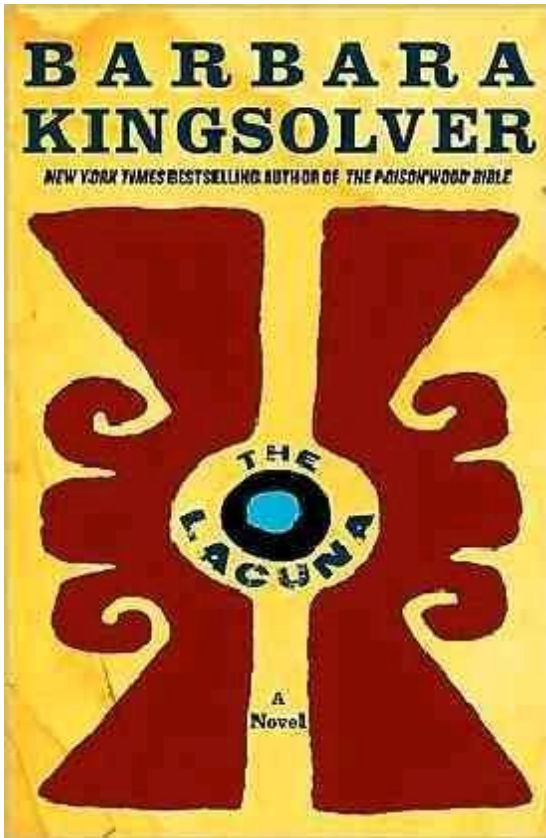


About the book...



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.

About the author...



- 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 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.*)

Award

2010 Orange Prize for Fiction

Reviews

Booklist

In her first novel in nine years, Kingsolver displays the same ambition she exhibited in her best-selling [The Poisonwood Bible](#) (1998). Moving her story between Mexico and the U.S. and covering some 20 years in the life of Harrison William Shepherd, born to a social-climbing Mexican mother and an emotionally distant American father, who eventually divorce, Kingsolver weaves in pointed social commentary on dark moments in the history of both countries. Zelig-like, Shepherd is present at disturbing yet key historical events, including the violent 1933 Bonus March in Washington, D.C. Kicked out of a military academy for a homosexual liaison, Shepherd returns to Mexico; is taken into the household of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and the exiled Leon Trotsky; and witnesses Trotsky's assassination. He eventually settles in Asheville, North Carolina, becoming well known as an author of historical fiction and coming to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee for his leftist leanings. Kingsolver packs her novel with rich detail on everything from underwater caves to the proper way to mix the plaster Rivera uses in his murals, relaying information through a pastiche of letters, newspaper excerpts, and diary entries. As a result, the novel can be slow going, but the final section, devoted to the loving if platonic relationship between Shepherd and his dedicated stenographer, builds to a stunningly

moving coda, conveying the tender emotions between two outsiders who have created their own sanctuary in the face of a hostile mainstream culture.

Library Journal

Diego Rivera's mural in Mexico's Palacio Nazionale 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.

Kirkus Reviews

Unapologetically political metafiction from Kingsolver ([*Prodigal Summer*](#), 2000, etc.) about the small mistakes or gaps (lacunas) that change history. Set in leftist Mexico in the 1930s and the United States in the '40s and '50s, the novel is a compilation of diary entries, newspaper clippings (real and fictional), snippets of memoirs, letters and archivist's commentary, all concerning Harrison Shepherd. In 1929, Harrison's Mexican-born mother deserts his American father, a government bureaucrat, and drags 11-year-old Harrison back to Mexico to live with her rich lover on a remote island. There Harrison discovers his first lacuna, an underwater cave that leads to a secret pool. As his mother moves from man to man, Harrison learns to fend for himself. His disastrous two-year stint at boarding school back in America is marked by his awakening homosexuality (left vague thanks to the lacuna of a missing diary) and his witnessing of the Hoover administration's violent reaction to a riot of World War I homeless vets. In 1935, Harrison returns to Mexico, where he becomes first a lowly but beloved member of the Diego

