



# STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

## *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver

### About This Book

The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles."

- Taylor Greer in *The Bean Trees*

Marietta Greer spent her childhood in rural Kentucky determined to do two things: avoid getting pregnant and escape rural Kentucky. At the start of the novel, she has headed west in a beat-up '55 Volkswagon, changing her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. By the time two tires give way in Tucson she has with her a stunned, silent three-year-old Cherokee girl who was, literally, dropped into her arms one night. She has named the child Turtle, for her strong, snapping-turtle-like grip. In Tucson Taylor finds friendship and support in Lou Ann Ruiz, a fellow Kentuckian and single mother, with whom she and Turtle share a house. Her newfound community also includes Mattie, who runs a safe house for political refugees in the upstairs rooms above her auto repair shop. The novel's theme of fear, flight, homelessness, and finding sanctuary within a community are present in Taylor's struggle to find a place where she belongs, and the more urgent plight of two Central American refugees, Estevan and Esperanza. These fellow travelers help one another create new lives and redefine the meanings of home and family.

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### Discussion Questions

1. *The Bean Trees* deals with the theme of being an outsider. In what ways are various characters outsiders? What does this suggest about what it takes to be an insider? How does feeling like an outsider affect one's life?
  2. How and why do the characters change, especially Lou Ann, Taylor, and Turtle?
  3. In many ways, the novel is "the education of Taylor Greer." What does she learn about human suffering? about love?
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### Author Biography

Although born in Annapolis, MD, Kingsolver grew up in Nicholas County, a rural area in Kentucky where most people earned a subsistence-level income through farming and depended heavily upon their neighbors to get through life. By the time she entered Nicholas County High School, she was writing poetry and short stories.

Daughter of Wendell R. (a physician) and Virginia (a homemaker; maiden name, Henry) Kingsolver; married Joseph Hoffmann (a chemist), 1985; daughter Camille born 1988; divorced 1993. Education: DePauw University, B. A. (magna cum laude), 1977; University of Arizona, M. S., 1981, and additional graduate study. Politics: "Human rights activist." Religion: Pantheist. Avocational interests: Music (piano, hand drums, rock-and-roll keyboards), hiking, gardening, parenthood.

In 1973, she enrolled at DePauw University (Indiana) intending to study instrumental music, but eventually changing her major to biology. During her time at DePauw she launched an effort to eradicate her rural Kentucky accent and to eliminate from her speech expressions peculiar to her native region, both of which, she told [an interviewer] sometimes made her an object of ridicule. Years later, she has said, she realized that such language was "a precious and valuable thing," and she "tried to recapture it" in the voices of some of her fictional characters.

Feature-writing award, Arizona Press Club, 1986; American Library Association awards, 1988, for *The Bean Trees*, and 1990, for *Homeland*; citation of accomplishment from United Nations National Council of Women, 1989; PEN fiction prize and Edward Abbey Ecofiction Award, both 1991, for *Animal Dreams*; Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, 1993, for *Pigs in Heaven*.

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### Extras

#### Kingsolver on *The Bean Trees*:

"I always think of a first novel as something like this big old purse you've been carrying around your whole life, throwing in ideas, characters, and all the things that have ever struck you as terribly important. One day, for whatever reason, you just have to dump that big purse out and there lies this pile of junk. You start picking through it, and assembling it into what you hope will be a statement of your life's great themes. That's how it was for me. It probably wasn't until midway through the writing that I had a grasp of the central question: What are the many ways, sometimes hidden and underground ways, that people help themselves and each other survive hard times?"

Author's official website: [www.kingsolver.com](http://www.kingsolver.com)