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ANIMAL DREAMS

By Barbara Kingsolver

HarperCollins. 342 pp.

In her ambitious second novel, Barbara Kingsolver takes on more challenges and larger goals than most writers would dare.

As in her earlier *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver writes with graceful wit about a woman coming of age, trying to both understand her roots and construct a meaningful life in a splintered, exploitative world. Kingsolver again employs contrasting women, sisters Hallie and Codi Nodine—one adventurous, the other fearful—who embody what Kingsolver confesses as warring aspects of her own personality.

Codi, three years older, now 32, narrates most of the story while horticulturist Hallie remains out of view in Nicaragua helping impoverished farmers. We glimpse passages of Hallie's letters home, but she is otherwise visible only in her impact on Codi, who views Hallie with immense admiration lightly salted with envy. Unlike herself, Hallie plunges purposefully into life.

Codi has left her medical residency, subsequent job in a 7-Eleven and bland romantic entanglement to return to Grace, her Arizona hometown. She has never fit in, anywhere. Her mother died months after Hallie's birth, leaving the girls with their emotionally remote physician father, Doc Homer, whose mind now withers to Alzheimer's disease. Kingsolver braids throughout the larger narrative short, poignant chapters from Doc Homer's disintegrating point of view.

Waiting in Grace is Loyd [sic] Peregrina, a trainman of Apache, Pueblo and Navaho descent, unaware that during their month-long high school romance Codi conceived and miscarried their child.

Teaching high school biology, Codi takes her class to examine Grace's water supply and finds their river dying, polluted by a nearby mining company. When she shares this news with the Stitch and Bitch Club, local women who have sewn towels for years, they turn to Codi to galvanize them into a purposeful unit able to fight and save Grace.

Several struggles occur simultaneously in *Animal Dreams*. Codi seeks the mysterious sources of her alienation and the enigmatic dreams that haunt her nights. She must, while time remains, reach peace with her father and find the mothering she has missed since age three. Doc Homer battles the loss of his mind. Hallie fights to help farmers while pursued by Central American Contras armed, financed and directly assisted by her own government. The women of Grace take on the impersonal powers destroying their environment.

Kingsolver thus has several strands she must weave into one tapestry. That she does so with large if not total success marks her development into one of the significant writers of our time. She writes about issues passionately, hoping to change the reader and the world, and this didactic design carries an artistic price.

Only Codi emerges as a rounded character. The others propel her along two courses moving in opposite directions toward the same point: personal integration within a global context. She must contribute to society before she can feel whole, yet she must feel whole before she can fit into society.

Codi has suffered so many losses—mother, baby, sister, father—that she mistrusts intimacy. Anything she loves will leave. Certainty of loss is all she dare attach to, so she has become a drifter. Yet attachments gradually form. Loyd proves not only a loyal lover but a spiritual mentor. He introduces her to Native American rituals, beliefs and myths, how the Pueblo "build homes the Earth could embrace" and consider themselves the Earth's guests, not its masters. Hallie too, through her letters, teaches Codi: "What keeps you going isn't some fine destination but just the road you're on . . . You see this damned-to-hell world you got born into, and you ask yourself, 'What life can I live that will let me breathe in and out and love somebody or something and not run off screaming into the woods?'" Hallie's emersion in day-to-day struggle—"It's what you *do* that makes you who you are"—helps Codi lead the Stitch and Bitch Club against Black Mountain Mining. And Codi's own search for her roots helps her learn, as does her father, that "love weighs nothing," certainly not enough to encumber what grows between her and Loyd.

If Kingsolver's urgency sometimes makes her characters teach rather than breathe, she compensates with compassion, purpose and masterful prose. She does not shy away from death, disease or corruption but employs them to make *Animal Dreams* an affirmation of our capacity for intimacy and heroism.