Mexico—from a coastal island jungle to 1930s Mexico City—Harrison Shepherd finds precarious shelter but no sense of home on his thrilling odyssey. Life is whatever he learns from housekeepers who put him to work in the kitchen, errands he runs in the streets, and one fateful day, by mixing plaster for famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. He discovers a passion for Aztec history and meets the exotic, imperious artist Frida Kahlo, who will become his lifelong friend. When he goes to work for Lev Trotsky, an exiled political leader fighting for his life, Shepherd inadvertently casts his lot with art and revolution, newspaper headlines and howling gossip, and a risk of terrible violence.

Meanwhile, to the north, the United States will soon be caught up in the internationalist goodwill of World War II. There in the land of his birth, Shepherd believes he might remake himself in America's hopeful image and claim a voice of his own. He finds support from an unlikely kindred soul, his stenographer, Mrs. Brown, who will be far more valuable to her employer than he could ever know. Through darkening years, political winds continue to toss him between north and south in a plot that turns many times on the unspeakable breach—the lacuna—between truth and public presumption.

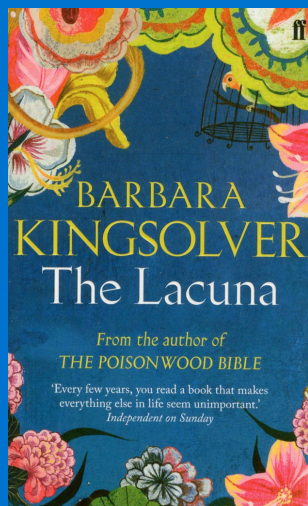
With deeply compelling characters, a vivid sense of place, and a clear grasp of how history and public opinion can shape a life, Barbara Kingsolver has created an unforgettable portrait of the artist—and of art itself. *The Lacuna* is a rich and daring work of literature, establishing its author as one of one most provocative and important of her time.

(From the publisher.)



The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver



Reviews

How can the experiences of a fictional loner merge with those of larger-than-life figures who played a pivotal role in world politics? And what can readers learn from their intersection? Those are the questions answered by this dazzling novel, which plunges into Shepherd's notebooks to dredge up not only the perceptions they conceal but also a history larger than his own, touching on everything from Trotskyism, Stalinism and the Red scare to racism, mass hysteria and the media's intrusion into personal and national affairs.... *The Lacuna* can be enjoyed sheerly for the music of its passages on nature, archaeology, food and friendship; or for its portraits of real and invented people; or for its harmonious choir of voices. But the fuller value of Kingsolver's novel lies in its call to conscience and connection. She has mined Shepherd's richly imagined history to create a tableau vivant of epochs and people that time has transformed almost past recognition. Yet it's a tableau vivant whose story line resonates in the present day, albeit with different players. Through Shepherd's resurrected notebooks, Kingsolver gives voice to truths whose teller could express them only in silence.

Liesl Schillinger - New York Times

The most mature and ambitious [novel] she's written during her celebrated 20-year career, but it's also [Kingsolver's] most demanding...a novel of capital-L Liberal ideas—workers' rights, sexual equality, artistic freedom.... Nevertheless, this rich novel is certainly bigger than its politics. It resurrects several dramatic events of the early 20th century that have fallen out of public consciousness, brings alive the forgotten details of everyday life in the 1940s, and illustrates how attitudes and prejudices are shaped by political opportunism and the rapacious media. But despite this large, colorful canvas, ultimately *The Lacuna* is a tender story about a thoughtful man who just wanted to enjoy that basic American right: the right to be left alone.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

Kingsolver's ambitious new novel, her first in nine years (after the *The Poisonwood Bible*), focuses on Harrison William Shepherd, the product of a divorced American father and a Mexican mother. After getting kicked out of his American military academy, Harrison spends his formative years in Mexico in the 1930s in the household of Diego Rivera; his wife, Frida Kahlo; and their houseguest, Leon Trotsky, who is hiding from Soviet assassins. After Trotsky is assassinated, Harrison returns to the U.S., settling down in Asheville, N.C., where he becomes an author of historical potboilers (e.g., *Vassals of Majesty*) and is later investigated as a possible subversive. Narrated in the form of letters, diary entries and newspaper clippings, the novel takes a while to get going, but once it does, it achieves a rare dramatic power that reaches its emotional peak when Harrison wittily and eloquently defends himself before the House Un-American Activities Committee (on the panel is a young Dick Nixon). "Employed by the American imagination," is how one character describes Harrison, a term that could apply equally to Kingsolver as she masterfully resurrects a dark period in American history with the assured hand of a true literary artist.

Publishers Weekly

Diego Rivera's mural in Mexico's Palacio Nacional was only half complete the day young Harrison Shepherd stood transfixed before it, but he would be forever captive to the extraordinary power of the imagination. A solitary child, a devourer of books, left to his own devices by a mother chasing unattainable men and a father pencil pushing for the government back in the States, Harrison observes and he writes. When a quirk of fate lands him in the home of Communist sympathizers Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Rivera's wife, Harrison becomes enmeshed in the turbulent history that will inform his life and work. Through the distinctive voices of Harrison and his insightful amanuensis, Violet Brown, Kingsolver paints a verbal panorama spanning three decades and two countries. World War I veterans protesting for benefits denied, the unleashing of the atomic bomb, the McCarthy hearings, censorship of the arts, and abuse by the press corps lend credence to the sentiment that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Verdict: As in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver perfects the use of multiple points of view, even reprinting actual newspaper articles to blur the line between fact and fiction. This is her most ambitious, timely, and powerful novel yet. Well worth the wait. —Sally Bissell, *Lee Cty. Lib. Syst., Ft. Myers, FL*

Library Journal

The Lacuna

Barbara Kingsolver

Discussion Questions

1. What does Shepherd mean when he says, "The most important part of the story is the piece of it you don't know." And how does this oft stated remark relate to the book's title?
2. What is the significance of the book's title? What does it mean within the context of the novel?
3. Do Shepherd's diaries feel realistic to you? Does he sound like a 12-year old at the beginning...and later a mature man?
4. What prompts Harrison to begin his journals? Why does he write? What does he mean by referring to his notebook as "prisoner's plan for escape"?
5. Describe Shepherd, first as a 12-year-old and, later, as a mature adult. What kind of character is he? How does he change over the course of the novel?
6. How about Shepherd's mother? In what way does her profligate life affect how Shepherd decides to lead his own life?
7. Describe the Riviera/Kahlo household. How does Shepherd see Riviera's influence over Kahlo? Have you seen the movie *Frieda*? If so, does that film influence your reading of *The Lacuna*?
8. How does Kingsolver portray Leon Trotsky in this work? Were you aware of his background and the history of the Russian Revolution before you read the novel? If so, did your prior knowledge color your reading—or did your reading affect your knowledge?
9. Do you find the second-half of the novel, in the US, evocative of a time and place that no longer exists? If so, is that a good or bad thing? If not, what has remained the same? How does Kingsolver present those years?
10. What is Shepherd's relationship with his secretary, Violet Brown? What kind of character is she? Why does she want to preserve Shepherd's memory?
11. What role do the media play in this novel? Is it a fair or realistic portrait? What are the benefits of fame...and what are its costs?
12. Does this book enlighten you about the era of the Red Scare and the McCarthy hearings? Or do you feel this ground has been well tread by many others?

(Questions by LitLovers)

