

Congo. When she appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, Kingsolver explained her family's horror to discover, fifteen years after they had been forced to leave, that the death of Lumumba had been orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (remember it was a tip-off from the CIA that led to the arrest of Nelson Mandela?). The United States had discovered that Lumumba had been offered aid by Russia and that there was a very real threat of the success of communism in the region so they decided that he was expendable.

people to take over civic duties or governmental positions. Predictably there was chaos.

Although a rather charismatic figure, Patrice Labumba was a humble postal worker. Would he have succeeded? Even during his short presidency there was a breakaway faction in the Katanga region led by Moïse Tshombe.

Barbara Kingsolver believes that he could have and her main aim in writing the book was to expose the part the CIA played in his downfall. As she says in the beginning of the book she waited thirty years for the maturity to write this story.

Patrice Lumumba: 'My brothers', he said, 'we have suffered the colonial oppression in body and heart, and we say to you, all of that is finished. Together we are going to make a place for justice and peace, prosperity and grandeur. We are going to show the world what the *homme noir* (black man) can do when he works for freedom. We are going to make the Congo, for all of Africa, the heart of light.'

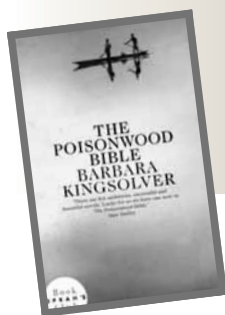
Poor Africa. No other continent has endured such an unspeakably bizarre combination of foreign thievery and foreign goodwill. All in the name of progress, but in reality in the name of greed. The story is told through the eyes of the wife and four children that at first sound naïve and simple, but even so you get a real feeling of what was going on. Orleanna, the mother provides the political background in flashbacks from a future life which she spent back in the southern states of America.

The father (Nathan) is never given a voice. We learn about him through the memories of his wife Orleanna. He is the fanatical missionary who believes that he has a duty to bring light and civilisation to the people of the Congo, and in the process sacrifices everything: the health and safety of his family and everything he possesses.

...this is not a nation, it is the Tower of Babel and it cannot hold an election. If these people are to be united at all, they will come together as God's lambs in their simple love for Christ.

The children have distinct voices. There is Rachel, the eldest who is almost totally blonde. She is a typical silly American teenager who longs for things like slumber parties and drugstores. She is vain and selfish. But she is also the survivor. Despite this she never goes back but ends up running the Hotel Equatorial single-handedly and successfully.

Leah and Adah are twins, graded as



The poisonwood Bible

MARION MARSH

Franschhoek Reading Circle

This superb book is about the Congo, and the influence the Belgians and the Americans had on it. We know it now as one of the most troubled places on earth. The question author Barbara Kingsolver is asking is, 'Would it have been any different if Lumumba was allowed to live?' He was the Mandela of his day, but he was president for only sixty days, so we will never know. She tells the story through the voices of the four daughters and the mother as they arrive in 1959. Inevitably Africa affects them for the rest of their lives.

Kingsolver herself spent her childhood years in the Congo as the child of medical and public health workers. They were not missionaries but must have had some as their friends. In 1960 after the assassination of Lumumba and the subsequent uprisings, many of the missionaries were killed and all whites were advised to leave the country. Although Kingsolver's parents left, she has tried to imagine what would have happened to a white family if they had stayed and through their story she is able to voice her disapproval of everything that happened. In doing so she makes the political personal.

The Kingsolver family naturally always took a great interest in the affairs of the

The Congo has had a troubled history. During the scramble for Africa in the 19th century, this vast territory (there are 250 ethnic groups) was awarded, not to the Belgians, but to King Leopold himself and was ruled by an army of his civil servants, who plundered it for every commodity they could find, mostly diamonds and rubber. The people were ruled with the utmost cruelty and ferocity and uprisings were ruthlessly dealt with. Thomas Pakenham in his book **The scramble for Africa** estimates that more people were killed in the Congo during that century than were killed in the Holocaust. It is thought that about 20 million lives were lost. The Belgians ensured that adequate infrastructure, roads and railways were provided to milk the territory's wealth.

The doctor: 'Reverend, missionary work is a great bargain for Belgium but it is a hell of a way to deliver social services. We Belgians made slaves of them and cut off their hands in the rubber plantations. Now you Americans have them for a slave wage in the mines and let them cut off their own hands. And you, my friend, are stuck with the job of trying to make amens (amends).'

