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Barbara Kingsolver

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Prodigal Summer weaves together three stories of human love within a larger tapestry of lives inhabiting the forested mountains and struggling small farms of southern Appalachia.

From her outpost in an isolated mountain cabin, Deanna Wolfe, a reclusive wildlife biologist, watches a den of coyotes that have recently migrated into the region. She is caught off-guard by a young hunter who invades her most private spaces and confounds her self-assured, solitary life. On a farm several miles down the mountain, Lusa Maluf Landowski, a bookish city girl turned farmer's wife, finds herself unexpectedly marooned in a strange place where she must declare or lose her attachment to the land that has become her own. And a few more miles down the road, a pair of elderly feuding neighbors tend their respective farms and wrangle about God, pesticides, and the possibilities of a future neither of them expected.

Over the course of one humid summer, these characters find their connections to one another and to the flora and fauna with whom they share a place. *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates a balance of narrative, drama and ideas that is characteristic of Barbara Kingsolver's finest work.

Prodigal Summer Details

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Author : Barbara Kingsolver

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From Reader Review *Prodigal Summer* for online ebook

Annika says

Very descriptive and calming. Three stories tied into one, and cleaned up neatly at the end. A good summertime read.

I read this book again, so I can write a better review, since this book definitely deserves a second thought.

This is a book to be savored, meaning, it is not a light easy read, and it isn't fluff. It isn't loaded with heavy issues (Barbara Kingsolver's *"Poisonwood Bible"* is definitely a heavier chunk o' reading compared to this) but I feel to truly appreciate *"Prodigal Summer"*, one must be in the right mindset.

This book takes three stories and alternates chapters with three different points of view. If you can pay attention to detail, you won't have trouble picking up on very subtle things the author leaves along the way, like bread crumbs on the trail that weaves through the three tales. However, Kingsolver is not an in-your-face author. She won't nudge you and say "Didja catch that? Didja?" It's up to you to find the "clues", so to speak.

Each story/chapter has it's own title. "Predators" is essentially a love story, an older "mountain woman" and a much younger hunter meet by chance on a mountain trail. Their story isn't so much love as it is obsession. In terms of nature, their story is very detailed. I love how Kingsolver can describe a tree, a rainstorm, a snake, a bug, a cabin in the woods and each time it's different and beautiful. She doesn't feel like she flipped through a thesaurus and learned new words as she went along. Her language is very easy and flows nicely with the setting of the story. Since Deanna Wolfe is a woman who has lived on the mountain for two years observing the flora and fauna, this type of dialect would come easily to her.

The second story/chapter is "Moth Love". Lusa Widener married a farmer, Cole, the only brother of five sisters. Lusa is Polish/Arabian and finds herself the owner of a tobacco farm at the foot of the mountains. She is not a farmer herself, but a botanist and a "bug lady" and struggles with relating to anyone in her new family. Her ideas about farming get her ridiculed.

The third story/chapter is "Old Chestnuts". Garnett Walker is a man in his eighties, a retired vo-ag teacher who is grafting a new chestnut tree to withstand the blight that took out all the American chestnuts in the region. He is an extremely focused, uptight, aged man who just wants to be left alone on his farm and in his own routine, except for one thorn in his flesh, his neighbor Nannie Rawley, whose apple orchard, beehives, and gardening techniques cause him agitation and stress.

I enjoyed this book even more the second time I read it. The dialect flows easily, the setting is very real, and the stories all tie up nicely by the end. I love the subtlety of this book, and still the complexity of instinct, life, death, rebirth, and finding our purpose here, among nature, to co-exist in some kind of harmony.

