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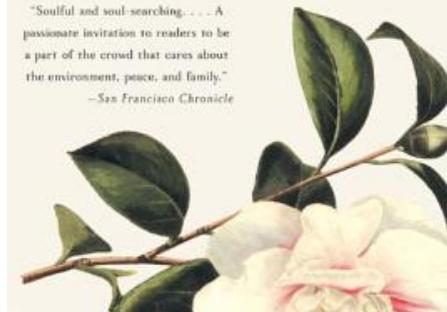
BARBARA KINGSOLVER

SMALL WONDER

Essays

"Soulful and soul-searching. . . . A passionate invitation to readers to be a part of the crowd that cares about the environment, peace, and family."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*



Small Wonder

Barbara Kingsolver

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Small Wonder Barbara Kingsolver

Sometimes grave, occasionally hilarious, and ultimately persuasive, *Small Wonder* is a hopeful examination of the people we seem to be, and what we might yet make of ourselves.

In her new essay collection, the beloved author of *High Tide in Tucson* brings to us, out of one of history's darker moments, an extended love song to the world we still have.

Whether she is contemplating the Grand Canyon, her vegetable garden, motherhood, genetic engineering, or the future of a nation founded on the best of all human impulses, these essays are grounded in the author's belief that our largest problems have grown from the earth's remotest corners as well as our own backyards, and that answers may lie in both those places.

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Small Wonder Details

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From Reader Review Small Wonder for online ebook

Lani says

I first read sections of Barbara Kingsolver's "Small Wonder" aloud, while recording a Christmas gift CD for friends and family in 2003. Several of the essays were so poignant to those of us hurting from the Sept. 11 attacks and tensions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

I re-read the book last month (June 2007), and found new messages in Kingsolver's beautifully formed essays. Her well-researched and rational pleas for the environment, her touching stories about family, her hopes for humanity and the future. ...Having just adopted two ducklings and two chicks, I was particularly amused by the sweet observations of her younger daughter's pride in caring for the family's small flock.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

4.5 stars

I was inclined to think I would like Kingsolver's fiction much better than her essays. Happily, I was wrong. This is a collection of beautifully written essays covering everything from raising chickens to raising children, from global war to birdwatching. There are so many perfectly expressed ideas and sentiments in these essays that I know I'll be reading it again. I laughed with her as she shared her young daughter's pronouncements, cried with her as she briefly shared her rape experience at age nineteen, and continually marveled at her ongoing hopefulness and idealism about the future of the world in general. I've very much enjoyed most of her novels, and now with these essays I've gained a great new respect for her as a person and a writer.

Her husband is an ornithologist, and there are some wonderful pieces the two of them wrote together about their birding experiences south of the border and closer to their own backyard. Nature-loving bird freak that I am, I really got into these essays.

I grew up without television and long ago chose to continue living without it, so the essay about why she keeps "the one-eyed monster" out of her home had special resonance for me. She articulated so well all the things I think and feel about the topic and am not able to put clearly into words. I feel like making photocopies for all my friends so we can understand each other about this.

Much food for thought and warmth and humor in this collection.

Amy Hoffman says

This book made me realize that I have been ignorant and extremely naive about my country and its involvement in world politics. Now I finally have an idea of just why other countries (especially those much, much poorer than our own) hate America and would like nothing better than to see us brought to our knees. With the current sluggish economy and thousands of people (my husband included) currently out of work, they may have gotten at least part of their wish. Kingsolver's book makes me want to open my eyes at last to

the realities of things our world leaders have done (and are still doing) that they would rather we remained blissfully ignorant of. I'm glad she included a list of books that gave her information about the truth behind our country's dealings with other countries. I for one am going to check them out and see what things I might learn. It's time.

Luke says

Excellent ideas, a writer who likes to hear herself write a little bit, but that goes with the essay as a tool, and it must be said that she is very witty and clear. . . I really liked it. She has a similar message to Wendell Berry, but she's not the "female Wendell Berry" that some people describe her as. There are some fundamental differences. She is missing the solid Christian underpinnings that Berry writes from with strength, though doesn't lean on as a crutch. Kingsolver doesn't seem so rooted in her writing, instead leaning more on her personal experience. When she gets heated about a topic (I agree with 95% of what she is saying and it desperately needs to be said) I sometimes wonder why she feels that way and what is driving her to stand up for the things she believes to be right. But like I said, what she is saying is often right on in my opinion, considering politics, importance of family and connectedness to the land, and social action.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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Jocelyn says

I get the feeling that Barbara Kingsolver wrote this book mostly for herself. Sure, there are the great environmental, feminist, and pacifist morals, which I must note now that I did often strongly agree with, but they are overshadowed by Kingsolver reveling in her own writing.

