Review of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

Howard A. Snyder

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Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible. A Novel.* New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998, 1999. 546 pp. ISBN: 006-093053-5.

One way to view this brilliantly-written novel is as a modern-day *Heart of Darkness.* Joseph Conrad's 1902 story *Heart of Darkness* is about the Congo (specifically the Congo River) and gives an ironic twist to the popular conception of Africa as "the Dark Continent." Where does darkness really dwell – in whose heart? Conrad's story, to which Kingsolver refers directly and indirectly in *The Poisonwood Bible,* serves as background to the novel. The haunting quote from *Heart of Darkness* – "Mistuh Kurtz, he dead" – finds its echo in the eventual fate of Nathan Price, quirky fundamentalist Southern Baptist preacher who with his family goes as a missionary to the Belgian Congo in 1959. "Mistuh Price, he dead."

The Story

The Poisonwood Bible is the story of the Price family and their year and a half in the Congo just before and after Congolese independence. The family consists of Nathan, the red-haired missionary; his wife Orleanna, who never seems to be quite sure what her role is; and their four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. Leah and Adah are twins. When the family travels from Bethlehem, Georgia, to the tiny, remote village of Kilanga, Congo, in late 1959, the girls are fifteen, fourteen, and five. The first 400 pages of this 543-page novel concern the Price family's adventurous seventeen months at Kilanga; the last 140 or so pages trace the family's history (or, more accurately, the individual stories of the mother and daughters) from the time the family leaves Kilanga in 1961 up until almost the present. Whereas most of the novel is set in the Congo, this last section is set also in South Africa, the United States, Angola, and other places to which the Price daughters are eventually dispersed.

Most of the story concerns Nathan Price's largely unsuccessful efforts to establish a true-blue, fully immersed Baptist church in the village of Kilanga. He goes out under the (fictitious) Southern Baptist Mission League, but against the advice of several people. Whatever others think, Nathan Price is determined – not to say obstinate. That is his primary character quality. He and his family go to Kilanga to pick up the work of an earlier missionary, Brother Fowles, who has had to leave because of some sort of trouble having to do with "consorting with the natives." The Price family moves into Brother Fowles' abandoned house on the edge of the village, inheriting his foul-mouthed pet parrot. At this point much of the story centers in the Price home in Kilanga, partly surrounded by jungle, the Kwilu River flowing nearby.

To make a very long story short, Nathan Price is a colossal failure as a missionary. He never really learns the language, Kikongo, and when he does try to use it he makes disastrous mistakes. He doesn't realize that many words have multiple meanings. His most notable mistake is that in trying to say "Jesus is precious," he actually says, "Jesus is poison!" – thus undoing whatever good he was trying to accomplish. As his daughter Adah explains:

> "Tata Jesus is Bängala!" declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon. More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and shouts these words to the sky, while his lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder. *Bangala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, my friends! for Jesus will make you itch like nobody's business" (p. 276).

Hence the name of the novel. Nathan Price preaches a poisonous gospel; turns the Word of God into, in effect, the Poisonwood Bible.

Over the course of the seventeen months that the Price family lives in Kilanga, things don't get any better. They gradually get worse until finally, in a series of disasters, the family is forced to leave, barely escaping. In fact, one of the daughters does not escape.

Picking up on the biblical metaphor (and the novel is full of biblical metaphors!), Kingsolver structures the book as a sort of Bible, including (improbably) the Apocrypha. The novel is divided into seven "books": Genesis, The Revelation, The Judges, Bel and the Serpent, Exodus, Song of the Three Children, and a final brief section, The Eyes in the Trees. This sequence pretty well tells the story.

The Characters

A unique technique that Kingsolver uses is to tell the story in the different voices of Orleanna, the mother, and the four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and little Ruth May. I found this to be highly effective. Kingsolver (in response to a question on her website) says that she worked long and hard to give each of the daughters a distinct voice, and I think she succeeds.

Examples here will be helpful, and give a better sense of the novel. Listen to the four daughters speaking, at the beginning of the novel in a section called "The Things We Carried."