Kathryn says

Overall, a delightful, thoughtful and refreshing novel. I loved the pure joy, the contagious adoration, for nature — from top predators to insects to extinct trees to blossoming weeds — that shines through the pages. (My only real gripe with the book is that, on occasion, this love morphs into rather a preachy cautionary tale,

or scolding—it could still have been powerfully ecological and progressive without the few soap-box passages.) Another message is the sometimes-lovely, sometimes-scary, ever powerful theme that no creature (including humans!) is ever as solitary as we may seem, even if we strive to be so. The characters are so vivid and "real." Worth the read if only for the "Old Chestnuts" section with the most endearingly stubborn and ornery old man you'll ever want to meet! I absolutely loved how the three "separate" stories wove together as the novel progressed, so that in the end it seemed everyone in the small town was tied to everyone else by the glorious web of non-solitariness among us. It's almost like a mystery story in the way that Kingsolver drops clues here and there as to how the connections will go—and once you know, you find all these little nuggets you didn't even notice at first. Very fun, in that regard. A really stellar story, a love-song to Nature and to Life. (Caution to some readers: While never very graphic and always respectful, there are a few passages that are definitely sex-charged—one of Kingsolver's points is how Nature is so fueled by sex, the desire to procreate—and that humans are also part of this.)

Another of the summer-themed books I'm cramming to read before summer ends! Thankfully, this one is at the library where I'm working for summer school (three weeks) and so it brings a bit of the brilliant summer indoors; if I have to work during summer, at least it's nice to have time to read about summer!

Leigh Statham says

I think my favorite line of "poetry" from this book is "He made love to me like a farmer!" She then goes on to talk about milking cows and tilling the land while describing their love making. Maybe I've just known too many farmers in my life and found none of them in the least bit attractive. There is nothing romantic about the smell of manure on a man. And anyway, I think that line sums up the depth of this book pretty well. From the first chapter I knew I was in trouble when one of the leading ladies ends up doing "it" in the forest, in a log, with a stranger. Ugh. I kept reading just because I had heard such great things about her first book, but I was really disappointed. The plot never thickened beyond the farm lust and I just found myself getting more and more angry at her heroines. I can handle people in a book not making the same choices I would have made, but it has to be well written prose to keep me hooked. I actually returned this book to B&N because I couldn't stand to read the last four chapters and I seriously wanted my money back AND I didn't want any book on my shelf that had a line like "he made love to me like a farmer" in it. UGH!!!

Gumble's Yard says

The key themes of the book are ecological/natural: that Spring/Summer are times of active reproduction and are sexually charged in nature; that removing a predator from an ecological system has huge repercussions, often causing the next layer down to devastate the ecology; that indeterminate pesticides often have the effect of boosting the population of the herbivore insects they seek to control (because of their proportionately effect on their carnivore predators); that man is also a natural creature but has largely forgotten or obscured the basic effects of pheromones or of lunar inspired cycles; the importance of re-wilding.

These themes are very interesting but perhaps overplayed and the divide between the better educated and informed women and the simpler farmers is not sufficiently nuanced but rather one sided in presentation.

Overall though a book which leaves a strong impression – the writing style complementing the theme and giving a strong sense of the battle between man and the wild.

Michael says

I've read and enjoyed all of Barbara Kingsolver's novels but "Prodigal Summer" stands out for me. The opening lines promise that you're going on a journey into the minds of memorable characters: "Her body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude is only a human presumption." What follows doesn't disappoint.

Three parallel stories unfold of characters quite unlike on the surface and yet connected in deeper ways that resonate profoundly. It would have been easy – and predictable – to have their stories wind together as the novel progresses. But Kingsolver chooses to let the undercurrents reverberate while the storylines continue in their own direction. In the end their paths brush lightly against one another speaking, I think, of the bonds that connect us all but leave us to make our own connections in our own time.

Anyone who finds solace in nature will find this novel irresistible. Kingsolver pays tribute to the natural world while quietly testifying that we can either live in communion with it or contribute to its demise.

Laura says

Lots of different subplots that eventually intertwine, includes a love story too. She writes very lyrically, you'll want to savor this one. Nature / animal lovers will appreciate this one too. Something for everyone, this one is probably in my all time top 10 or 15 list.

2nd reading: This is not a book to read but a book to *feel*. It's a book you feel the truth and the rightness of, down deep in your gut.