Ruth May: 'I was glad nobody wanted to cut off my hands. Because Jesus made me white, I reckon they wouldn't.'

The 20th century colonialism became unfashionable. By this time the Americans had also moved in to exploit the country as much as they could. Despite the wealth to be gained it was decided, almost overnight, that colonies were too much of a burden. The Belgians had never trained black

gifted, although their father says that giving education to a woman is like filling shoes with water. They are mirror images of one another.

Adah and Leah had been sent to bring back water. Sent together, the twin and niwt, chained together always in life as in prelife. There was little choice, as Her Highness Rachel is above manual labor, and Ruth May beneath it so to speak.

Adah has hemiplegia. She is the only one who manages to leave Africa, as only 'half' of her was there. But she devotes her life to research into tropical diseases.

Ruth May is the baby, the 'laatlammetjie/okapi', and means the most to her mother. But she is the sacrificial lamb. It is only when she has been given up to Africa that her mother is able to leave.

She can't take the rest of them, so Leah is entrusted to Anatole and Rachel to Eeben Axelroot. She has to take the handicapped child, the one who will not be able to look after herself.

Let us deal with the minor characters first.

Eeben Axelroot, the villain: It is strange how often, in modern thrillers particularly, the villain is made out to be South African. In one sentence Barbara Kingsolver sums up where she got him from.

Somewhere deep in that crowd was a South African mercenary pilot who owned a radio. Very shortly, the CIA station chief knew Lumumba was free. (Lumumba had been imprisoned and it was as a result of this radio report that the CIA knew he had escaped.)

Apart from his unlikely name, I feel that the author is rather accurate in her summing up of him. Remember the mercenaries that went to the Seychelles? The type of people who are involved in illicit diamond buying? In her research she clearly came to South Africa, but were there electric gates and high walls in the sixties?

Anatole: He reminds me of Benedict in shades. An orphan and not bound by the superstitions that bind families together who can free himself through education. But still he is thrall to savage Africa (the scars on his face) and can never leave even though he studies in Africa. In an argument with the father (p.150) he tries to explain African beliefs to someone who clearly won't listen. He is a wise man who genuinely tries to do good. During the ant invasion he helps to save them all while Nathan runs around preaching sermons about the plagues.

Anatole: 'Don't blame God for what ants have to do. We all get hungry. Congolese people are not so different from Congolese ants.' 'When they are pushed down long enough they will rise up. If they bite you, they are trying to fix things in the only way they know.'

He explains why the Congolese continue to give them gifts of food. They don't want them there, but they also don't want them to die. White people make powerful ghosts.

Methuselah: At first he seems just a comic character who has been taught to say rude words. When Nathan throws him out, he can't go far because he has lost muscle tone in his wings and he can't find food for himself. He is set free on Independence Day and like the Congolese he has not been taught to fly.

Adah: At last it is Independence Day, for Methuselah and the Congo. But he wasn't taught to fly.

The enslaved parrot Methuselah, whose flesh has been devoured now by many generations of predators, is forcing his declaration of independence through the mouths of leopards and civet cats.

Brother Fowles: He is a Catholic and much more relaxed about the moral issues and pragmatic about religion. He does not try to force the people to do anything they don't want to do and they refer to him with affection. He is known as Tata Biddy Biddy.

The Underwoods: Those strange people who hang on at the end of a colonial era. Because they have a good life in Leopoldville while poverty rages around them.

Nathan: Returned from the war in the Pacific a changed man. During a battle he was wounded and semi-conscious he crawled away from the scene and hid himself. On his recovery he learns that his entire battalion perished in the most terrible way. He is unable to come to terms with his guilt and feels that the only way to atone is to give his life entirely into the service of God. His control over his family is absolute and they all come to hate him. Rachel always refers to him as 'Our Father'. A southern Baptist preacher who specialises in the Upper Hand comes to bring salvation to the people of the Congo. He is narrow-minded and bigoted and in the end his poisonwood Bible comes to be as discredited as the Apocrypha is to modern Christianity.