At several points, Kingsolver takes on an insultingly self-righteous and condescending tone, and in these sections most of what I got out of the book was "gardens, hope, nature, I'm better than you, peace." She's got it all--the humble brag, the outright boasting, the subtle jab at everyone who isn't her. Halfway through, I thought it would be fun to place sticky notes on sections I found particularly disgusting, and soon ran out of sticky notes.

Mostly, it's the superior tone that puts me off. Kingsolver seems to believe that she does most things better than everyone else and urges everyone to do the same--eat from vegetable gardens, support local growers, don't take many airplane flights--even though 1) a lot of people can't afford those organic or pesticide-free foods, 2) most of us don't have the time or land to plant our own vegetables, and 3) she mentions taking so many flights that she has "enough frequent-flyer miles to go to China."

And anyway, I'm here to read about your ideas and your suggestions and then judge them for myself, not have them shoved down my throat and denounced if I don't agree with them. Admittedly, I do often agree with them, so I'm not as offended as, say, a reader who doesn't have such strong beliefs regarding feminism would be. Even so, at some really low points, I did groan out loud (out of both exasperation and anger).

Kingsolver seems to ignore those not-so-little things that could weaken her case: staunchly supporting global warming without even mentioning scientific evidence (or lack thereof), check; completely disregarding the cost of those "healthier" foods, check. Coupled with her bragging (she has an entire section devoted to telling us how badly she thought of herself in high school, then gleefully telling us that she was actually very pretty and was valedictorian, even though this has nothing to do with her point whatsoever), this book was nearly intolerable.

So, if you agree with every single thing she says, by all means go for the book. It's eye-opening, in an infuriating way. But remember, if you think you'll so much as question one idea she has, you'll probably start to feel irritated by Kingsolver's smug tone before long.

Note: This is the first book that I have ever quite literally thrown down in disgust.

Michael says

Written in the period after 9-11, this diverse set of essays advances one's sense of participation in life around us and ways to move toward sisterhood with others on the planet. The resonance of the universal in the particular shines throughout.

booklady says

My oldest daughter just climbed into bed next to me with her English 4 textbook. She said, Letter to my Mother is what I'd write to you if I could write like Barbara Kingsolver. When she left to take her shower, I asked her to leave the book with me. I read it with tears running down my face almost from start to finish. But they were tears of joy and it was one of the most beautiful tributes to mother-daughter love/relationships that I've read in a long time! Tender and oh so true!

Now I must try to read some of the *other* essays in the book...

Andi says

Okay, so Animal, Vegetable, Miracle was one of those books that significantly changed my life, and I really liked, as did the rest of the world it seems, The Poisonwood Bible, but I honestly cannot tell you what made me want to read Kingsolver's essay collection Small Wonder. Maybe I read about it on a blog or in a review, and whoever turned me onto this book, I owe you a huge debt of gratitude. This is the book that helped me start my book. No joke, no questions, this book did it.

There's something about Kingsolver's voice in this collection that just comes off as honest and true, not overly crafted or carefully worded. This isn't a collection of wrought language and complex metaphor. These essays are just the writer's perspective on a lot of issues from her daughter's decision to raise chickens for their eggs to the U.S. flag to biodiversity. Each piece is - in the way of most things - political for it states a clear perspective and opinion on something, and I really like that. I like knowing where she stands, and knowing why she stands there. I feel like I've just finished a really good visit with a dear friend, a trip where

we spent the day walking the beach or sitting by the fire and just talking - sometimes deeply, sometimes heatedly, but always honestly, in the way I only can with my closest friends.

The last page of the book, which is the last page of the essay "God's Wife's Measuring Spoons," says this.

... still I suspect that the deepest of all human wishes, down there on the floor of the soul underneath the scattered rugs of lust and thirst and hunger, is the tongue-and-groove desire to be understood. And life is a slow trek along the path toward realizing how that wish will go unfulfilled. Such is the course of all wisdom: Others will see the front and the back, but inside is where we each live, in that home where only one heart will ever beat. There we have to make our peace with all we need of sorrow, and all we can ever know of the divine, by whatever name we call it.

