In the culture in which I was raised, it was considered charming to tell long, entertaining stories about peculiar relatives or a runaway hog or anything under the sun—except yourself. Prolonged self-revelation seems discourteous to me, and self-aggrandizing is vulgar. Among the worst things I commonly heard people say about a woman, in my childhood, was that she was “parading herself around.” This may explain why I’m happy to put a three-pound novel into the hands of anyone inclined to heft it, but squeamish about autobiography. I’ve never written anything in that line. I offer the world my books, which stand on their own without explanation, and never imagine the details of my personal life should interest anyone but friends and family. I do not believe this information improves the understanding of my books, in any way.

Yet I understand that for many people, art inspires curiosity about the artist. I’ve also learned, the hard way, that Wikipedia abhors a vacuum: others gladly fill in the biographical details I decline to offer myself. For that reason, as a supplement to the other versions that are now in the world, I provide here my own version of the Barbara Kingsolver story. It’s less entertaining than some of the others, but has the distinction of being true.
I was born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, Maryland, but barely remember it because my family moved to rural east-central Kentucky when I was two. I’m lucky to have grown up in the midst of pastures and woodlands, with parents who favored virtually any form of reading as educational. This meant anything from classic comic books to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and whatever we could pull down from bookshelves at home or at the library or, scariest of all, my Dad’s old medical textbooks in the basement. Any wild creature we could catch and contain, except mice or snakes, could be brought in the house. We kept a snapping turtle for months in a large pickle jar, though it made him livid, and in retrospect I am sorry about that. My best childhood memories involve some combination of books or plots inspired by books; my siblings; hiding places under trees; games of stealth; living creatures; and no adult supervision.
At age eight I began keeping a journal, inspired by the gift of a small red diary with a tiny lock. The lock was gratuitous, given the diary’s soporific content, but the ruled lines encouraged a habit of daily writing. When my schoolteachers assigned a two-page theme, they would get ten pages from me, a surfeit of juvenile prose I am sure they came to dread. I could hardly contain my adjectives. I entered every school essay contest that presented itself, and my first published work, entitled “Why We Need a New Elementary School,” gave an exciting account of how our grade school’s ceiling plaster fell and injured my teacher. My essay was printed in the local newspaper prior to a school-bond election, and the school bond passed. I had no notion of ever becoming a writer then (evidence suggested that writers were old, from England, and uniformly dead), but I credit that school-bond incident for teaching me that the pencil is a mighty tool.

On several occasions during my childhood, my parents took my brother, sister and me to live in other countries where my father donated his services as a physician to people in
The most memorably exotic of these was the Republic of Congo, in 1963, in a remote village of thatched-roof houses with no electricity, plumbing, or automobiles. (Or school.) This required enormous courage from my parents who were dealing with problems on the order of smallpox and leprosy, and procuring our daily food from heaven knows where, in support of a newly independent African democracy.
For me it was just a fantastic adventure involving more exotic creatures to stalk, and a village of kids who surely found us oddly pigmented and inarticulate (they spoke Kituba), but played with us anyway. I was ignorant of politics but initiated to cultural difference.

Our family always returned afterward to Kentucky and electricity, but these jarring stints away were double-edged, giving me both a sense of the world beyond my small hometown, and an uneasy status as an outsider in a peer-group that valued conformity. I survived the standard miseries of introverted adolescence by means of high school marching band, piano practice and competitions, good novels, and copious journal entries.
In 1973 I entered DePauw University, in Indiana, on a piano scholarship. I soon changed my major to biology, in the practical hope of someday earning a living. Beyond the expected math and science classes, my liberal-arts education included a manic cross-section of electives: anthropology, history, French, music theory, a semester in Greece, a winter internship at the Eli Lilly Pharmaceutical Company, and one creative writing class, which I loved. I supported myself as an art-class model, typist, housecleaner, and typesetter in the town’s print shop. I nurtured a private passion for writing, but to claim “author” as a professional ambition would have seemed starry-eyed to me, in the same category with “concert pianist,” “movie star,” and “people who can fly.”

After graduation I bought a cheap one-way ticket to Europe to seek my fortune. I continued to support myself by any means available, working mostly on archaeological digs in France and England. By the time my work visa expired, I had accumulated notebooks full of poems and stories but no noticeable fortune.
I returned to the U.S. in ’78 and moved to Tucson, Arizona, out of a curiosity to see the West. I worked two years as a lab technician at the University of Arizona Medical School before entering the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology as a graduate student. While studying theoretical population genetics and teaching undergraduate biology, I continued to write poetry and fiction but never disclosed this to my colleagues, as I felt it would mark me as unserious.

