

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher: AP Literature

School: Liberty High School

Book Title: *The Poisonwood Bible*

Genre: Fiction

Author: Barbara Kingsolver

Pages: 543

Publisher: HarperCollins

Copyright: 1999

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and Summary Citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

The Poisonwood Bible is a story told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. They carry with them everything they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it—from garden seeds to Scripture—is calamitously transformed on African soil. What follows is a suspenseful epic of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa. (Book flap)

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum blueprints and/or State standards.

Kingsolver's complex portrait of a family and a country will be used in the latter portion of AP Literature when students are developing sophistication with close reading of a full-length text. The novel is told from multiple points of view, and employs a layered structure and rich allusions that all contribute to the complex character relationships and themes in the text. One aspect of sophistication, according to the literary argument rubric outlined by the College Board, is the ability to place a text in its context and the novel's very specific geographical and historical context will assist students in making connections between the craft of literature and the social/historical context that informs it. Students will also have read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which goes farther back in the history of the same region and which also provides a layer of allusion (in addition *The Poisonwood Bible*'s many Biblical allusions.)

Priority Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form). Reviews should suggest an appropriate grade-level or grade-band.

Review #1: *The New York Times*

Although "The Poisonwood Bible" takes place in the former Belgian Congo and begins in 1959 and ends in the 1990s, Barbara Kingsolver's powerful new book is actually an old-fashioned 19th-century novel, a Hawthornian tale of sin and redemption, and the "dark necessity" of history.

The novel's central character, a fiery evangelical missionary named Nathan Price, is part Roger Chillingworth, the coldhearted, judgmental villain of Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," and part Ahab, Melville's monomaniacal captain who risks his own life and the lives of those closest to him in pursuit of his obsessive vision.

On the surface, certainly, "Poisonwood" might seem to have little in common with Ms. Kingsolver's earlier work ("The Bean Trees," "Pigs in Heaven," "Animal Dreams," "Homeland and Other Stories"), fiction set for the most part in the American South and Southwest and dealing, most memorably, with the plight of single mothers trying to sort out their lives.

These previous works, however, also grappled with social injustice, with the intersection of public events with private concerns and the competing claims of community and individual will -- some of the very themes that animate the saga of Nathan Price and his family and their journey into the heart of darkness.

Narrated in alternating chapters by Nathan's wife, Orleanna, and their four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May, "The Poisonwood Bible" begins with the arrival of the Price family in the remote Congolese village of Kilanga -- a tiny cluster of mud houses devoid of all the ordinary amenities of life back home in "the easy land of ice cream cones and new Keds sneakers and **We like Ike.**" Here, there are plagues of killer ants, hordes of malaria-carrying mosquitoes and unseen parasites, and lions and tarantulas and snakes -- a fearsome world of nature whose perils are magnified by political and racial tensions.

Moving fluently from one point of view to another, Ms. Kingsolver does a nimble job of delineating the Price girls' responses to Africa and their father's decision to uproot them. At 15, Rachel, the whiny would-be beauty queen who "cares for naught but appearances," can think only of what she misses: the five-day deodorant pads she forgot to bring, flush toilets, machine-washed clothes and other things, as she says with her willful gift for malapropism, that she has taken "for granite."

Leah, the feisty one, pledges herself to her father's mission in the face of mounting opposition, while her twin, Adah, damaged since birth and unable (or unwilling) to speak, records her observations of her family with a shrewd poetic intelligence. As for the youngest, 5-year old Ruth May, she brightly tries to make sense of the exotic new world in which she finds herself, even as she makes friends with the children of Kilanga.

All this while their mother, Orleanna, struggles with the hardships of daily life -- toting and disinfecting the family's water, scrambling to make ends meet and trying to protect her family from the myriad terrors of the bush.

Orleanna's misgivings about her husband mount as his hubris and utter selfishness become more and more apparent. Although the local people are reluctant to abandon their traditional deities (and fearful of baptizing their children in the crocodile-infested waters of the nearby river), Nathan vows to convert them. He proves equally oblivious to the welfare of his own family when he refuses their entreaties to leave -- even in the face of illness and escalating violence against whites. Indeed he will end up sacrificing the life of one of his daughters to his self-righteous beliefs.

Nathan, of course, is meant to represent the patronizing attitude of white colonialists toward Africa -- and the devastating legacy of violence they bequeathed to regions like the Congo. Such efforts by Ms. Kingsolver to turn the story of the Price family into a social allegory can be heavy-handed at times, transforming many of her characters into one-dimensional pawns in a starkly lit morality play.

Orleanna, it's clear, is a symbol of the not-so-innocent bystander, whose own passivity keeps her from speaking up against the crimes of others; Rachel is a symbol of the selfish pragmatist, who puts her own desires before the needs of others; and Rachel's lover, a white mercenary and diamond smuggler named Axelroot is a symbol of foreign meddling in the Congo. Even the Prices' pet parrot, Methuselah (long accustomed to living in a cage and eaten by a wild animal once it is released), becomes a symbol of the Congo's newly won independence -- independence that swiftly devolves into violence under the dictatorial rule of the Cold War strongman Mobutu Sese Seko.

One of the things that keeps "The Poisonwood Bible" from becoming overly schematic and lends the novel a fierce emotional undertow is Ms. Kingsolver's love of detail, her eye for the small facts of daily life: the Betty Crocker cake mixes, carefully carried to Kilanga, that won't work in Orleanna's primitive African kitchen; the Clorox bleach, "measured out like the Blood of the Lamb" to wash the local produce; the endless bargaining the Congolese, under Mobutu's regime, must conduct for everything from a kidney-stone operation to a postage stamp.