Rivera/Frida Kahlo household, then secretary to Leon Trotsky until Trotsky's assassination. Kingsolver is at her best in the pages brimming with the seductive energy of '30s Mexico: its colors, tastes, smells, the high drama of Trotsky and Kahlo, but also the ordinary lives of peasants and the working poor. When Harrison returns to the States, however, the novel wilts. His character never evolves, and the dialogue grows increasingly polemic as his story becomes a case study of the postwar anticommunist witch-hunt. Harrison moves to Asheville, N.C., writes fabulously popular novels about ancient Mexico, hires as his secretary a widow whom the reader knows already as his archivist, and is then hounded out of the country by the House Un-American Activities Committee, with fateful results. A richly satisfying portrait of Mexico gives way to a preachy, padded and predictable chronicle of Red Scare America.

Publishers Weekly

Kingsolver's ambitious new novel, her first in nine years (after [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.

Discussion questions (<http://www.litlovers.com/>)

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?

Readalikes (*Books & Authors*)

[*All the Pretty Horses*](#) by Cormac McCarthy

When his beloved grandfather dies, young Texan John Grady Cole feels himself to be an orphan. His parents, though still alive, are divorced from each other and estranged from him. With friend Lacey Rawlings, Cole pulls up his shallow roots and heads for Mexico. He and Rawlings are joined along the way by Jimmy Blevins. Blevins is the youngest of the three, barely into his teens, but he has a good eye with a gun and a 19th century reluctance to talk about his past.

Together, the three find hardship, danger, adventure, cruelty, and even love in a Mexico that challenges them to find their own paths to survival with honor.

[Bel Canto](#) by Ann Patchett

Officials in an unnamed South American nation want Japanese businessman Mr. Hosokawa to build a factory in their country. He loves music, so they throw a birthday concert for him at the vice president's residence and invite his favorite opera singer, American Roxanne Coss, to perform. As the concert ends, terrorists burst into the mansion and remain there for more than four months. Coss is the only female hostage they hold; the rest are mostly French, Russian, and Italian diplomats. Though based on fact (a 1996 incident in Lima, Peru), the book contains many elements of magical realism. Captives and captors, soothed by the soprano's beautiful voice, adapt to their situation. They are kind to one another, they manage to communicate despite language problems, they form friendships, they fall in love. But a tragic hostage rescue attempt becomes more likely with each passing day.

[The Hummingbird's Daughter](#) by Luis Alberto Urrea

This novel explores the impact when 16-year-old Teresita, the illegitimate daughter of the wealthy and powerful rancher Don Tomas Urrea, wakes from a dream and discovers she has risen from the dead with a power to heal. The Catholic Church denounces her as a heretic, and the Mexican ruling class, fearful of her populist message and ability to assemble the masses,

sentences her to death. Set against a period background of the guerrilla violence of post-Civil War southwestern border disputes and the civil war brewing in Mexico, this is an intriguing mix of Western fairy story, magic realism, hagiography, and Indian legend. The author is Teresita's great-nephew.

[The Master Butchers Singing Club](#) by Louise Erdrich
Shortly after returning from his duties as a sniper for the Germans during World War I, Fidelis Waldvogel marries Eva, the pregnant widow of his best friend, who was killed in the war. Haunted by memories of the war, Fidelis decides to immigrate with Eva to America, where they settle in the small town of Argus, North Dakota and open a butcher shop. Fidelis satisfies his love of music with a singing club that meets in the butcher shop, and brings together various eccentrics from the town whose differences disappear as they harmonize together. Then traveling vaudeville performers Delphine Watzka and her partner, Cyprian Lazarre, enter town and decide to stay so that Delphine can care for her alcoholic father, Roy, who is also a suspect in the deaths of a family. Delphine befriends the Waldvogels, but her friendship with the family is complicated by the growing attraction that she and Fidelis feel for each other. Covering a span of over 30 years, the novel examines small town life and the repercussions of both World Wars through the lives

of Fidelis and Eva, their four sons, and the inhabitants of Argus.