After receiving a Master’s degree but before finishing my dissertation, I took a job as a scientific writer for the University of Arizona. My duties ranged from grant-writing to reporting on research news. I was not always thrilled by the material, but arrived at a new understanding about writing: if I worked at it full time, it paid the rent. After-hours, I took assignments for newspapers and magazines, branching out beyond the science beat into arts coverage and investigative journalism. By 1985, my freelance assignments were steady enough to lure me toward the most difficult professional decision of my life: to walk away from a salaried job and benefits, in order to pursue my passions. My first year as a full-time freelancer, I earned about $6,000 and learned to live on it. I never looked back.
That same year I married Joe Hoffmann, a chemist who had recently earned his PhD from the U. of A. We lived in a fix-up-special bungalow in downtown Tucson, honed our carpentry skills, and grew a garden in our miniscule backyard. A few years later we moved from there to a small cabin in the desert outside the city. We were both active in organizations that worked to investigate human-rights violations on the border and support Latin American refugees seeking asylum. I would later write about this time: “I had come to the Southwest expecting cactus, wide open spaces, and adventure. I found, instead, another whole America . . . This desert that burned with raw beauty had a great fence built across it, attempting to divide north from south. I’d stumbled upon a borderland where people perished of heat by day and cold hostility by night.”
In the mid-80’s I began publishing poems and short fiction, in addition to journalism. I spent so many months covering a dramatic mine strike, the strikers referred to me as “the gal that’s writing the book about us.” Not wanting to disappoint, I assembled my hundreds of hours of interviews into *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike*, a history of some heroic, principled people fighting a losing battle against big money. In the library I looked up “how to find an agent” and found Frances Goldin, a wonderfully encouraging literary agent who tried for a year to find a publisher for my mine-strike book, without success.

I was embarrassed to tell her I was also working on a novel, *The Bean Trees*, equally unmarketable I felt certain. I wrote it during the insomniac nights of my first pregnancy, working at a desk inside a closet so the light wouldn’t disturb my sleeping husband in our one-room house. Just before the pregnancy concluded in the birth of a daughter, Camille, in March ’87, I had a fit of extreme housecleaning and needed to evict the piles of pages one way or the other: the trash can, or New York. I decided on the latter, and mailed off the manuscript with a note saying, “I’m sorry, you probably don’t want this. I think it’s a novel.” Ms. Goldin responded that
it was indeed a novel, and immediately found a publisher. It was released the next year with a modest first printing and an abundance of kind reviews. Independent booksellers pushed it into readers’ hands, and now it has been in print for over twenty years, becoming a standard in literature classes and translated into several dozen languages. It gives me pause, still, to think of the day I cleared the decks and mopped the floor before heading to the delivery room: how near I came to throwing The Bean Trees in the trash.

Instead, I found myself living a wholly unexpected life as a full-time author, and hoped to make it stick. I learned to type one-handed while nursing a baby, and followed publication of the first novel with a collection of short stories called Homeland the following year, and a second novel, Animal Dreams, in 1990 (both from HarperCollins). My earlier non-fiction book about the mine strike finally found a home at Cornell Press and also came out in 1989.
In 1991 we moved to the Canary Islands for personal and professional reasons including Joe’s research, our wish for Camille (now age four) to absorb another language, and my long-term plan to write a novel set in Africa. As a mother with a young child and limited funds, it hadn’t been feasible for me to take research jaunts from Tucson to the other side of the world. But the Canaries, just off the African coast, offered that possibility. In our apartment in Santa Cruz de Tenerife I pondered how my closet-writing fortunes had reversed: now we made a large closet into our makeshift bedroom so I could use the front room for writing, under a window with a view of the sea. While living in Tenerife I was able to begin researching my embryonic African project, and I also completed the novel I’d begun back home, set largely in Tucson and Oklahoma. I recall the odd feeling of struggling to
remember the flavor and context of American dialogue while living a Spanish-speaking life.

I also proofed the galleys of my first (and thus far, only) poetry collection, *Another America*, which was released after our family returned to the U.S. in ’92. The following year my life took a turn for dramatic excess as the three of us coped with grave illness and divorce, and my sixth book, *Pigs in Heaven*, became my first to hit *The New York Times* bestseller list. It was one of those years in which “best” and “worst” do not combine to equal “average.”
Over the next decade I learned to roll with the hard knocks and also take the pleasures of a writing life I’d never planned. I wrote five more books: the essay collection *High Tide in Tucson* (’95), novels *The Poisonwood Bible* (’98) and *Prodigal Summer* (2000), and *Small Wonder* (essays, 2001), all from HarperCollins. I served as editor for *Best American Short Stories 2001*, contributed work to many literary anthologies, and wrote for newspapers and magazines. I got to meet a lot of the writers and artists I admired, and some of them became friends. In collaboration with photographer Annie Griffiths, I wrote prose to accompany her remarkable photographs in the book *Last Stand: America’s Virgin Lands*, published by *National Geographic* in 2002.