Tom says

Prodigal Summer tells the stories of several different people clustered around a deep valley in Southern Appalachia. Deana is wildlife biologist who works for the forest service. She enjoys her hermitic existence living in a cabin on a mountain, keeping track of the wildlife in the National Forest. This all changes when a young hunter comes into her life, for whom she feels a strong physical desire. Lusa is an academic who marries a farmer from the valley, and moves with him onto his farm. She is widowed and left alone amidst his clannish family, mounting farm debts, and a desire to work in tune with the land in contrast to the local farming wisdom. I can't remember the name of the third protagonist, but he is a very religious retired agricultural vocational teacher in his eighties. He is plagued by his scandalous (She wears shorts and doesn't believe in pesticides), younger (in her seventies) neighbor who owns an apple orchard.

There were some things I really liked about Prodigal Summer. In particular I really enjoyed Kingsolver's love of the Southern Appalachian ecosystem that comes through loud and clear in the book. She was a biologist before she became a novelist, and her deep understanding of ecology, and her wonder at nature's

systems is so well described. It's a good set of interwoven stories, and I enjoyed reading the book.

There were definitely some things about the book that I didn't like. Clearly Kingsolver was not writing for my half (male) of the population. I've read and enjoyed many books with female protagonists, but I felt somewhat excluded from *Prodigal Summer*. Instead of appealing to the universality of human emotions, there was almost a sense that Kingsolver was only writing this book for women, and didn't expect or even want men to read it. I say this not as a criticism, it's her book and she can reach out to any audience she wants, but as a factor that took away from my enjoyment of the book. What I would label as a criticism was the over obvious version of feminism that pervaded the book. Reading *Prodigal Summer* felt a little like talking to a 14 year old girl who has started thinking about feminism for the first time. I wanted to tell Kingsolver, "I get it! Women are in touch with nature and work with it. Men try to control nature and don't understand it." I don't resent the point. I think there is some truth in it, as long as we're talking in generalities. But it annoyed me that this well trodden ground was presented as a revelation. I also felt like there was a real stereotyping of the male characters, and some of the female ones. The men in the story were either eye candy, backwards bible thumpers stuck in the 1950s, or dumb red-necks. God knows there have been enough stories where the female characters have been stereotyped, and maybe there is a statement to be made by turning the tables, but characters with no complexity detract from a book, whatever the reason.

Ruth says

My first Barbara Kingsolver book. Won't be my last. It is so BEAUTIFULLY written. Every sentence is crafted - which means it's quite a slow read; no skipping through paragraphs like most books. It has the jewel-like clarity and intensity of Ian McEwan but without the prissy, look-at-me-I'm-so-clever that creeps into his work.

Such vivid characters, each with their own voice. There were clear themes running through the book reflecting Kingsolver's detailed knowledge of biology and farming: evolution, the danger of man destroying any of the earth's creatures because of the knock-on effect, a fantastic exposition on why spraying insecticides on crops makes the problem worse. I've just gone and made this book sound boring haven't I? But it isn't; it's quietly gripping and life affirming.

Debbie says

The Circle of Life

In this book author *Barbara Kingsolver* really takes the liberty within this book to assert her views on the circle of life, nature, the land, plant, animal and human life existing in conjunction to each other. She rolls this philosophy up into the lives of three main characters who live two in a small town and one in the mountains above the town in the Appalachias. Deanna has been living as a forest services ranger for two years and studying the wild life peacefully before Eddie Bondo infiltrates her world. Lusa was a scientific lab technician teaching in Lexington before she met her husband Cole and moved back to his rural farm amidst his imposing family. Nannie is a spry senior citizen running her own apple orchard organically. Her neighbor old Sheldon Walker always has a bone to pick with her natural methods. He at first thinks her a witch. Everyone and everything is effected by nature from beginning to end.

