

Barbara Kingsolver Revealed

an autobiography

Childhood:

A Diary with a Key

(1955-1972)

Seeking My Fortune

(1973-1985)

*A Wholly
Unexpected Life*

(1985-1994)

Opportunity Knocks

(1994-2004)

*The Landscape
of Home*

(2004-present)

Barbara Reveals Herself

introduction



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.

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Childhood: a diary with a key (1955–1972)



I was born April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, Maryland, but I 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.



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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

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extreme need. 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.

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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.

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Seeking My Fortune

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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.



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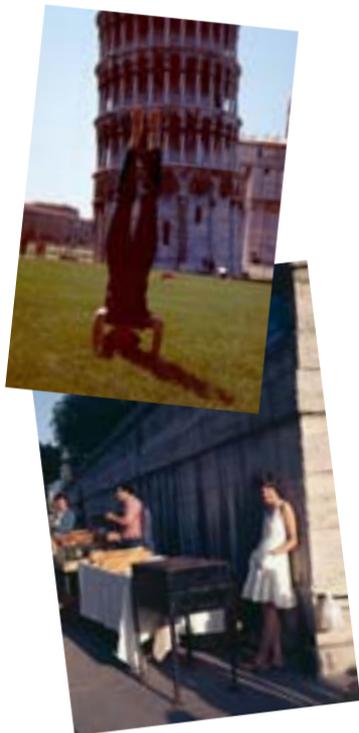
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I returned to the U.S. in '78 and moved to Tucson, Arizona, out of a curiosity to see the West. I worked two years as a lab technician at the University of Arizona Medical School before entering the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology as 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.

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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.”



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A Wholly Unexpected Life

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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

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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.

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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



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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.”

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Over the next decade I learned to roll with the knocks and also seize 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 dozen literary anthologies, and wrote for most of the newspapers and magazines I thought to be worth reading. I was lucky enough to meet a lot of the writers and artists I most admired, and many of them became friends. In collaboration with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt, 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 Remainers, 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 grand red ribbon, by President Clinton; and being invited to join the usage review panel for the *American Heritage*

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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 harrowing for shy people like me, especially in a culture that treats celebrities (even lower-order, literary ones) as objects rather than humans with feelings and families. Earnest work draws the sincerest fans, and also the vilest critics. The major work 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 (bellwetherprize.org), which is awarded biennially to first-time novelists.

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But the most important event of the '90's, for me, turned out to be a Lila Wallace fellowship. It was an opportunity I nearly declined; 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 mother 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 on the next-to-last day 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.

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In June 2004 Camille finished high school, Lily completed grade two, and our family made our move to Virginia permanent, to be near extended family. Arizona was not easy to leave behind. I am grateful for my 25 years in the southwestern borderlands, where I meant to spend a few months and instead became a writer, mother, and citizen of the world. Equally welcome to me, though, has been a return to the eastern deciduous woodlands of my childhood and the polite, inflected accent that is my first language.

The year of our move, we remodeled a 100-year-old farmhouse, renovated fields and orchards, and established



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flocks of poultry and Icelandic sheep. I wrote a screen adaptation for *The Poisonwood Bible* (on contract, though it has yet to be produced), and broke several crucial bones while on an assignment in South America. The next year I spent 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 is 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), a project that includes a local-foods restaurant, The Harvest Table.

The next book, *The Lacuna*, was published in 2009. This novel about memory, history, American political identity, privacy, celebrity, gossip and truth, I had contemplated for decades. It took years of research in libraries and archives,

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jungles, museums, and historic neighborhoods all over Mexico and the U.S. It is without a doubt the most difficult and satisfying work I've done.

The sainted literary agent Frances Goldin, who first reassured me that I was a writer (marketable or not), still represents me. My family still lives in our hundred-year-old farmhouse in the southern Appalachian Mountains, where I hope to spend the rest of my days. Steven is a professor of environmental studies at the local college. Lily is a teenager. Camille is grown, living a few hours away in North Carolina. I'm presently at work on a new novel, a poetry collection, a screenplay, and whatever the farm requires of me today. That could be pulling weeds or delivering lambs or canning tomatoes, and whatever it is, it won't wait. We raise Icelandic sheep, Bourbon Red turkeys, laying hens, good-for-nothing guineas, and a huge vegetable garden, and persist in the parental belief that life's best influences are good books and nominally adult-supervised adventures outdoors. I have been known to let snakes come in the house.



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I believe I can do my best work for the world by devoting myself to writing, attentive motherhood, and being an active citizen of my community. Since public life directly conflicts with those tasks, I rarely travel for speaking engagements or public appearances. Nevertheless, I feel a profound connection to my far-flung community of readers, and am grateful for their support. My life surprises me daily. I kept my writing a secret for more than twenty years because it seemed an indulgent passion, and I'm well aware of how risk and luck have crossed my path at important turns. I could have stayed on payroll instead of hazarding the precarious economics of freelance writing. Later on, because I felt swamped as a single mother trying to make ends meet, I nearly declined the writing fellowship that led me to meet my husband. And I came within about six inches of discarding my first novel, rather than bother anyone to read it. Now, each time I begin a new book, I wonder again who will follow me down these roads, to ask these difficult questions that draw me in. And still, readers do. That is the best luck of all.