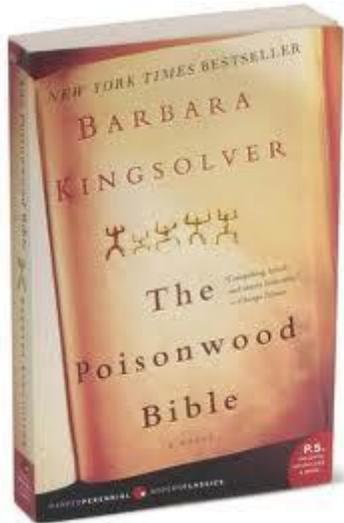


The Poisonwood Bible, by Barbara Kingsolver
Reviewed by Liz Wassenaar



Told in first-person narrative, with the female protagonists alternating chapters, *The Poisonwood Bible* follows the story of a Baptist missionary family, the Prices, that travels to the Congo in order to, in the words of the family patriarch, “save Africa for Jesus.” Leading the cause is dogmatic, fiery preacher Nathan Price, followed by his wife Orleanna, whose own passion for Jesus is decidedly (though secretly) less than that of her husband. Nonetheless, she is initially deferential to her husband’s decision. Along for the ride are their four daughters: the eldest, Rachel, vain and prone to malapropisms of all kinds; twins Ada and Leah, whose similarities begin and end with their shared birth date; and Ruth May, the adventurous, stubborn youngest.

Although the family arrives with all they required when the southern United States was home, they soon realize they are utterly unprepared for what awaits them in their assigned village of Kilanga. Although Nathan Price is posed to act as the village’s Christian savior, its inhabitants are far less interested in his Western idea of church. His accusatory sermons denigrate everything from their dressing habits (the women go topless) to their current worship practices (they wish to include the Christian God among the pantheon of those they already worship). Unsurprisingly, his Sunday speeches hardly ingratiate his chosen flock to the red-haired preacher. Ignoring any attempts of assistance by friendlier villagers, he continues to take a fire-and-brimstone approach in his increasingly poorly attended church services.

While Nathan Price resolutely presses on against this un-turning tide, both Orleanna and the daughters begin to understand the villagers not as uncouth savages, but as people with a different, but no less valuable, social structure. And as this understanding grows, faith in the forceful Price patriarch grows dimmer. And in perhaps response to this, Reverend Price’s insistence and fervor continues to grow even stronger.

One would be remiss, however, to not discuss this book in the wider context that Kingsolver has assigned the Price women and the fervent reverend. In the middle of their stay a political coup, orchestrated by the United States’ CIA, creates large-scale unrest across the country. Although the inhabitants of Kilanga by and large remain oblivious to political forces, the escalating Congo Crisis parallels the tension created by Nathan Price’s unbending fanaticism on villager and Price family alike.

Ultimately a commentary on ignorant Western, particularly U.S, involvement in Africa, *The Poisonwood Bible* sets the stage for the reader’s reflection on this very issue. The novel is not a mere family drama about a zealous minister and some unwilling followers. Nor is the Congo circa 1959 just a backdrop to their plight. Although Kingsolver’s treatment with this subject is heavy-handed at times (it’s difficult to miss that Reverend Price’s attitude symbolizes the U.S’s own arrogance in foreign nations) she does so in such a way that it is not distracting.

The Price's own time in Kilanga finally ends due to a family tragedy. Meanwhile, the incredible violence and instability due to Western involvement Congo continued to escalate for the next seven or so years. The proverbial "blood on their hands" was a reality for both the fictional family and those who orchestrated the coup. Price women and reader alike are left to unpack the aftermath.

But how, then, does one deal with the intrinsic culpability the West has due to African involvement? Darkness and guilt engulf the Price's and Congolese stories at the novels' climax. By osmosis, the reader is as well, due in part greatly to the book's manner of narrative. The commentaries of the five Price women reveal a different kind of developing maturation and understanding of their experiences from their arrival to tragic end, and beyond. Their words draw one into the story, making it impossible to escape long after the book has come to a close. The Price's small-scale involvement in Kilanga leaves each woman having to deal with her experience, and ensuing guilt, in wholly different ways. Kingsolver gives no easy solutions on how to deal with our own feelings of culpability as Westerners. How can she? Rather, she leaves us to ponder our own actions, as well as those of our country.