

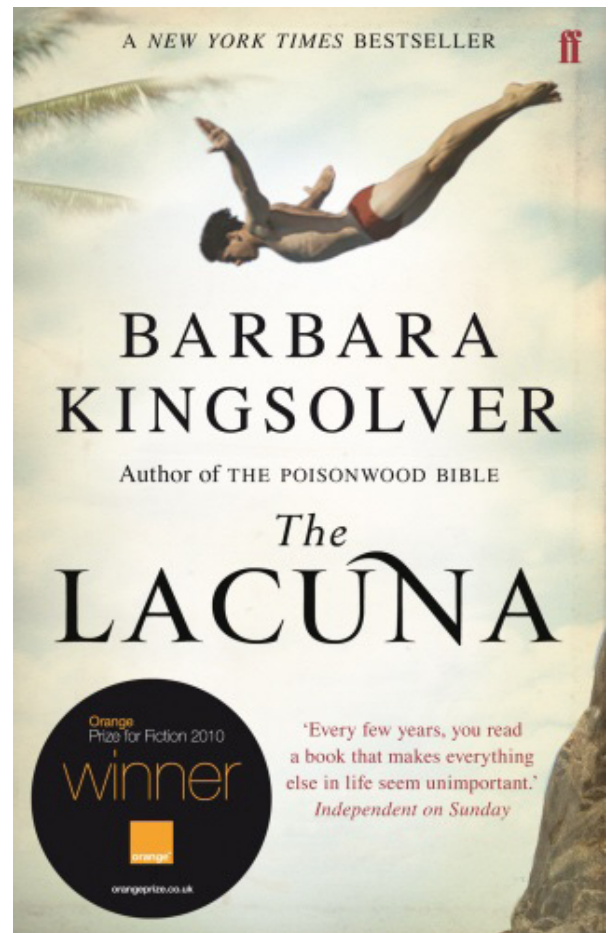
The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver

The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver In brief

The Lacuna is the story of Harrison William Shepherd. Spanning from 1929 to 1951 it sees him get caught up in key moments in world history.

Shepherd grows up the son of a flighty Mexican mother. When he leaves home he finds himself mixing plaster for the muralist Diego Rivera, and goes on to move into his home, where he gets to know the household - including Rivera's wife, the painter Frida Kahlo, and later Leon Trotsky. Later, Shepherd becomes secretary for the exiled communist, and witnesses his execution. All of this time, he is keeping diaries.

Shepherd returned to the US and becomes a successful and popular writer, largely apolitical. However, this is the time of the communist witch-hunts and his past will come back to haunt him.





Background

The Lacuna was published almost a decade after Barbara Kingsolver's previous, bestselling novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, which was one of the best-loved and widely-read book club novels of all time, and was also chosen by Oprah Winfrey for Oprah's Book Club.

During the intervening decade, much about the political landscape of the United States changed, and this had an undeniable effect on Kingsolver and *The Lacuna*. Kingsolver was sent hate mail for articles she wrote following the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that the US exercise caution in their foreign policy. Nevertheless, she has stated in interview "I never think that anything I'm writing is bluntly political in any way. I'm not going for commentary, and if I worried about controversy in this country I would just shut myself into a room and never come out. Anything one does is likely to be labelled absurdly and that is part of what this book is about."

Nevertheless, Kingsolver has remained a firm favourite of her readers, and particularly book groups, who have found much to discuss in the richness of her themes and characters. It is against this backdrop that *The Lacuna* was written and published.