This was a bit of a difficult read for me. I actually had to push myself and I could have put it down quite a few times but I was curious. I have enjoyed two other books by this author but this would be on the bottom of the list of her books for me. It seemed to ramble on at times about the names of flowers, trees, plants, insects, moths, wolves, goats.. You name it the research was done this species explained at length. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy learning as I read, even fiction but this was brimming on overkill in my opinion and I began skimming a lot. It got slightly predictable, pointless and boring. It seems the reason for the stories was to have a place to build her theories too. I don't know what I thought this was going to be like but it definitely wasn't anything I expected.

I find it hard to rate this. The knowledge and research should be worth some positive points but the stories were kind of weak and I was really bored the majority of the book. 2 1/2 stars. I may try other fiction by this author considering I did like two other books of hers and this is the first fail. I do recommend anyone who has read her other books or those interested to give it a try maybe you will like it.

meredith says

Ok. What gives, Kingsolver?

I have adored her work for years, and had this particular book sitting on my shelf for a long time unread. I picked it up to read recently, and went "oh yeah, that's why". i'd tried previous times to read it and couldn't "get into it". I'm usually a stickler for the "getting in to it" factor. if something doesnt hold my attention, or is downright fucking painful, within the first chapter, i have to ditch it.

but no. i gave Barb K the benefit of the doubt. i mean, she wrote the Poisonwood Bible, after all. i decided i'd read this entirely, even if it killed me.

it nearly did. it wasn't bad. i infact enjoyed it more and more as the LONG ASS story went on and on. very little plot. nothing really happening. lots of boring ass inane descriptions of nature that got really old really fast. her previously used narrative device of telling different stories with different narrators each chapter was annoying here. i found i only cared about 1 person's story, and didnt care about any of the other co-protagonists.

it was a book that was beyond slow, beyond tedious. it could've been told in 1/16th the length. i hate nothing more than books that're just taking up pages. Mind you, when you find books you love love love, you wish they'd never end. you get sad when it's finished.

this isnt one of them.

i put this book down twice and read other things, then brought it on vacation with me and slowly read it over a month. jesus, a month.

fhew, it's over now.

i'd love to hear from someone who actually liked it

Carol ?? says

I had to create a new shelf for this book as I couldn't put it on my literary fiction shelf as I don't believe people will be reading this book in a hundred (or even fifty) years time. & it was too "heavy" to be categorised as chick lit.

I had a lot of problems with this book.

For one thing, it featured multiple points of view - which I'm not a fan of. At least it didn't go back & forth in time as well.

I was far more interested in Lusa's story than the other two - although my interest in Deanna's was high at the start, then faded & Garnett's story was (finally) interesting at the finish. I'm a bit of a tree hugging, muesli munching, bone carving wearing greenie myself,* but found this book got more than a little "preachy" as it went on. For example;

... "So? Who needs birds?"

"I do. You do."[redacted] "Not to mention, the rain would run straight down the mountain and take all the topsoil off my fields. The creek would be pure mud. This place would be a dead place."

Chrys shrugged "Trees grow back"

"That's what you think. This forest took hundreds of years to get like this."

& on & on & on!

Also a minor point but Deanna was supposed to have really beautiful, but amazingly long hair in the conditions she was living in? *Yeah, right!*

& endless stuff stuff about the minutiae in the character's life. Like, I just made plum jam, then plum chutney but didn't have enough plums to make plum sauce. Interested? Didn't think so. I think a good 50 pages could have been pruned off this book.

While one part of the three characters meshing together really surprised me (& was handled beautifully) others felt forced to tie everyone up a neat, tidy bow.

Kingsolver writes well and does capture the sour disenchantment of Lusa's disintegrating marriage perfectly. Since she is my sister's favourite author I may try another one - but I'm not in any rush!

* Phrase I always liked from a long ago NZ magazine - probably Metro.

Phrynne says

As usual in a Kingsolver book the writing in *Prodigal Summer* is just beautiful and the descriptions lyrical. It is a book to read carefully and slowly and just enjoy.

