

**Barbara Kingsolver.** *Prodigal Summer: A Novel.* New York: HarperCollins, 2000. 444 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-019965-4.



**Reviewed by** Marion W. Copeland

**Published on** H-Net (February, 2001)

## A New Voice

Perhaps Kingsolver's nearest thematic compatriot is the British novelist A. S. Byatt. Although no two writers could be further apart in tone and texture, both bring readers to themes that reach beyond nationality, indeed, beyond politics and gender, to consider, as John Updike puts it in a recent review of Byatt's *A Biographer's Tale*, an "appreciation of the near-chaotic thing of things: the planet Earth." And in both, to edit Updike a hair, Earth is less a "thing" than a "being," a concept now a given in what is coming to be called ecofeminist fiction. I see both writers fitting in that category. Where Byatt includes humans in Earth's ecosystem more by analogy (or in the case of "Eugenia Morpho" by allegory), Kingsolver simply includes us along with all other living beings. Her humans are not "like" insects, her humans and insects and coyotes share, in the case of *Prodigal Summer*, the same specific habitat--southern Appalachia. All are endangered by the same intruders and subject to the same natural rhythms and forces.

Kingsolver's characters, human and nonhuman, evolve in an outdoor setting rather than in the elegant interiors featured in Byatt's works. In this the two writers reflect their personal as well as cultural heritage and habitat: Kingsolver grew up in Kentucky, earned a graduate degree in biology, and continues to explore and write about science and natural history with her ornithologist husband as well as in her fiction. Byatt's degrees are in literature, she has lectured and on occasion continues to lecture on literature in universities, and, although she is drawn to diverse areas of research, nature and natural history remain constants in the web of her imagination (cf. John Updike, "Fairy Tales and Paradigms," *The New Yorker*, 19 and 26 February 2001: 216-222). By contrast, nature and natural history *are* the web in which Kingsolver's characters and, to her mind, life itself, have their being.

That doesn't mean that Kingsolver's characters are flat or undifferentiated. To her scientifically-hewn imagination, individual and species distinctions loom large and are clearly drawn. Her three human female protagonists are far

more distinct from one another than are the sisters in Byatt's "Eugenia Morpho," for instance. Kingsolver's fourth female protagonist, an alpha coyote, just as distinctly drawn, has no parallel in Byatt, and, consequently, demands the critic's careful attention. The coyote's story begins as a strand in the story of Deanna Wolfe (the name is quite intentional), a wildlife biologist and forest ranger, who has chosen to isolate herself from human society and dedicate herself to the protection of the wilderness habitat on the same mountain that the coyote and her family, recent migrants, now occupy. Slowly the coyote's story gains equal prominence with those of Deanna, Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, a recent widow whose land is adjacent to the mountain's wilderness, and Nanny Land Rawley, whose apple orchard lies at the foot of the mountain (note that the names of these two contain "land," even as Kingsolver suggests the land contains them). All four of these characters share habitat and gender and kind; all are mammals. Of the four, Lusa (whose story is told in sections called "Moth Love") comes closest to being Byatt-like. She is well-versed in literature and obsessed with moths, a parallel to Byatt's "Eugenia Morpho" but also a possible parallel to the American author Gene Stratton-Porter whose natural history, *Moths of the Limberlost*, and novels *Freckles* and *Girl of the Limberlost*, anticipate Kingsolver's insights, themes, and concerns by almost a century.

Deanna Wolfe's tale is called "Predators," and Nanny's, "Old Chestnuts." The latter is in part a pun, for Nanny and her neighbor Garnett Walker are old, but also in large part is an allusion to Garnett's obsession—reintroducing a chestnut tree to the habitat that is resistant to the fungus that wiped the species out (interestingly, the fungus itself was also introduced by humans). Not only does this strand affirm the importance of flora as well as fauna (the illegal gathering of ginseng on the mountain reinforces this theme), but contrasts with the natural reintroduction of the coyote. Garnett's methods, employing genetic manipulation

and pesticides, both of which Nanny rejects in the raising and harvesting of her apples, proves a greater threat to the ecosystem than the reintroduction of the chestnut would prove a boon. The coyote, commonly seen as a threat, is, as Deanna determinedly argues, an essential ingredient of a healthy ecosystem and one the mountain has lacked since its dominant predator, the red wolf, was driven out by area farmers.

Like the other fauna and flora, humans are preyed upon by alien (human) and natural predators and, again like them, are subject to the natural rhythms and forces that prevail in the region. Since the story takes place in the spring and summer, the most prominent of these forces is procreation: in fact "prodigal summer" is defined in the text as "the season of extravagant procreation" (p. 51). Much of each female's story has to do with the sex drive as well as with its accompanying demands for raising and caring for young of whatever kind, thereby filling the habitat with life.

These four stories are woven together throughout the novel much as are the distinctly voiced narrations of Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, and, taken as a whole (or perhaps a chorus), constitute the novel's plot. No section can be understood without the others, and the plot remains ephemeral until, in the final chapter, the female coyote is allowed her own narration, independent of Deanna's overseeing. Thus the new and needed voice in *Prodigal Summer* is the voice of the non-human. Through its function in the novel, Kingsolver makes clear that this voice is what has been missing in mainstream literature (though certainly not in a variety of so-called popular genres). Moreover, its absence has jeopardized the health and balance of mainstream literature, shutting it off from the web of life, just as the absence of a dominant predator threatens the balance of the mountain that is the setting of *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver's coyote story is not titled because nonhuman story still lacks a name in mainstream criticism.

Ecofeminism points us in the right direction, as do the works of ecofeminist novelists like Kingsolver, Byatt, Stratton-Porter, and Jane Smiley. Kingsolver and Smiley seem to share a determination to clarify the need both for the nonhuman story and for its serious consideration in mainstream literature. Smiley's *Horse Heaven* (2000) weaves the stories of five race horses and a dog into the strands of the human story that makes up its plot and allows each animal to tell his or her own story, a step Kingsolver denies any of her protagonists, perhaps because, where in the human-created habitat of Smiley's race track individuals have an illusion of control, they lack the final word in the natural habitat of Kingsolver's mountain where nature--"planet Earth"--controls the loom. Perhaps that is also the point Kingsolver has in mind when Garnett Walker discovers, growing in the far reaches of Nanny's orchard, a fungus-resistant chestnut that has been fertilized by the bees from the pollen of both his experimental nursery stock and the few remaining wild trees. Kingsolver's real narrator is none other than Earth herself, lending *Prodigal Summer* a radically new voice and marking it as truly Gaian ecofeminist fiction.

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**Citation:** Marion W. Copeland. Review of Kingsolver, Barbara. *Prodigal Summer: A Novel*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

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