Leah Price is the first to speak:

> We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle. My sisters and I were all counting on having one birthday apiece during

our twelve-month mission. "And heaven knows," our mother predicted, "they won't have Betty Crocker in the Congo."

"Where we are headed, there will *be* no buyers and sellers at all," my father corrected. His tone implied that Mother failed to grasp our mission, and that her concern with Betty Crocker confederated her with the coin-jingling sinners who vexed Jesus till he pitched a fit and threw them out of church (p. 13).

Five-year-old Ruth May:

God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah's three boys: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Everybody comes down on their family tree from just those three, because God made a big flood and drowneded out the sinners. But Shem, Ham, and Japheth got on the boat so they were A-okay.

Ham was the youngest one, like me, and he was bad. Sometimes I am bad, too. . . .

. . . Our village is going to have this many white people: me, Rachel, Leah, and Adah. Mama. Father. That is six people. Rachel is oldest, I am youngest. Leah and Adah are in between and they're twins, so maybe they are one person, but I think two, because Leah runs everywhere and climbs trees, but Adah can't, she is bad on one whole side and doesn't talk because she is brain-damaged and also hates us all. She reads books upside down. You are only supposed to hate the Devil, and love everybody else.

My name is Ruth May and I hate the Devil (pp. 20f).

Rachel Price, nearly sixteen, first speaks as follows:

Man oh man, we are in for it now, was my thinking about the Congo from the instant we first set foot. We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn't look to me like we're in charge of a thing, not even our own selves. Father had planned a big old prayer meeting as a welcome ceremony, to prove that God had ensued us here and aimed to settle in. But when we stepped off the airplane and staggered out into the field with our bags, the Congolese people surrounded us—*Lordy!*—in a chanting broil. Charmed, I'm sure. We got fumigated with the odor of perspiring bodies. What I should have stuffed in my purse was those five-day deodorant pads.

I looked around for my sisters to tell them, "Hey, Ade, Leah, aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?" I couldn't find either one of the twins but did catch sight of Ruth May fixing to executrate her second swoon of the day (p. 22).

Rachel is the funniest of the four sisters, but she doesn't mean to be. She is of average intelligence, whereas her twin sisters are brilliant, gifted. Rachel is mostly interested in herself and how to survive without ruining her long, whitish-blonde hair. As the above quote illustrates, Rachel gets her language mixed up, often using the wrong words, sometimes with hilarious results. This is Kingsolver's technique, of course, to give Rachel a distinctive voice, but it works pretty well. I could use up the rest of my review just giving examples, but here are some of the best:

"But the men, now that is a course of a different color."

The men "wore steel bracelets on their black arms, and loose, flapping cloths tucked half hazardly around their waists" and carried heavy spears "to slew the animals."

"I was not about to be bothered by the spectrum of death. . . ."

"It gave him a mysterious air, like a putative from the law."

The students "wrestle with their numbers and their French congregations."

"Then all of a sudden the fire hit the pan."

"Mother vanished Mr. Axelroot from our table."

Other missionaries "don't like to come out here in the boondoggles" (which, ironically, is a fairly apt description).

"They aren't even Baptists. . . . They are Episcopotamians."

The "little kids [were] running like bansheets for cover."

"If his big plans were going so well, seems like we would have seen hides or tails of the Russians by now."

"It is a sheer tapestry of justice."

"[B]elieve you me, your chances are dull and void."

"I'm willing to be a philanderist for peace."

"Maybe he's been in Africa so long he has forgotten that we Christians have our own system of marriage, and it is called Monotony."

"I prefer to remain anomalous."

"I abided my time."

"[M]y feminine wilds."

"I'd found out about another one of Axelroot's little piccadillies."

"They have shot their own career ladders in the foot."

"Nelson was not going to sleep in our chicken house for all the teeth in China."

"If we don't boil our water for thirty full minutes we'll get plebiscites and what not."

And Rachel speaks of Moses coming down from "Mt. Syanide [sic]." I suppose that's the author's private joke, since cyanide is a poison.