Several different stories run parallel and tie up eventually towards the end of the book. I found my interest in each story uneven and tended to rush the parts about Garnett Walker because I became tired of his constant, repetitive musings and I wanted to get back to Deanna or Lusa. However I never rushed any of their parts:)

The author has a very strong philosophy on life which always runs through her novels but in this one she does rather get on her soap box, and I did occasionally feel she was trying to brow beat me into submitting to her views (and I am already a believer!). For me this loses the book one star.

Nevertheless it was a lovely read with some charming characters, very human behaviours and a positive,

hopeful ending.

Brenda says

I enjoyed Kingsolver's Poisonwood Bible so much that for some reason I delayed reading this one (does that make sense?). I just liked the idea of another unread novel by her being out there, waiting for me to read -- something I was saving like a piece of rich dark chocolate.

Her descriptions of the natural world are lovely. The relationships are complex and sexy and intriguing. My favorite story line is the romance between Deanna and Eddie. It reminds me of the romance in "The River Why", another book I will write about here on goodreads (someday).

Coyotes play a prominent role in the book. I grew up falling asleep to the sound of coyotes howling (whenever I stayed with my grandparents). It is an eerie sound, almost human. This is a book that can make you love coyotes and chestnut trees and even our fellow humans (with all of our quirks and failings and missteps along the way).

Here's the final paragraph (it's not a plot spoiler):

"Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for the chosen."

As I expected, I am feeling reader's remorse. There are no more Kingsolver titles out there for me to read. Yet. Write quickly Barbara. I miss you already.

Bethany says

This is my favorite of Barbara Kingsolver's fiction.

Three stories weave together into a beautiful story of nature, love, and family. The biology Kingsolver integrates in the narrative is educational and fascinating.

The three threads begin with "Predators" which follows Deanna, who is a Forest Preserve ranger and lives alone in a small cabin high upon Zebulon Mountain. She unexpectedly begins a romance with a roaming coyote poacher, although Deanna is working tirelessly to protect a hidden den of coyotes. Next is "Moth Love" about newly married Lusa and her adjustment to life on her husband's family farm and the large family that comes along with it. Finally there is "Old Chestnuts" which focuses on Garnett and Nannie, two old folks who have lived next door to each other their whole lives. The cantankerous relationship between them eventually arrives at mutual understanding and a unique sense of harmony.

My favorite character in the book is Lusa, who, for me, is the catalyst for action in the lives of the people she comes in contact with. Kingsolver's tying together of all these characters is subtle, yet powerful in the unknown impact each has on another. This truly is a work of art.

Heather says

I don't want it to end! :(There's still much life for these characters to lead and I want to be there for it! Although I guess it has to end somewhere...

The BEAUTIFUL NATURAL WORLD she gives - my kingdom to know so much and be so deeply involved in the real world around me. (This week, I met the wooly bear caterpillar and the granite spiny lizard at Mission Trails, both locals. I can't wait to meet more and learn about more. Thank goodness for parks and rangers - at least SOMEONE is maintaining this knowledge!)

Her writing is nice - she is especially beautiful describing plants and animals, and has a storyteller's voice for introducing them to humans. Her scenes are long and involved - no quick hits to make a point but no excess either. The pace matches the story. It takes TIME to know the world and is not something you learn in soundbites.

I want to live there. I want to be these characters and have their problems and flaws. My heart aches. Unreservedly 5 stars.

Lyn Elliott says

Reading this is a joyous experience. Other people have written long and thoughtful reviews but I'll just say that I loved its exuberance - a light exuberance, not at all boisterous - and its gentle, often funny, exploration of family and neighbourly 'business'.

I returned it to the friend who lent it to me and bought a copy to keep. She had said 'Try this' when I confessed I had never been able to get into The Poisonwood Bible, didn't want to read about missionaries in Africa. Thank you Lisa!

Linda says

Another book with my review & date read lost in Shelfari import UGH

Julie says

I promise I could make you laugh if I showed you the comments my teachers made in my high school yearbook in my senior year.