For discussion

- What did you think of the significance of the title? Did it cast a different light over the novel, or did you not notice or not care about any meaning?
- “You had better write all this in your notebook,” Salomé tells Shepherd, “so when nothing is left of us but bones, someone will know where we went.” Do you think that Shepherd was right to record as much as he did in his notebooks? Do you think that the value of recording a life is greater than the risk of misinterpretation that it can pose?
- What do you think that this novel is saying about the temperament of a writer? How does Shepherd approach his relationships differently from others given that he has his notebooks, which he regards as a ‘prisoner’s plan for escape’?
- What did you think of the character of Shepherd’s mother? Do you find her charismatic or infuriating? How does she contrast with other characters? What of her can you see in Shepherd?
- Do you think that the character of Violet is an effective one? Did you connect to her emotionally, or did you find her more functional?
- Did you enjoy the structure of the novel, the way that it uses newspaper clippings and notebooks? Did you find it helped you to get to know the characters, and held your attention? Or did it create distance?
- Do you enjoy learning about world history as a result of a fictional narrative? Do you think that it works well with this novel?
- Barbara Kingsolver has mixed fictional characters with real ones, and used a combination of real and fictional newspaper headlines. Did you find that she inhabited the real characters and newspapers as well as the ones she had created? Or do you not mind, if they are existing characters?
- Have you enjoyed other novels that use this combination? How does it compare to *Any Human Heart* or *Underworld*?
- Did you find yourself wanting to discover more about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera? Have you looked into their art? Or did your interest in them only extend to their role as ‘characters’ in the novel?
- Do you find that Trotsky is portrayed as a ‘great man’ in the novel? If so, how do you feel about that? Do you agree? Did you change your mind?
- Have you been to Mexico? If so, did you feel that Kingsolver evoked the sights, sounds and smell well in the novel? If so, what techniques can you spot her using to do so?
- Do you think that America could be seen as being xenophobic in the novel? Do you think that that is a comment on the current American political landscape?
- This is a novel peopled with very dynamic artistic characters and their relationships, but it is also one about war and politics. Do you find that the two sit well together? Do you enjoy reading about both together?
- Barbara Kingsolver has said that she began the novel with ‘a series of questions. I was very interested in national character and why art and politics have such an uneasy relationship in my country, and why we’re so nervous about self-criticism.’ Did you notice and/or enjoy this while reading the novel? Or do you find reading interviews with her afterwards to be more fun, once you have established your own relationship with the book?
- *The Lacuna* won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010. Have you read any of the other novels on the shortlist? If so, do you think you would have chosen *The Lacuna* as the winner?
- Barbara Kingsolver has said ‘I grew up reading Doris Lessing’s Rhodesia novels, and Tolstoy, and Charles Dickens, whom I think is extremely political. So I always thought, ‘Well, literature’s about important things’. Do you agree?

About the author

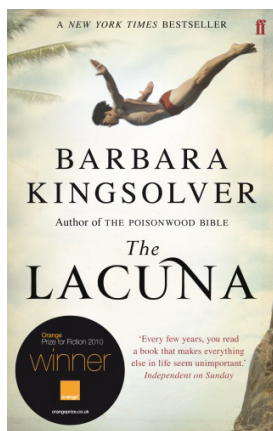
Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. She has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently lives.

Her books have been translated into more than two dozen languages, and have been adopted into the core literature curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the United States

The Poisonwood Bible was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the Orange Prize, and won the national book award of South Africa, before being named an Oprah Book Club selection. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* won numerous prizes including the James Beard award.

The Lacuna is the winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction 2010.

She has two daughters, Camille (born in 1987) and Lily (1996). Her husband, Steven Hopp, teaches environmental studies.



Resources

<http://www.kingsolver.com/>

Author's website

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/books/review/Schillinger-t.html>

Book review in the New York Times

<http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/show/feature/home/orange-2010-winner>

The winner's page on the Orange Prize for Fiction website

Suggested further reading

Fiction

Wolf Hall – Hilary Mantel

A Gate at the Stairs – Lorrie Moore

Underworld – Don DeLillo

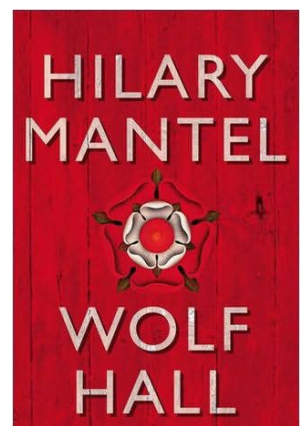
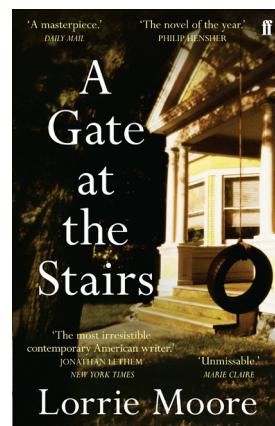
Orlando – Virginia Woolf

Any Human Heart – William Boyd

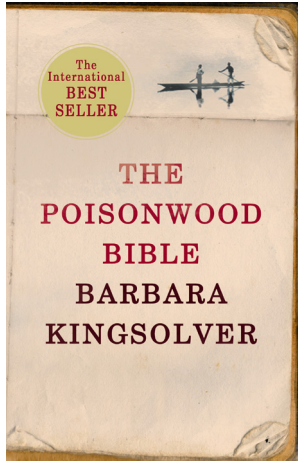
Non-fiction

My Life: An Attempt at Autobiography – Leon Trotsky

The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait



The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver



Other books by Barbara Kingsolver

Fiction

The Bean Trees (1988)
Homeland (1989)
Animal Dreams (1990)
Another America (1992) - poetry
Pigs in Heaven (1993)
The Poisonwood Bible (1998)
Prodigal Summer (2000)

Non-fiction

Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike (1989)
High Tide in Tucson (1995)
Small Wonder (2002)
Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands, with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt (2002)
Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (2007)