Kingsolver must have had fun making these up! Although this is not a fun book in which everyone lives happily ever after, it is very funny in places.

Adah, Leah's twin who suffered brain damage at birth and has a quirky but brilliant mind, says:

> Sunrise tantalize, evil eyes hypnotize: this is the morning, Congo pink. Any morning, every morning. Blossomy rose-color birdsong air streaked sour with breakfast cookfires. A wide red plank of dirt—the so-called road—flat-out in front of us, continuous in theory from here to somewhere distant. But the way I see it through my Adah eyes it is a flat plank clipped into pieces, rectangles and trapezoids, by the skinny black-line shadows of tall palm trunks. Through Adah eyes, oh the world is a-boggle with colors and shapes competing for a half-brain's attention.

Due to her brain injury and her physical handicap, Adah always sees things differently from others, slanted or in reverse. She is well read (she likes Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allen Poe) and the most keenly aware of irony. She delights in palindromes, words and phrases that read the same backwards and forwards, and keeps making them up. (Here again Kingsolver allows herself some fun.) God's love" becomes "Evol's dog." Some of the palindromes are nonsensical, some are paradoxical or perverse (like "Amen enema"), and some are pin-point on target, going to the heart, in fact, of the novel itself. Perhaps the best are these two: "Evil, all its sin is still alive," and "Live was I ere I saw evil."

There are some clever resonances of Dickinson, Poe, and other poets in Adah's writing.

Much of the story is what happens to these three daughters—Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May—and in particular to their relationship with their father, Reverend Price. They all come to despise him because of his severity, drivenness, and lack of genuine love toward them. Father Price – whom Adah, with some irony, often calls "Our Father" (capitalized) – has a particularly perverse way of punishing his daughters for their weakness, slowness, or misdemeanors. He assigns them "The Verse." This means he gives them a particular Bible verse, and they must copy out that verse (from the King James Bible, naturally) and the following 99 verses. The hundredth verse specifies what their sin or infraction was, in Nathan Price's eyes. In this and other ways, the Bible in effect becomes poison to Reverend Price's own family.

Of the four daughters, Leah is the heroine. Her voice is most dominant, and she seems most to express the author's real point of view. She is complex and high-minded but also (like all the daughters and the mother, Orleanna) troubled with issues of guilt and forgiveness. Initially, she is the daughter who admires her father and tries to please him and be close to him. Part of the drama of the book is her gradual shift in attitude, from respect to loathing. The underlying tragedy in the book (so far as the book concerns the dynamics of the Price family) is that the daughters are able to see God only as mediated through their father – all law and obligation, and no grace. They never do come to see God in a truer light. Grace is the missing ingredient in the book. Where it does appear, it comes ironically, for the most part, in the shape of characters who are not avowedly Christians. (One thinks here of the movie, *Chocolat*.)

In the novel, Nathan Price is never given a voice except as he is quoted by his wife or daughters. But this does not mean his character is flat or undeveloped (as I believe some have claimed). Quite the opposite. Gradually we come to see who and what he is, and why. At one point Orleanna, reflecting back on her life with Nathan and how she came to marry him, reveals that he had been the sole survivor of the Bataan death march in the Philippines during World War II. He was changed by that experience, though it appears he was already cocky and self-assured. After the war he seems tormented by survivor's guilt. He is driven, unforgiven and unable to forgive, despising all weakness and therefore all compromise. As a result, throughout the book the reader can see that he is bound for self-destruction.

Some have said that in Nathan Price, Kingsolver lumps together all the worst mistakes of Christian missionaries in foreign lands. That is quite true. Yet Kingsolver says, in response to a question, that she is not anti-Christian or anti-missionary. She writes,

> Some people seem to think that, but I certainly don't, and I took some care to try and make that clear. In fact, my favorite character is Brother Fowles, whose role in the novel is to redeem both Christianity and the notion of mission. I happen to think religion is a wonderful thing—I'm only opposed to arrogant proselytizing. Nathan Price is, indeed, an arrogant proselytizer, but he's not the only agent of Christianity here. His wife and daughters take different paths toward more open-minded kinds of spirituality, and I called in Brother Fowles specifically to represent Christian mission in a kinder voice.
>
> Christianity, like every other major religion, has a million different voices and I think it's very important to remember that.