In addition, Ms. Kingsolver endows two of her narrators, Leah and Adah, with a sympathetic intelligence that reveals both their girlish difficulties in coping with their family's plight and their maturing need to make sense of the world for themselves.

In watching these two Price sisters grow up -- one will become a doctor in America; the other, the wife of a Congolese activist jailed for opposing Mobutu -- the reader is made to understand not only the ways in which a father's sins are visited upon (and expiated by) his children, but also the ways in which private lives can be shaped and shattered by public events.

As Leah will observe many years later, "We've all ended up giving up body and soul to Africa, one way or another." Each of us, she adds, "got our heart buried in six feet of African dirt; we are all co-conspirators here."

Review #2: The Guardian:

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* is remarkable not just for its story but also for its narrative form. It has five narrators. Orleanna Price and her four daughters accompany her husband Nathan Price, a Baptist missionary, to the Congo in 1959. The Price daughters and their mother narrate in contrapuntal

alternation. By turns they describe their lives in a remote Congolese village and the fortunes of Nathan's mission to convert the Congolese.

Nathan himself never speaks to us, though his sermonising voice echoes through the novel. He is excluded because he resists all sympathy – he refuses to admit to doubt or weakness. "Our father speaks for all of us," observes Adah, and so the voices of his family are a kind of descant to his mission.

Telling a story in a sequence of monologues by different characters is a surprisingly old novelistic technique. It was pioneered in the 19th century by Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone*, a crime mystery in which different characters spoke in turn as if giving evidence in a trial.

In the early 20th century it was associated with some of the pioneers of modernism – Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* or William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. *The Poisonwood Bible* carries memories of Faulkner: the family comes originally from Mississippi, like Faulkner's, and their locutions have a Southern twang ("I was sore at father all right ... But it was plain to see he was put out, too, something fierce").

Kingsolver does not, however, attempt so closely to follow the patterns of everyday speech. The voices of her characters are as much written as spoken. The convention has evolved to allow us to imagine narrative voices as expressions of different characters' thoughts.

Orleanna is given the benefit of hindsight. Back in Georgia after the years in Africa, she recalls events; her daughters' voices, however, seem to be describing experiences as they unfold. Three of the four sisters are teenagers when they arrive in Africa and Kingsolver has described how she read reams of magazines from the late 1950s and 60s in order to fabricate the idiom for American girls of the period.

Rachel is the eldest, and the most obstinately American, "heavy hearted in my soul for the flush commodes" she has left behind. Entirely resentful of the new world into which she is plunged, her truculence is expressed via a high school demotic. "I always wanted to be the belle of the ball, but, jeepers, is this ever the wrong ball".

Yet her scorn for her father's grim idealism allows for a mocking perceptiveness. "We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn't look to me like we're in charge of a thing". She speaks with a prissiness that produces frequent malapropisms, as when, in order to fend off the amorous local chief, she entertains the advances of a roguish South African pilot. "I'm willing to be a philanderist for peace, but a lady can only go so far where perspiration odor is concerned."

In contrast, her sister Leah, the dutiful daughter, seeks to follow her father. "All my life I've tried to set my shoes squarely into his footprints." Her narration combines biblical cadence with ready clichés. Her twin Adah suffers from hemiplegia and, for much of the novel, cannot speak at all. Yet she speaks to us. Indeed, speechless Adah is the novel's language expert. She plays with words and is a lover of palindromes, with which her chapters are punctuated.

She puns and rhymes and turns words inside out. She begins to learn the local tongue, Kikongo, and to discern that small differences of emphasis make one word become another. Hectoring the locals in his sermons, her father – she hears – keeps telling them something different from what he means. "Tata Jesus is a bangala!" he declares, meaning "something precious and dear". "But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree."

Five-year-old Ruth May has her chapters, too, and as strong an inclination as any other character to cite the scriptures. Battered with chapter and verse by their father, every member of the Price family is steeped in the King James Bible. It provides the family likeness in their voices. Its verses are inescapable.

Orleanna thinks of her husband's power over her and hears Genesis in her head: *in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee*. "Oh, mercy. If it catches you in the wrong frame of mind, the King James Bible can make you want to drink poison in no uncertain terms."

The clear purpose of the multivocal narrative is to let you piece together the apparently strange world of the Congo from these different accounts. Until Leah befriends Anatole, the young man who translates her father's sermons as he is performing them, we only glimpse the Congolese, we never exactly hear them. Yet the more the Prices speak, the odder they seem, and the more intelligible and reasonable seem the habits of the supposedly benighted people they have come to instruct.

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: *East of Eden*
Title:

Author: John Steinbeck
Author:

Document any potentially controversial content:

The book contains some references to domestic abuse and a teenager's thoughts about marriage and sex. More significantly, the novel covers the sometimes tempestuous political history of Congo including the

reign and assassination of Patrice Lumumba and contains some descriptions of political violence. Some readers could take issue with the novel's presentation of some Christian missionaries.

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading Level of this Title (if applicable):

Suggested Professional Literacy Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults

Signatures:

Teacher: 

Date: 11-22-2021

Department Head: 

Date: 11-22-2021

Building Administrator: 

Date: 12/1/21

Curriculum Supervisor: _____

Date: _____