A few other highlights of the decade were: occasionally playing with the Rock Bottom Remainders, an all-author rock and roll band; getting the call from Oprah, when she chose *The Poisonwood Bible* for her book club; having the National Humanities Medal hung around my neck on a red ribbon by President Clinton; and being invited
to join the usage review panel for the American Heritage Dictionary, a responsibility I enjoy to this day. One of my kids learned early that any playground shouting match over “my-parent-is-tougher-than-yours” could be ground to a halt with: “My Mom *writes the dictionary!*”

All public exposure is hard work for introverts like me, especially in a culture that treats celebrities (even lower-order, literary ones) as objects rather than humans with feelings and families. A significant task of my life has been learning how to accept the “fame” package with a smile and then scribble a forwarding address on it as quickly as possible. In the late 1990’s I was able to put good fortune to use by establishing the Bellwether Prize, awarded biennially to a manuscript by a previously unpublished novelist of exceptional skill and courage. The award, now in its 20th year, is administered by the PEN American Center (PEN/Bellwether Prize).
The most important event of the ‘90’s, for me, turned out to be a Lila Wallace fellowship. I nearly declined the invitation; as a single mother I could hardly take a night off to see a movie, let alone accept a visiting-writer residency in another state. After some indecision I negotiated a brief residency near Kentucky so my family there could help with babysitting. At Emory & Henry College in southwestern Virginia, I gave lectures in countless classrooms including that of biology professor Steven Hopp. It was a good choice. We married at the end of 1994, and our daughter Lily was born in ‘96.

For the next seven years our family spent summers living in a log cabin on Steven’s farm in the mountains of Virginia, and the remainder of the year in Tucson where the girls attended school.
In June 2004 Camille finished high school, Lily completed grade two, and our family made our move to Virginia permanent. Arizona wasn’t easy to leave behind. I’m grateful for my 25 years in the southwestern borderlands, where I’d planned to spend a few months, and instead stuck around long enough to become a writer, mother, and citizen of the world. But I never stopped missing the eastern deciduous woodlands of my childhood and the polite, inflected accent that is my first language. After our long stint in the desert, my children – although both Tucson born – were thrilled and ultimately grounded to spend every holiday with relatives and Memorial Day in the cemetery bringing peonies from our yard to the graves of people who shared our last name.
We spent our first year remodeling a 100-year-old farmhouse, renovating fields and orchards, and establishing flocks of poultry and Icelandic sheep. I also took on several journalism projects including, memorably, one to South America where I calamitously broke three leg bones. The next year I stayed close to home, slowly re-learning to walk, and beginning two new books.

The first, *Animal Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, was published in 2007. Co-written with Steven and Camille, it’s a nonfiction book about farming and food economies framed by a memoir of our family’s year of producing or procuring our food locally. The overwhelming response of readers to this book stunned us. As an ongoing commitment to our own local food economy, Steven founded the Meadowview Farmers Guild in our community ([meadowviewfarmersguild.com](http://meadowviewfarmersguild.com)), a project that includes a local-foods restaurant, The Harvest Table.
The novel that followed, *The Lacuna*, is a contemplation of history, collective memory, American identity, and the ways nationalism can be weaponized. The seeds for the story had been planted in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks. I’d sincerely believed we could summon a better response to fundamentalist hatred than simply answering it in kind, and I wrote some op-eds to that effect. My optimism was punished with a public media thrashing and a rash of threats against my family. I filed away the hate mail and spent the darkest winter of my life looking for a way to make sense of this, and put it to use. It took years of research in libraries, archives and museums, and travel through the U.S. and Mexico. In the end, that cache of hate mail went into my novel, along with newspaper articles tracking America’s path from a generous wartime patriotism of the 1940’s to the witch-hunts of the 50’s. *The Lacuna* was published in 2009. It was the hardest and most satisfying work I’d ever done.

My next book, *Flight Behavior* (2012), brought me back home to Appalachia where I saw a growing mistrust between rural and urban cultures: our complex, divergent perspectives on globalization, science, religion, and especially climate change. Farmers in my region are some
the country’s hardest-hit victims of new weather patterns, and among the most reluctant to name climate change as the culprit. I wanted to know why. I built a fictional framework for asking questions, and it led me to surprising places, including an evangelical megachurch, an entomology laboratory, and the spectacular overwintering grounds of millions of monarch butterflies in Michoacán, Mexico. I love my job.

