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Critical Insights:
Barbara Kingsolver

In-depth critical discussions of her life and works - Plus complimentary, unlimited online access to the full content of this great literary reference.

Over the past two decades, Barbara Kingsolver has built a sizable reputation as one of the most politically engaged writers in America. When *The Bean Trees* was published in 1988, Kingsolver established herself as a new literary voice willing to take on contemporary political and social issues like race, feminism, class, and immigration. Subsequent books, like *Pigs in Heaven*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, and *Small Wonder*, reiterated these concerns and added others, most notably environmentalism. Today, she continues to be a formidable advocate of politically, socially, and environmentally conscious writing.

This collection of essays, edited and introduced by Thomas Austenfeld, Professor of American Literature and Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, offers readers an introduction to Kingsolver's life, works, and critics. Austenfeld's introduction reflects on Kingsolver's "sense of place" and her ongoing commitment to being a "writer with a purpose," while four original essays provide valuable context for readers new to Kingsolver. These essays draw on Kingsolver's biography to discuss the evolution of her political convictions and locate her as an inheritor of the political fiction of the 1930s; review the major pieces of Kingsolver criticism and the popular reception of her books; demonstrate how her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, reworks the gothic tropes of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* to affirm positive portrayals of racial and ethnic others; and offer an ecofeminist reading of *Prodigal Summer* that reveals, how throughout the novel, the female protagonists reconsider their relationships with human communities and the land of the Appalachian South.

Finally, this volume assembles a highly diverse selection of previously published essays concerning Kingsolver. *The Bean Trees* is read as a feminine re-working of the American Western, and matriarchal communities are explored in the same as well as in *Pigs in Heaven*. Other essays analyze *Animal Dreams* through the lens of trauma studies to yield insight into the novel's narrative structure and use developmental psychology to understand the growth of the novel's protagonist. *The Poisonwood Bible's* depiction of the colonization of the Congo is read as a parallel to Nathan's colonization of the women of the Price family, and other readings of the novel reveals how it reworks the genre of domestic fiction, how its multiple narrators subvert traditional Western narrative techniques to create a unique rhetorical appeal, and how Kingsolver depicts disability. *Prodigal Summer* is read as an argument for a bioregionalism perspective of sustainable agriculture and, finally, a survey of Kingsolver's fiction and nonfiction is used to discuss the environmental concerns spanning her works.

The volume also contains an original contribution by *Paris Review* writer Katherine Ryder that discusses the politics of Kingsolver's essay collection *Small Wonder* as well as critical reference materials for readers wishing to study this uniquely committed writer in greater depth.

Each essay is 5,000 words in length, and all essays conclude with a list of "Works Cited," along with endnotes. Finally, the volume's appendixes offer a section of useful reference resources:

- ▶ A chronology of the author's life
- ▶ A complete list of the author's works and their original dates of publication
- ▶ A general bibliography
- ▶ A detailed paragraph on the volume's editor
- ▶ Notes on the individual chapter authors
- ▶ A subject index