He interprets the Bible as he pleases. He thinks he knows the language and keeps

telling them that Tata Jesus is Bangala which can mean several things. He does not have the blessing of the Missionary Society to stay there. In the Congolese he meets his match. They refuse to be converted. He wants to baptise them in the river, but the river is full of crocodiles. They see his intentions as murderous, but it is his frustrations that are murderous.

Then I saw him (Nathan) reborn with a stone in place of his heart. God was testing him like Job... the Congo breathed behind the curtain of forest, preparing to roll over us like a river.

There is also his attitude to sex.

Bethlehem: ...man and swollen wife and no more room at the inn.

Orleanna: She starts off life as simple Southern belle who is flattered by the attentions of the handsome young preacher. Because her generation (the fifties) never had any of the options that females have these days she puts up with everything that subsequently happens to her. It is her duty to stay with Nathan and she has his children one after another. Until her favourite child is taken from her. This gives her the strength to break away but never frees her from Africa. In the end she asks Leah why she did not pour kerosene over both her and her father.

I knew Rome was burning, but I had just enough water to scrub the floor, so I did what I could. But look at old women and bear in mind we are another country. We married with simple hopes... But his (Nathan's) kind will always lose in the end... they stand still... A territory is only possessed for a moment in time. They're desperate to hang on.

...trying to wear the marks of the boot on my back as gracefully as the Congo wears hers.

I had washed up there (in the Congo) on the riptide of my husband's confidence and the undertow of my children's needs. ...hell hath no fury like a Baptist preacher. I remained his wife because it was the one thing I was able to do each day. ...I was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease from which I have not managed a full recovery.

In Africa she comes to question her religious beliefs.

I was blinded from the constant looking back: Lot's wife. I only ever saw the gathering clouds.

Unto the woman God said: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (From the Book of Judges).



Orleanna finds her heart of darkness.

By then, I was lodged in the heart of darkness, so thoroughly bent to the shape of marriage I could hardly see any other way to stand. ...though my soul hankered after the mountain, I found, like Methuselah, I had no wings.

Finally she sums it up.

To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to die one hundred deaths. I am a mother. You aren't, he wasn't.

Rachel, the all-American teenager who only wants pretty things and parties. Whose only treasure is a mirror. She is, by the way, the whitest of them all. She is uncomplicated and not very intelligent. She sees her father for what he is and does not try to please him. Her observations of the neighbours are always comical. She sees them as ridiculous. It is she who sees the chief for what he is and when she is offered in marriage pragmatically chooses to go with Eben Axelroot instead. She remembers her hope chest. *...remembered my hope chest. I guess you might say my hopes never got off the ground.*

In Johannesburg she makes the best of her life. She marries a diplomat, wears designer clothes and then marries a rich man from whom she inherits an hotel. She is successful.

...the Equatorial, which isn't just a hotel, it's like running a whole little country where everybody wants to run off with a piece for themselves the minute you turn your back.

But she won't let her sister's husband, Anatole, come to stay.

Adah: She will always be a crooked little person trying to tell the truth. She chooses not to talk but is an acute observer. What does the palindrome effect really mean except that she is a mirror image of her twin? Nathan and Adah can both be spelt both ways. On her lameness:

Recently it has been decided, grudgingly, that dark skin or lameness may not be entirely one's fault, but one still ought to show the good manners to act ashamed.

We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all of his history. ...the mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible.

She loses her faith.

Leah: Completely embraces Africa. She

marries Anatole and produces children the colour of coffee and silt and loam. She observes that time erases whiteness and sees her children as the true citizens of Africa. However, she always manages to get them to America for their jabs.

I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt, loam, dust, and clay... I understand that time erases whiteness altogether.

I could see that the whole idea and business of childhood was nothing guaranteed. It seemed to me, in fact, like something more or less invented by white people and stuck onto the front end of a grown up life like a frill on a dress.

p.572: 'Everything you're sure is right can be wrong in another place. Especially here.'

Leah: *Poor Father... ...stamped me with a belief in justice, then drenched me in culpability, and I wouldn't wish such torment even on a mosquito.*

Ruth May: The sacrificial lamb who has to be given up to free them all from Africa. There are three things that point to this. She is the one who has observed the fledging communist uprising in the Congo by spying on them from the alligator pear tree.

The very last chapter has Ruth May speaking from the dead. In the end she receives the precious gift of the okapi which she slips into her pocket.

The final question is about missionaries and missionary work: what do you think...?