What I can find is this, and so it has to be: conquering my own despair by doing what little I can. Stealing thunder, tucking it in my pocket to save for the long drought. Dreaming in the color green, tasting the end of anger. Don't ask me for the evidence. The possibility of a kinder future, the existence of God - these are just two of many things fall into the category I would label "impossible to prove, and proof is not the point." Faith has a life of its own.

And well, that about says it. This book is one that will sit on my shelf to be caressed and peeked into when I, too, am seeking to conquer by own despair by doing what little I can.

Rebecca says

If I had to pick one book that would come with me wherever I went, it would be this one. This is my all-time favorite book. My favorite Kingsolver, my favorite book of essays (my favorite medium), my favorite. She is my hero.

Matt says

I would recommend this book to anyone. It is worth the price of admission just for the essays "Knowing Our Place" and "Lily's Chickens," although the whole thing is worth reading. The first essay and some of the others feel a little dated since they are reflections written just after September 11, 2001 (Not that that makes them any worse--they capture the mood of that time very well, it's just that a lot has happened since). One of the essays, about the author not watching TV, touches on the shooting at Columbine, which was timely for me, having just read Dave Cullen's "Columbine," and a certain blog post about choosing how to use our time. Anyway, I will be reading more Kingsolver in the future.

okyrhoe says

In general terms I, too, am on the same side of the fence as Kingsolver. Maybe that's why I was disappointed to find that this was not as engaging a read as I expected it to be.

As I was reading through these post-9/11 "essays" I found it increasingly difficult to be sympathetic with Kingsolver's earthmother-y stance, her frequent recourse to phrases such as 'balance,' 'salvation,' 'spirit' and 'small wonder' in the face of pressing global political and environmental issues. These are generalities that sound very nice, but practically speaking, can mean different things to each reader. Or worse, they can mean nothing at all. I wish Kingsolver would be more specific and precise when offering her viewpoints or even her advice.

Speaking of 9-11, Kingsolver writes, "This new enemy is not a person or a place, it isn't a country; it is a pure and fearsome ire as widespread as some raw element like fire. I can't sensibly declare war on fire, or reasonably pretend that it lives in a secret hideout like some comic-book villain, irrationally waiting while my superhero locates it and then drags it out to the thrill of my applause."

One cannot reduce human beings, no matter how disagreeable their ideologies or their destructive their actions, to a metaphysical abstract. I get the sense, by the end of this collection, that Kingsolver has the tendency to perceive the 'enemies' in what she considers the pressing issues of the day through the prism of morality and abstraction. She makes it seem as if by being a responsive mother, a conscientious gardener, or a socially-conscious consumer, then the inherent benevolence of her convictions and her life choices will act as mental duct-tape and shield her from the existential angst of the post-9/11 reality.

When discussing specific issues - ecology, global warming, genetically modified food, poverty, etc. - it's irritating when she shies away from specifically identifying those 'other people' she perceives as the 'evildoers.' She tells us of the dangers of GMOs, for example, but does not venture to name names, to identify the governments, multinational companies, etc. which are releasing these organisms/foodstuffs into the market without notifying us or soliciting our consent. If she is a biologist, a scientist, then she must be aware of exactly who or what is behind this movement, and I expect her to inform the reader on this count. Maybe she assumes we've already done our 'homework' and are informed on these matters. But if that is so, then why does she waste her breath on such a truly pedantic argument against television ("The One-Eyed Monster, or Why I Don't Let Him In")? Come on, we all know too much TV is no good, regardless of the many reasons why.

It's only in the last essay, "God's Wife's Measuring Spoons," that she begins to take a less dove-ish stance. Unfortunately, by this point, the 'enemies' she's railing against are her critics. After having enjoyed reading her fiction, I didn't think I'd end up being one myself.

Meghan Pinson says

If I could get my dad to read this book, I wouldn't have to ruin perfectly good camping trips arguing the points she so effectively tackles. Sorry about the tilapia, Dad!

Lusi says

Kingsolver has a way with words, that after reading the first couple of essays, you feel as though you should start a garden, start a chicken coup, and start riding a bike to limit your carbon footprints. Then after a few more essays, you feel as though, you should volunteer more often, and generally do better at being a human being. Assuming of course you weren't already. Kingsolver forces us to have questions of our own, about the state of affairs in our country, from the seemingly endless wars "we" find ourselves in, to the seemingly endless issues associated with poverty and homelessness. Will we ever be at peace with the rest of the world, and how can we? If we're starving many souls in the world, by our incessant need to consume more and waste more of the earth's resources without a thought to what we're going to do when we run out. However,

far from being a "sky is falling" series of essays as I'm making it out to be, Kingsolver more than anything (from what I gather) wishes we all take time out of our busy lives to marvel at the small wonders this life has to offer. For we only have one to live, and there are only 24 hours in a day. And hopefully, life offers you many small wonders to marvel at instead of wasting hours of your life away in front of a talking box, commonly known as an idiot box, or television. But more importantly, that we find a way to help our local community, our world to be a better place for all of its inhabitant rather than a select few.