Kingsolver hardly needed to say that Brother Fowles, and his Congolese wife and family, are her ideals. I concluded that as I read the book. They and their ministry, combining humanitarian work with the study of Africa's flora and fauna, represent Kingsolver's ideal. Leah Price (and, later in the book, her African husband) come closest to imitating the ministry of Brother Fowles, in great contrast to the “ministry” of Nathan Price. (Incidentally, there are some implied, but unstated, ironies in the names “Fowles” and “Price.”)

The final character in *The Poisonwood Bible* is Orleanna Price, the wife and mother, for whom the reader can hardly help but having great sympathy. She is caught between love and obedience toward her husband and the care and protection of her children. She becomes very resourceful, largely out of necessity. Her life is one of great pain. Yet she copes and survives. But like all in the family, she struggles with issues of guilt and forgiveness. She is the narrator Kingsolver uses to fill in details and background and broader perspective. Like the author, she is poetic and a lover of nature. She is in various ways a victim, and eventually loses one of her daughters in Africa. During their months in the Congo, Orleanna can see what is happening to the children. Nathan can’t.

The Larger Story

From all I have said so far, you would conclude that this is essentially a personal drama about a missionary family in Africa. In fact, the story of the Prices is actually the vehicle for what is fundamentally a political novel and an exercise in historical fiction. Telling the story primarily through the voices of the four daughters, Kingsolver skillfully introduces the reader first to the main characters – the Price family and their life together in the Congo – before widening the focus to the broader horizons of the social-political drama unfolding in the background. The daughters’ gradual, step-by-step exploration of the world around and beyond their house and village becomes a metaphor for the widening of the story to the drama of Congo’s approaching independence from Belgium.

The real story – and, I think, the reason for the novel – is the drama of Congolese independence in 1960, the election of Patrice Lumumba as Congo’s first president, and the undermining of his regime by the United States, with help from the CIA. By political and military intrigue, Joseph Mobutu is installed in power and becomes a 30-year scourge on the Congo (renamed Zaire). Kingsolver feels deep-seated anger and a sense of betrayal over this, and successfully conveys these sentiments to the reader (at least in my case). Here again is a case of U.S. wrong-headed meddling in other countries, getting rid of Lumumba and replacing him with Mobutu, just as the U.S. in Chile managed to get rid of the freely-elected Allende and replace him with the dictator Pinochet (powerfully depicted in the movie, *Missing*). As Leah wryly observes in the book, capitalism and socialism are economic systems, while democracy and dictatorship are political systems – but the United States would rather deal with a dictatorship that is capitalist than with a democracy that is socialist. In the process, millions, millions of people become victims.

As if to show that she is dealing with the history fairly and accurately, Kingsolver includes a bibliography at the back of the book. One item is the 1976 report of the U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, under Senator Frank Church. This report, which

Kingsolver uses in the book, documents U.S. covert violence and other operations in the Congo fifteen years earlier, at the time of Congolese independence, during the administration of President Eisenhower.

Kingsolver's Style

Much more could be said about this, but I want to say a few words about Kingsolver's style, as a writer. Her work could profitably be studied by aspiring, or even accomplished, writers. (I have not yet read any of her other books.)

Kingsolver is a master of rhythm, cadence, and simplicity. Take, for example, this sentence: "All of them out there in the hot sun that day were just dumb animals cursed with the mark of ash on their brow" (p. 351). A sentence of 24 words, 23 of them words of one syllable.

Kingsolver is a master also of simile and metaphor. Here again I would like to give many examples, but a few will suffice:

Large forest trees "like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason."

Explorers and profiteers "walked out on Africa as a husband quits a wife."

"[W]e lumbered like cattle off the plane."

"The . . . women were singing high, quavery tunes like birds gone crazy in the full moon."

Nathan Price preaches, "his rising singsong preaching voice [going] high and low, then higher and lower, back and forth like a saw ripping into a tree trunk."

