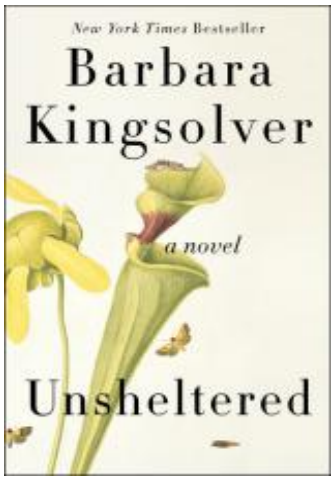
# Unsheltered

by Barbara Kingsolver




## About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of FLIGHT BEHAVIOR, THE LACUNA and THE POISONWOOD BIBLE and recipient of numerous literary awards --- including the National Humanities Medal, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the Orange Prize --- returns with a timely novel that interweaves past and present to explore the human capacity for resiliency and compassion in times of great upheaval.

*How could two hardworking people do everything right in life*, a woman asks, *and end up destitute?* Willa Knox and her husband followed all the rules as responsible parents and professionals, and have nothing to show for it but debts and an inherited brick house that is falling apart. The magazine where Willa worked has folded; the college where her husband had tenure has closed. Their dubious shelter is also the only option for a disabled father-in-law and an exasperating, free-spirited daughter. When the family?s one success story, an Ivy-educated son, is uprooted by tragedy, he seems likely to join them, with dark complications of his own.

In another time, a troubled husband and public servant asks, *How can a man tell the truth, and be reviled for it?* A science teacher with a passion for honest investigation, Thatcher Greenwood finds himself under siege: his employer forbids him to speak of the exciting work just published by Charles Darwin. His young bride and social-climbing mother-in-law bristle at the risk of scandal, and dismiss his worries that their elegant house is unsound. In a village ostensibly founded as a benevolent Utopia, Thatcher wants only to honor his duties, but his friendships with a woman scientist and a renegade newspaper editor threaten to draw him into a vendetta with the town?s powerful men.

UNSHELTERED is the compulsively readable story of two families, in two centuries, who live at the corner of Sixth and Plum in Vineland, New Jersey, navigating what seems to be the end of the world as they know it. With history as their tantalizing canvas, these characters paint a startlingly relevant portrait of life in precarious times when the foundations of the past have failed to prepare us for the future.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** What do the living spaces in their various conditions throughout the novel suggest about the people living in them? Figuratively speaking, which foundations turn out to be solid, or precarious?

**2.** Mary Treat tells Thatcher that to be unsheltered is to live in daylight. What does she mean? What kinds of shelter do these characters crave, in their different centuries? How might sheltered lives --- or the craving for them --- become a hindrance?

**3.** Which of the many challenges confronting Willa are hers alone to bear, and why? What do you see as the foundation of her successful relationship with Iano? How has marriage changed, or not changed, since the time of Rose and Thatcher?

**4.** Why do you think happy marriages so rarely appear in fiction?

**5.** In what ways, if any, do you find Nick?s bigotry and anger comprehensible? What accounts for Tig?s patience with him, despite their differences? How do the family?s conflicts relate to the polarization of present times? What?s suggested by Willa?s and Nick?s argument taking place on the Walt Whitman Bridge?

**6.** How are Mary Treat?s eccentricities related to her strengths? In what ways is her friendship especially valuable to Thatcher? What is the role of the scientist in times of social upheaval?

**7.** What are some of the"old mythologies" discussed by Mary and Thatcher, to which people cling for comfort even when they?re no longer true? Are any of these still popular in the modern era?

**8.** Mary tells Thatcher she is "astonished at how little most people can manage to see." Specifically, which realities in her century, and ours, do people find it difficult to see? What are the costs? Is it possible to view ourselves objectively in our own time?

**9.** When Thatcher sees the world "divided in two camps, the investigators and the sweeteners," what is he observing? Which of the novel?s characters are the former, and which are the latter? Where would you place yourself?

**10.** Consider the creative names and botanical character identities throughout the novel. What do they reveal? How have the various characters? education or backgrounds shaped their perspectives? Why do you think a select few of them are able to think outside of what Tig calls "the cardboard box," or Mary, "the pumpkin shell?"

**11.** What family dynamics might have made Tig and Zeke so different and combative, while Jorge and his siblings are close and supportive?

**12.** How do the characters in two centuries variously understand and connect with the natural world? When Willa?s phone causes "thousands of birds [to burst] from their tree skyward like a house going up in smoke," what does this potent image suggest? What about the ants that seem to inhabit the neighborhood outside the boundaries of time?

**13.** When Willa complains that "the rules don?t apply anymore," what does she mean? How are Zeke and Tig preparing

differently for a future in which they will have less than their parents? Did the novel move you to any new insights about generational difference?

**14.** How does the powerful experience of loss affect this novel?s characters, at personal and societal levels? Is the nature of grief constant across human experience? How might "the loss of what they know" influence people?s political behavior?

**15.** The novel?s epigraph quotes a Wallace Stevens poem,"The Well Dressed Man with a Beard." How does the epigraph relate to the novel, and how might Christopher Hawk (a well-dressed man with a beard) serve as its pivot point? Why do you think the author chose to set the story in two different centuries? And why these two in particular?

**16.** In shifting between chapters, what changes did you notice in the characters? language, or the narrative tone? In what ways did you find the two separate narratives connected?

**17.** What is the "precise balance of terror and mollycoddling" that Charles Landis manages? How, when and why do you think people respond to this leadership style?

**18.** The shooting of Uri Carruth by Charles Landis, and subsequent not-guilty verdict, are actual historical events. Is the anecdote relevant to the present? What is the role of journalism in a healthy society? Who is responsible for its integrity?

**19.** As they shift from parent-child to a more adult relationship, what does Willa learn from her daughter? How might "the secret of happiness" be "low expectations?" How does this relate to the lost-and-found quote about happiness from Willa Cather?s MY ANTONIA?

**20.** Thatcher settles finally on seeing Mary Treat as "a giant redwood: oldest and youngest of all living things, the tree that stood past one eon into the next." Do you agree?

## Author Bio

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times she has lived in England, France and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Kingsolver was named one the most important writers of the 20th century by *Writers Digest*, and in 2023, she won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel DEMON COPPERHEAD. In 2000, she received the National Humanities Medal, our country?s highest honor for service through the arts. Her books have been translated into more than 30 languages and have been adopted into the core curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the nation.

Critical acclaim for her work includes multiple awards from the American Booksellers Association and the American Library Association, a James Beard award, two-time Oprah Book Club selection, and the National Book Award of South

Africa, among others. She was awarded Britain's prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly the Orange Prize) for both DEMON COPPERHEAD and THE LACUNA, making Kingsolver the first author in the history of the prize to win it twice. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

She has two daughters, Camille and Lily. She and her husband, Steven Hopp, live on a farm in southern Appalachia where they raise an extensive vegetable garden and Icelandic sheep.

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