



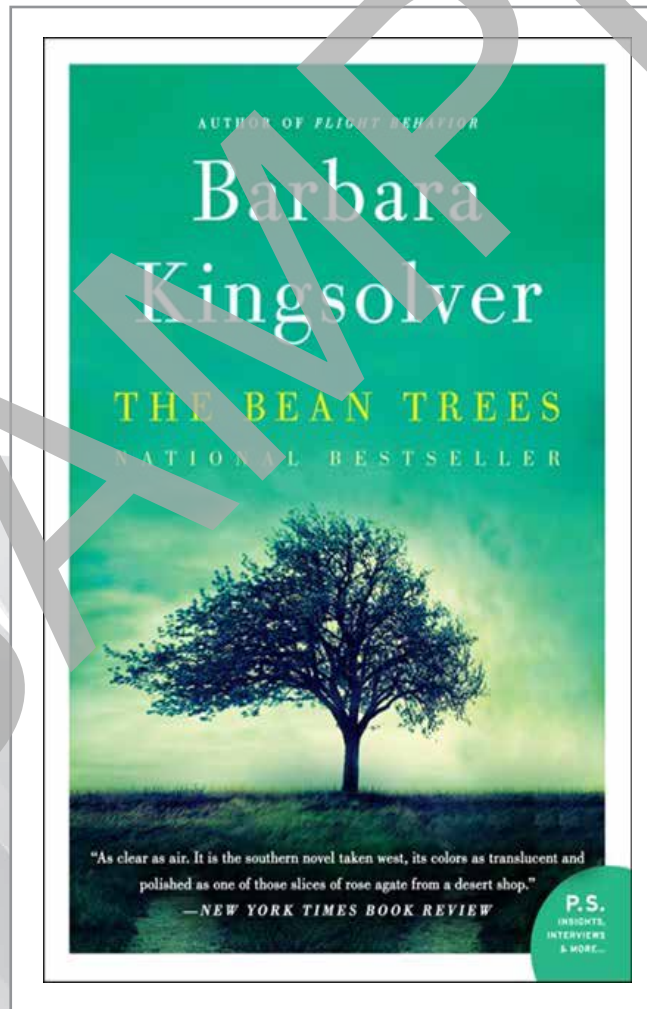
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Bean Trees

Barbara Kingsolver



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Bean Trees

Barbara Kingsolver

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Table of Contents

Plot Summary	3
About the Author	3
Initiating Activities	4
Anticipation Guide, Verbal Scales, Three-Minute Daydream, Theme, Brainstorming, Pre-reading Discussion, Background Information, Geography, Writing, Audiotapes, Novel Sleuth	
Vocabulary Activities	9
Vocabulary, Discussion Questions, Writing Ideas, Activities	
Reading Sections:	
Chapter 1	10
Chapters 2-3	12
Chapters 4-6	15
Chapters 7-8	17
Chapters 9-11	21
Chapters 12-13	24
Chapters 14-15	27
Chapters 16-17	29
Post-reading Discussion Questions	31
Post-reading Extension Activities	32
Other Books About the Southwest	40
Assessment	42

Plot Summary

Barbara Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*, explores important issues which are often ignored in contemporary fiction: homelessness, poverty, child abuse, immigration, single motherhood, and a need for a new feeling of community in our society. And while one might expect a novel about such weighty issues to be gloomy, hopeless, or at least whiny, Kingsolver's plucky protagonist, Taylor Greer, deals with all these problems with inspiring strength, unfailing humor, and optimism.

Called "the Southern novel taken West," *The Bean Trees* begins in Pittman County, Kentucky, where Missy Greer has grown up with two goals in mind: to avoid pregnancy and to leave Pittman as soon as possible. By the end of her senior year, other girls have "fallen by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun," but Missy has a job at the hospital and soon saves enough money to buy an old VW bug and leave Kentucky for the first time in her life, renaming herself "Taylor" along the way.

By the time she arrives in Tucson, Arizona—with two flat tires and no money for repairs—Taylor has acquired Turtle, a little girl who has been the victim of abuse, pressed upon her by a desperate Cherokee woman in Oklahoma. Although Turtle is hardly a burden Taylor needs, she feels that keeping the little girl is the only choice she has for the moment. In Tucson, Taylor and Turtle take up residence at a downtown fleabag hotel and Taylor works at the Burger Derby, feeling guilty about leaving Turtle at a free babysitting center at a nearby mall, but having no other options.

In a parallel story, told in alternating chapters, we meet Lou Ann Ruiz, another Kentuckian and a new mother, who has just been abandoned by her husband, Angel. When Lou Ann advertises for a roommate, Taylor answers the ad and they soon form a "family" of their own, with two elderly neighbor ladies filling in as grandmothers/babysitters. As the story unfolds, Lou Ann, a chronic worrier and timid soul who wanted nothing more than to be the perfect wife and mother, finds she has strengths of her own.

When Taylor goes to work for Mattie—owner of Jesus Is Lord Used Tires—she meets Estevan and Esperanza, political refugees from Guatemala who are being sheltered by Mattie. Taylor is soon drawn into the underground efforts to get the pair to safety. When Taylor decides she wants to officially adopt Turtle, Estevan and Esperanza help with the legal difficulties that arise by agreeing to pose as Turtle's real parents and signing the adoption papers.