Congolese women "can sit, stand, talk, shake a stick at a drunk man, reach around their backs to fetch forth a baby to nurse, all without dropping their piled-high bundles upon bundles. They are like ballet dancers entirely unaware they are on stage."

Kingsolver can't resist giving all her characters, or at least the daughters, the ability to speak in such apt metaphors.

The Author

Barbara Kingsolver was born in eastern Kentucky in 1955 and, she says, grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field." She majored in biology at DePauw University in Indiana, took one creative writing course, and was involved in anti-Vietnam War protests. She has done scientific and political essays, using in part her background in biology. According to the biographical sketch on her website (probably written by herself),

> From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from

> insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.

According to the biographical sketch at the back of the book, Kingsolver and her husband have two daughters and divide their time between Tucson, Arizona, and the southern Appalachian mountains. Her other novels include *Pigs in Heaven, Animal Dreams,* and *The Bean Trees.* Like *The Poisonwood Bible*, each title involves an irony or seeming contradiction. So also her essay collection, *High Tide in Tucson.*

Concluding Reflections

What does an Evangelical Christian, and a former foreign missionary, make of this book? As a work of literature and an extended political essay, it is excellent. As a commentary on Christianity and Christian missions, it is unsatisfying. I have no trouble identifying with Kingsolver's critique of foreign missions as practiced by Nathan Price, though I do think her picture is exaggerated to the point of being unbelievable at points. (Would a fundamentalist Baptist preacher really preach from the Apocrypha? I think not. Kingsolver admits that Nathan Price was atypical in that respect.) As critique of the mistakes missionaries have made and do make, the book is excellent – failure to appreciate or learn the culture, for instance.

Yet where the book ends up is a disappointment. One is left feeling that though Kingsolver knows the Bible, she does not really know or understand the Gospel. Or if she does, she does not reveal this in the book. She knows the Bible as literature, but not really as Good News. (In fact, she unwittingly gives herself away at one point, referring to "the *parable* of the loaves and fishes.")

As Christians, we know that there are better solutions to the problems of guilt and unforgivenness than Orleanna Price or any of her daughters find. One can imagine a happier ending where the characters learn that there is genuine forgiveness in Jesus Christ and don't have to seek it merely from themselves, from one another, from good works, or from "the eyes in the trees."

Kingsolver, or at least her more sympathetic characters, end up with a kind of nature-loving pantheism. This is typified by Adah Price, the supposedly brain-damaged one who eventually "loses her slant" and becomes a brilliant doctor and researcher of African diseases. Adah concludes, near the end of the book:

> God is everything, then. God is a virus. Believe that, when you get a cold. God is an ant. Believe that, too, for driver ants [which appear as a scourge earlier in the book] are possessed, collectively, of the size and influence of a Biblical plague. . . .

> . . . Back then [when I was a teenager] I was still a bit appalled that God would set down his barefoot boy and girl dollies into an Eden where, presumably, He had just turned loose elephantiasis and microbes that eat the human cornea. Now I understand, God is not just rooting for the dollies. We and our vermin all blossomed together out of the same humid soil in the Great Rift Valley, and so far no one is really winning. Five million years is a long partnership. If you could for a moment rise up out of your own beloved skin and appraise ant, human, and virus as equally resourceful beings, you might admire the accord they have all struck in Africa (p. 529).

As I say, this is spiritually and theologically unsatisfying. There is a better solution. Kingsolver (or Adah) is right to point out the intricately laced relationship between human beings and the natural world, of course, and to glory in it. But to lose the distinction between Creator and creation always proves dehumanizing in the long run.

The problem of Nathan Price, and therefore of the whole Price family, is not that they fail to appreciate the flora and fauna and people, the nature and culture of Africa. The problem is that they fail to understand and experience God's grace in Jesus Christ. Yet I think that Kingsolver is quite right that the sad story of U.S. involvement in the Congo (like the earlier tragic history of King Leopold II and the Belgians in the Congo) is a betrayal of America's professed values. And, I would add as a Christian, a betrayal of the love and justice of the Kingdom of God.

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