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PIGS IN HEAVEN

By Barbara Kingsolver

HarperCollins, 352 pp. \$22

Five years ago, Barbara Kingsolver's debut novel *The Bean Trees* made clear that a major new writer roamed America's Southwest, one at home on the range of prose styles midway between the taut minimalism of Elizabeth Tallent and the torrential word showers of Lee K. Abbott. Kingsolver's language shimmered with such color that the New York Times declared the book "contains more good writing than most successful careers."

The Bean Trees painted the coming of age of spirited Taylor Greer, who moved from rural Kentucky to Tucson. En route, in Oklahoma, Taylor was given an orphaned Cherokee toddler who had been brutalized and refused to speak. Taylor named the child Turtle because of how tightly she gripped whatever she held on to.

Kingsolver's even more masterful and touching new novel revisits Taylor and Turtle three years later. Turtle speaks now, and one of the first things she says here saves a man's life. But when the tiny hero appears on an Oprah Winfrey show profiling "Children Who Have Saved Lives," Cherokee attorney Annawake Fourkiller, viewing from Heaven, Okla., suspects the adoption Taylor describes violated the Indian Child Welfare Act. Only the Tribal Council can allow a child to be adopted outside the Cherokee Nation.

Annawake asks Taylor to return Turtle, and Taylor says, "If you walked in here and asked me to cut off my hand for a good cause, I might think about it. But you don't get Turtle." Before Annawake can ask again, Taylor puts Turtle in her car and speeds northwest.

They're joined in Las Vegas by Taylor's mother Alice, 61, fresh from a two-year marriage that "has failed to warm her" to a man so committed to domestic silence that nightly he watches Home Shopping on cable with the sound off. The "family without men" (even Alice's mother had run a hog farm alone for 50 years) picks up the novel's quirkiest character, a busty blonde who has legally changed her name to Barbie™ and whom Taylor feels "behaves like a tourist from another solar system who only read a toy catalog before arriving."

As Taylor grows discouraged by the inadequacy of mothering-on-the-run, Alice, as feisty as her daughter, flies to Oklahoma where her own Cherokee roots may yield a solution to the rival claims to Turtle. That solution proves as outlandishly improbable as *Oliver Twist* or late Shakespeare, and as irresistibly moving. There are moments in the final pages which any reader with a pulse will read through wet eyes.

Kingsolver applies the tone and structure of the great traditional comic romance to contemporary problems. Therein lies the danger for her. This writer, who has openly declared, "I am horribly out of fashion: I want to change the world," has been faulted before for palpably political designs. But in this novel she has evolved, like Paul Simon, in a direction that eases political agendas toward the background as she realizes how much of the magic lies in the music itself. The earlier Taylor was high-minded and nearly flawless. This one is imperfect and accessible.

And while Kingsolver openly addresses today's issues—the plight of the single parent, the ongoing devastation of Native American society, women's independence—her novel has at its heart timeless problems. She stakes the conflicting claims to Turtle with equal sympathy: the primacy of a mother's love versus the need to prevent a people from losing its children and vanishing from the earth, a tougher judgment than Solomon faced.

Annawake's insistence that Turtle assume her Cherokee heritage calls in question whether her adoption, even if a rescue from abuse, was a favor. Someday Turtle will ask the Oedipus question: "Who am I, and where do I come from?" a question non-native Americans are in the world's poorest position to answer, as reflected dramatically in the frenzy of geneological research inspired by Alex Haley's *Roots*. Most American immigrants relinquished ancestral homes and sustaining myth structures for the hope of freedom and opportunity, mortgaging their past for a future (Haley's ancestors, of course, lost home in return for no earthly hope at all). Now that the newer myths they cherished—the frontier, the pioneering individualist—are also lost, Americans, like Taylor, find themselves adrift.

There's far more to this novel than its grave central conflict, though. While Kingsolver's commitment to fiercely independent women makes her male characters feel idealized and thinly airbrushed onto the plot, both Taylor and Alice have colorful love interests.

But the novel's greatest virtue lies in the writing itself, vibrant with simile, rich with insight and laugh-out-loud funny. A gothic unevenness to the prose paradoxically enhances its appeal, offering abundant crannies to grab hold. Kingsolver gets careless with details, calling a headlock a hammerlock and having a character named after a singer he's actually older than. Some of her similes seem less than apt (a recliner "smug as a catcher's mitt"), she constantly misplaces adverbial "only"s, and her occasional arch moments make you wish she could keep the stand-up comic in herself seated.

Yet, the amount of fresh imagery and perceptive observation she fits into this craggy surface makes it impossible to read any three consecutive pages without knowing we're in the presence of a brilliant writer, one not to be missed.