[Nightwoods](#) by Charles Frazier

In this suspense novel, author Charles Frazier tells the story of a reclusive woman living in the North Carolina backwoods who is assigned custody of her recently deceased sister's twin children. Luce has long isolated herself in the Appalachian Mountains, eschewing the nearby towns in favor of a life of subsistence and solitude at a deserted lake lodge. Then her sister passes away, leaving her to raise the sister's orphaned children, Dolores and Frank. The twins haven't talked since watching their mother being slain before them at the hands of their stepfather, yet they act out their anguish by destroying things and setting fires. Luce is unsure if she can ever get through to the children until a man named Stubblefield arrives, there to claim his inheritance as the rightful heir to the lodge. As a relationship blooms between Luce and Stubblefield, Dolores and Frank's stepfather is set free from prison and comes looking for the twins. Can Luce and Stubblefield keep these children safe from a merciless man who has already killed once?

[On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon](#) by Kaye Gibbons

Victim of a tyrannical father who abuses his wife, his children, and his slaves, Emma Tate finds a measure of

protection in Clarice, the slave matriarch of the household. Clarice is the only one who can face down the elder Tate, and all six children depend on her to salvage the fragments of their lives. While Emma is still in her teens, she marries a doctor to escape her home. The Civil War finds her helping him care for the wounded in a Raleigh hospital. Her life seems at last to be her own, but there is still a secret hanging over her, a secret that only her father and Clarice know.

[Portrait in Sepia](#) by Isabel Allende

Eliza Sommers, the protagonist of Allende's *Daughter of Fortune*, is one of the grandmothers of the heroine, Aurora del Valle, in this novel. The novel begins when Aurora is 30, as she reviews her past to determine where the nightmares that have haunted her for years originated. Aurora's mother, Lynn, dies during childbirth while in Chinatown, San Francisco in 1880. Aurora doesn't know the identity of her father and her memory of the next five years of her life has been blurred by traumatic childhood events. She is raised in Chile by her grandmother, formidable businesswoman Paulina del Valle, and enjoys a certain amount of freedom uncommon for women at the turn of the century. Yet after entering a marriage that is not what she expected, her search for the truth of her parentage and the events of her early life give her purpose. She follows a circuitous path that leads from Chile to California and to her other grandmother, Eliza, and her

grandfather, the Chinese doctor Tao Chi'en. Characters from Allende's 1987 novel, *House of the Spirits*, also appear.

Further Reading

[*Trotsky: A Biography*](#) by Robert Service

Acclaimed author and Oxford University professor Robert Service provides an intimate look at the life and work of Soviet revolutionary Leon Trotsky. *Trotsky: A Biography* offers a meticulous exploration of the leader's life, from his childhood and adolescence to his initial forays into the political arena, from his first trailblazing successes to his bitter feud with Stalin--a feud that would ultimately lead to Trotsky's death. Drawn from previously unutilized information and detailed research, *Trotsky* paints a picture of an unforgettable figure in Russian history and politics. This volume contains black and white photos, bibliographical references, and a full index.

[*In the Casa Azul*](#) by Meaghan Delahunt

Delahunt's debut treats the little known affair between Russian Revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky and painter Frida Kahlo during his exile in Mexico City. Expelled from the Soviet Union in a power conflict with Joseph Stalin, Trotsky comes to live for a time at the home of muralist Diego Rivera and his wife, Kahlo. The novel's

strategy is to examine these figures from the perspective of their all-too-human frailties, providing glimpses of Trotsky's life, Mexico in the 1930s, and an obsessive Stalin consumed by jealousy.

The Years with Laura Diaz by Carlos Fuentes

A young man recognizes a portrait of his great-grandmother Laura Diaz in a famous mural painted by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, which is housed in the Detroit Institute of Arts. At that point, he reflects back on her life. Laura's life mirrors 20th century Mexican history; and, despite her humble beginnings, her story places her in the midst of important events with many prominent people. Along the way she marries, has children, takes several lovers, and gets involved with the political issues of her time. Ultimately she becomes a bit of a heroine to both her family and her people.



Ann Arbor District Library