About the Author

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, the daughter of a physician and a homemaker, and grew up in Carlisle, Kentucky. Her parents encouraged her to read, write, and listen to good music. Television was not allowed in their home. After changing her major from music to zoology, she graduated magna cum laude from DePauw University in 1977, and earned an M.S. in 1981 from the University of Arizona. Kingsolver has worked as a

Vocabulary • Discussion Questions • Writing Ideas • Activities

Chapter 1

Summary: In this expository chapter, we meet Missy Greer, a poor Kentucky girl whose kind and loving mother has raised her well. Missy gets a job at the hospital and saves her money for a car. She leaves Kentucky, driving west in her 20-year-old VW, and changing her name to Taylor along the way. In Oklahoma, an Indian woman insists on giving Taylor a baby girl. When Taylor realizes the child has been sexually and physically abused, she decides to keep her.

Vocabulary

Jesus bugs (2)
orderlies (7)
hokey (14)

moony (3)
codeine (9)
selvage (23)

enraptured (3)
coal scuttle (9)
indelible (23)

platelets (6)
lethal (13)

Discussion Questions

1. To what does the title of this chapter, "The One to Get Away," refer? (Newt Hardbine, Missy's classmate, remained in Pittman County and died violently when he was young. She saved up some money, bought a car, and was "the one to get away.")
2. How did Missy's mother help to build her daughter's feelings of self worth and confidence? (She called her "Miss Marietta," made a big fuss over the tiny fish she caught, and encouraged her to try to get the job at the hospital because nobody was any better than she was.)
3. How did Hughes Walter change Missy's life? (He helped her to get a job at the hospital, which meant she was able to earn enough money to buy a car and get away from Pittman.) Have you ever had a teacher who changed your life—or known someone else who has had that experience? How?
4. What does Mama mean when she makes the analogy about people and scarecrows? (Regardless of how a person looks or how much money they have, what really counts is whether they have the inner strength to keep them fighting to solve life's problems.)
5. How did "all hell bust loose" shortly after Missy started working at the hospital? (Newt Hardbine and his wife were brought in, Jolene with a bullet wound and Newt already dead. Missy got a glance into another kind of life when Jolene told her about Mr. Hardbine beating all of them, even the baby.) How did Jolene's father's name for her become a self-fulfilling prophecy? (He called her a slut, and she got pregnant in high school.)

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6. Why is Missy afraid of tires? (She saw one explode and seriously injure Mr. Hardbine while he was putting air into it.) Do you think that fear diminished at all when her mother put her through the practice run of changing tires on her car?
 7. What two promises did Missy make when she drove out of Pittman County? (that she would change her name and that she would drive west until her car stopped running) How did she fulfill the first promise to herself? (She decided that when the car ran out of gas, it would be “a sign,” and if she looked around at that point she would know her new name. She ran out at Taylorville, so Taylor became her new name.) Why didn’t she keep the second promise? (The car broke down on Cherokee land in Oklahoma, and she found the area depressing because of its lack of hills and trees.)
 8. Why does Taylor find it ironic that her car broke down on Cherokee land? (Taylor is one-eighth Cherokee herself; her mother has told her they could go and live on the Cherokee Nation. Taylor finds it sadly ironic that the Cherokees believe God is in trees, and there are no trees on this land.)
 9. How does Taylor acquire a passenger? (An Indian woman places a child in Taylor’s car and tells her, “Take this baby.” Before she can decide what to do, the woman has left.) What would you have done if you were Taylor? What were some of her options?
 10. Why do you think Taylor said “Bingo” when she saw the grey-haired lady in the window of the Broken Arrow Motor Lodge? (She probably thought the lady might be a kindly grandmother type who would understand that the baby needed to be in a warm place. Her guess was correct.)
 11. What does Taylor discover about the baby when she takes off her wet clothes? (She has been physically and sexually abused.) What is Taylor’s reaction? (She is horrified, sick to her stomach, and filled with compassion for the little girl.)
 12. **Prediction:** Will Taylor decide to keep the little girl?

Supplementary Activities

Literary Analysis: Simile

A **simile** is a figure of speech in which a similarity between two essentially unlike objects is directly expressed, using words such as “like”, “as,” or “so.” For example: “red as blood.”

Kingsolver is a master of unusual and amusing similes. For instance—

page 3: “Believe me in those days the girls were dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppyseed bun.”

page 7: “Jolene looked like the part of the movie you don’t want to watch.”

feelings for Taylor—or is this a “just good friends” relationship for him? Are his feelings of loss the same?

5. Do you agree with Estevan that “... all we can do is to make things as right as we can” (page 220)? Should Esperanza face reality where Ismene is concerned, or is it better this way?
6. What does Taylor mean, “All four of us had buried someone we loved in Oklahoma” (page 220)? (Taylor lost Estevan; Turtle accepted her mother’s death; Esperanza lost Turtle/Ismene; Estevan lost Taylor.)
7. Why do you think Taylor calls her mother and thanks her for being so good to her? (Perhaps now Taylor realizes what it means to be a mother and thinks about how strong her mother had to be to raise her alone.)
8. Do you agree with Mrs. Greer that children become what you tell them they are? Can you think of any examples where this has happened?
9. Why does Taylor call Turtle “tempest-tossed”? (She is referring to the inscription on the Statue of Liberty: “Send me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore; send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”)
10. What parallels can you draw between the wisteria, with its rhizobia, and the characters in the story? (Like the rhizobia who work secretly underground, Taylor and Mattie and others secretly helped the refugees.)

Supplementary Activities

Culminating Activity

Use the diagram to discuss how the characters interacted, each giving what they could and taking what they needed. (Feel free to add more interaction arrows.)