Donna says

This was a collection of nonfiction essays written by Barbara Kingsolver. I probably would never have read this on my own, but it was a book club read so I took up the challenge.

There were parts of this that I liked. Overall, it is worth the time to read. Some of it was definitely thought provoking. It felt quite personal in that she shared so much of herself and her stand on various topics. She makes her points politely and does so in an easy manner. I thought she was careful to not offend or to beat anyone over the head with her stand on certain topics.

Now with that being said, I didn't agree with some of her opinions. There was some eye rolling on my part, but I guess that is where we agree to disagree and that is okay. I would give this 3.5 stars but will round up because it was well written and thoughtfully assembled

Jennifer says

I just thought this was bad. Maybe it was my mood but it just seemed condescending (by that I mean it was dumbed down too dramatically) and far to preacher-y. Sorry Kingsolver, I generally love your writing but I wish I never read this.

claire says

I love Barbara Kingsolver but I think I was reading this book at the wrong time. It was written in 2001 and has a lot of essays about how terrible our country it. If I read this book 5 years ago I probably would've really liked it, but right now I am riding the Obama wave of optimism and hope to not going back to hating our country for a long time.

Tyler Jones says

Gee, I hope nobody finds out I not only read but *liked* a Barbara Kingsolver book or my reputation as a tough guy will be ruined. Still, I am man enough to give credit where it's due and these essays, while sometimes flowery, delivered a lot of information as well as passion. If her arguments are as emotional as they are logical it can be forgiven because, well, if you can't get emotional about topics like the destruction of the environment or the hi-jacking of democracy, then you should check your pulse.

So does this mean I'm going to run out and join a book club reading *The Bean Trees*? Not likely. But I will take these pieces to heart and try to tread lighter on this earth and the poor people on it.

Jennifer says

Kingsolver's in a bit of a tough position; she cares deeply about things like biodiversity, homelessness, sustainable agriculture, and pacifism, but she can't usually approach these topics from a relatable, self-deprecating angle because she's the rare human who actually plans her lifestyle around her beliefs. In light of this, she does a damned good job of keeping the preaching to a minimum, and along the way she offers down-to-earth, beautiful writing on everything from reading short stories to mother-daughter relationships to hummingbird nests. I'd probably recommend her other essay collection ("High Tide in Tucson") before this one, but you can't go wrong with either.

Lukie says

Kingsolver is my personal hero. She puts everything I believe, and more that I didn't know I believed until she says it, into gorgeous, heartfelt, clear, high-impact prose. If the world worked according to her ideals, it would be an awesome place. I would be so happy living here, as would everyone else. (Okay, not the truly greedy or fanatics.)

One of the things I admire most about her is that she makes the effort to scrutinize and write about so many topics that most of us think about from time to time, maybe even lie awake at night fretting over, but also turn away from...because it gets too hard to look all the time. It's discouraging to see a worsening of U.S. politics, poverty, war, GMOs, etc etc, and so we turn to petty distractions and escapes. But Kingsolver (I want to call her Barbara, actually) really LIVES her beliefs, AND writes about it so that the rest of us can read it and find comfort that she's putting it all into eloquent words for us.

I worry for her! She wrote this 12 years ago and things have only gotten worse. For someone who cares so much, she must be so disappointed! But she more than manages--writing three (?) books since then and no doubt is working on something else right now. And growing food and reaping the benefits of having raised two girls awesomely. (Curious to know what they're up to!)

I feel as deeply as she does (mostly) about the topics she writes about, but I haven't found a way to deal with it, turn it into something positive. I get really angry and really sad every day. On the topic of not giving in to despair, she writes, "Faith has a life of its own. Maybe the cynics are on top of the game, and maybe they're not. Maybe it doesn't cost anything to hope, and those of us who do will be able to live better, more honest lives as believers than we could as cynics. . . . Maybe life doesn't get any better than this, or any worse, and what we get is just what we're willing to find: small wonders, where they grow."

They certainly grow in this book.