The 20-teens have been lively years for our family, with change in every direction. One daughter got married in our front yard, found a career as a psychological counselor, and had a baby. The other left for college to study environmental science. Steven and I began flying away occasionally from our empty-ish nest (dogs and livestock always stay behind) to work and travel in places we’d waited a long time to see: South Africa, Cuba, Australia. I’ve worked with brilliant collaborators, met inspiring people, walked on some of the planet’s most wondrous places, and some of its most damaged. As the Obama administration ceded to a new political reality on the horizon, I
started pondering another giant question, this time: what the heck? Is the world as we’ve known it just over? Fear and polarization rule, familiar shelter is failing us. There aren’t enough resources on earth to keep up with human demands, but we still look to growth and consumption to answer every prayer. Why do we keep trying so hard to fix new problems with old solutions? It seemed like a novel to me: it’s called Unsheltered, published October 2018.

When I’m not on book tour, or skipping out on February under some bright southern sky, I’m on our farm where I hope to live out the rest of my days. We still raise Icelandic sheep and a huge vegetable garden, and have persisted – across several generations now – in our belief that life is much improved by good books and outdoor adventures. Steven still teaches at Emory & Henry College. Both our daughters have moved back to the mountains and live nearby: Lily to work as an environmental educator, Camille and Reid to raise their splendid little boy, here in the landscape that feels like home to all of us. I work every day to represent Appalachia honestly and honorably, to a world that mostly underestimates this place and my good neighbors.
My current projects include a screen adaptation, a couple of very different books, and whatever the farm requires of me today. That could be pulling weeds or canning tomatoes, delivering a breech lamb or feeding an orphaned one in the kitchen. It might mean leaving this quiet hollow and getting out on the streets. Whatever it is, it won’t wait.

I’m lucky to have reached a stage of life when I need little from the world except the chance to do my best work. And to know how to do it: by giving myself over to writing, my family, our farm, and my community. Public life conflicts with all three of those things, so I rarely travel for speaking engagements if I can help it. But once every few years I step out for the book tour, and get reminded that I haven’t just been sitting alone in my office all this time, talking to myself. I’m profoundly thankful to my far-flung community of readers, who are overwhelmingly lovely people and seem willing to stick with me as I poke at the hardest questions I know how to ask. Life surprises me every day. I kept my writing secret for decades because I doubted its worth to anybody but me. I quake to think how risk and luck have crossed my path: I might have stayed securely on payroll as a science writer instead of hazarding a freelance career.
As an overwhelmed single Mom, I almost said no to the visiting-writer gig that led me to meet my husband and find my way back to home ground. And before all that, I came within an inch of discarding my first novel rather than troubling someone to read it. Every time I begin a new book I relive that moment when confidence hangs in the balance, wondering again if readers will really want to follow me down this road. And still, you do. That is the best luck of all.
Timeline of life events and major works:

1955: born April 8, Annapolis, Maryland
1957: moved to Nicholas County, Kentucky
1963: lived with family in Republic of Congo
1973: left Kentucky to attend DePauw University
1977: earned Bachelor’s Degree, moved to Soissons, France
1978: moved to Tucson, Arizona
1980: enrolled in graduate school, University of Arizona
1985: began full-time freelance writing, married Joseph Hoffmann
1987: birth of daughter Camille Hoffmann Kingsolver
1989: Homeland (short stories)
1990: Animal Dreams (novel)
1991: moved to Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain
1992: Another America (poetry); returned to U.S., ended marriage
1993: Pigs in Heaven (novel), first national bestseller
1994: married Steven L. Hopp
1995: High Tide in Tucson (essays)
1996: birth of daughter Lily Hopp Kingsolver
1998: The Poisonwood Bible (novel)
2000: Prodigal Summer (novel); National Humanities Award.
2001: Small Wonder (essays) The Best American Short Stories (editor, anthology)
2003: Last Stand: America’s Virgin Lands (nonfiction, with Annie Griffiths)
2004: moved to Washington County, Virginia
2005: April, to April 2006, locavore year recorded for book in progress
2007: Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (nonfiction, with Steven Hopp and Camille Kingsolver)
2009: The Lacuna (novel)
2012: Flight Behavior (novel)
2013: Screenwriting projects, ongoing
2017: Animal, Vegetable, Miracle 10th Anniversary Edition (includes new chapters written by Barbara, Steven, Camille and Lily)
2018: Unsheltered (novel)