From every language arts or creative writing teacher I ever had: *The sky's the limit for you, kid!*

From every science and math teacher I ever had: *Marry rich, kid!*

I often wondered what a conversation might have sounded like between the two camps, if they ever collided

in the teacher's lounge. Half of them would have been surprised to learn that I was a candidate for a full ride scholarship for writing and the other half would have been surprised to learn that they believed pole dancing would be the highest bar I could ever achieve.

It's not that I don't love Nature; I do. I love it. I trip all over my own two feet staring at it, break into spontaneous poetry writing about it. . . I just don't want to study it. I don't want to know where the luna moth lays her eggs or why. Don't want to glaze over while a botanist explains why the green leaf turns red; I just want to savor the magic that it does, and I want to read Robert Frost aloud when it happens.

So, my first 4 attempts to read Barbara Kingsolver were rough. I kept reading her books and kept feeling disappointed by, well, my reaction of really *disliking* them. How could I not admire a woman who would dedicate a book to "wildness, where it lives?" How could I not love a writer who has spent her impressive career drawing attention to the damage we are doing to our planet?

I *do* love Ms. Kingsolver, I do. I love what she represents, love that she fights for our beautiful, natural world. That's why I've given her chance after chance. But, unfortunately, for four consecutive reads, I found her characters about as unrelatable as psychopaths in an asylum in the 1800s.

But. . . even though the protagonists in *Prodigal Summer* are also unrelatable to me, (lady scientists who think hair brushes are tools for collecting strands of DNA). . . this is the book that FINALLY worked for me.

Prodigal Summer is so stunning. It may be the greatest tribute that a novel has ever paid to a single season (two runners up may be *Doctor Zhivago* or *Ethan Frome* for winter) and it is a celebration of. . . well. . . procreation.

Everybody's doing it here, people: the humans, the moths, the coyotes, the snapping turtles, the salamanders, the birds, the flies.

I ruined my copy by taking it, twice, into a cold shower with me.

I never knew that blue-green algae could be so. . . sexy.

Physical pleasure was such a convincing illusion, and sex, the ultimate charade of safety.

I'm finally on board the Barbara bandwagon.

Turns out, she just needed to get dirty.

Ray says

I first read Barbara Kingsolver maybe 10 years ago and really liked her. Since then, I've discovered authors like Edna Forbes and Alice Hoffman who also both have an interest in the lives of rural women, rich narratives and, sometimes magical realism. That said, Kingsolver is still very much at the top of this field. However, this book left me somewhat disappointed by the end for two reasons:

1. Big themes- without spoiling too much, the theme of this book is that evolution is always going on and that human beings are not the end product of evolution, just a part of it. Perhaps more importantly

Kingsolver tries to remind us that evolution is a slow, long, adaptive process. Evolution rarely happens quickly, yet Kingsolver's characters themselves go through rapid, possibly even radical changes, by the end of this book. Good stuff for drama, but inconsistent with some of the broader themes.

2. Narrative Structure- nonlinear storytelling is not accomplished solely through an unconventional conclusion (read: Hollywood happy ending/closure). Kingsolver ends her book in a kind of abstract manner, shifting perspective to some coyotes whose existence in the plot prior to the end point seemed added on. Many minor plot were left unresolved as the coyotes walked off into the Sun, This would have been fine if the rest of the plot has not been so plodding and attentive to every detail in each character's life, but it was.

The conventional tale paired with an aspiring, but unresolved ending, just felt incomplete.

Along the same lines, the interweaving of characters and narrative voices is great, but about 3/4 of the way through the book every main character had been connected to every other main character in a way that simply felt over the top and a bit trite. Like, we get it, it's a small community and these characters needed to have some kind of theme tying them together, but it got a bit silly by the final connection.

Despite these flaws, Prodigal Summer was a good read and brought up a lot of interesting ideas and themes. The dialogue was well written and engaging.

Jan Rice says

This book is hot.

It's my favorite Barbara Kingsolver novel.

I came away liking coyotes. And grieving the American chestnut.
