The Bean Trees Study Guide

The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver

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Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver demonstrates that politics are personal in *The Bean Trees,* her novel of friendship and survival set in the and American Southwest. The novel focuses on Taylor Greer's search for a new life as she moves from her dull Kentucky home to exotic Arizona and the lessons that she learns along the way. Taylor's adoption of an abused Cherokee toddler, her friendship with a pair of Guatemalan refugees, and her support system of a small community of women, all contribute to the novel's central conviction that people cannot survive without empathy and generosity. Published in 1988 to an enthusiastic critical reception, *The Bean Trees* won an American Library Association award and a School Library Association award and has found a devoted reading audience around the world. Critics and readers alike relish Taylor's humor and warmth, with her down-home speech and perceptive observations. Like her narrator, Kingsolver grew up in Kentucky, and she draws from the voices she heard in her youth to create Taylor's voice. This voice helps to guide the novel, with its strong humanitarian views, away from simple political correctness toward a rich believability. Kingsolver has been praised for her skill in *The Bean Trees* at walking the fine line between preaching and taking a moral stand, and Taylor's straightforwardness and humor provide the cornerstone to Kingsolver's approach.

Author Biography

Born in 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, Kingsolver grew up in rural Kentucky. She began writing as a young child, but chose to study biology in college at DePauw University. In her twenties she moved to Tucson, Arizona, where she eventually earned a graduate degree in ecology at the University of Arizona. Following graduate school, Kingsolver turned back to her life-long love-writing and began writing nonfiction as a technical writer in a scientific program at the university. By the mid-1980s she was writing and publishing short fiction. Her contact in Arizona with people from Latin America, particularly refugees, influenced Kingsolver's choice of subject matter when she turned to fiction. Published in 1988, *The Bean Trees* was her first novel.

Best known as a novelist, Kingsolver also writes poetry, nonfiction, and short fiction. She believes that fiction can be used as an instrument of social change, and her own fiction reflects this belief. Kingsolver describes her political stance as that of a "human rights activist"; to pursue these interests, she belongs to Amnesty International and the Committee for Human Rights in Latin America, two humanitarian organizations that advance the cause of human rights around the world. In 1997 she established a literary prize, the Bellwether Prize, to be awarded every year to a first novel of exceptional literary distinction that also embodies this belief in fiction's power to change the world.

Kingsolver describes herself as a pantheist; pantheism is not an organized religion but is more a doctrine based upon the belief that the natural world is imbued with a divine presence. Rooted in her Kentucky childhood, she credits her interest in nature as having been a major influence on her life, and her work reflects her sense that the environment cannot be ignored. In *The Bean Trees,* the dry Arizona landscape that manages to produce flowers and vegetables is central to the novel, as it reflects the deprived lives of the characters who are able to flourish in spite of their difficult circumstances.

Kingsolver has won several literary awards for her work, among them an American Library Association award and a School Library Association award for *The Bean Trees.* Audiences around .the world have responded warmly to *The Bean Trees,* as it has been translated into several languages and published in more than sixty-five countries.

Plot Summary

The heroine of *The Bean Trees,* Marietta (otherwise known as Miss Marietta, Missy, and Taylor Greer) is determined to avoid becoming a pregnant teen. Her early years in Eastern Kentucky have been heavily influenced by her perception that Pittman County is "behind the nation in practically every way you can think of, except the rate of teenage pregnancies." She has also been influenced by her supportive mother, and by her work with "blood and pee" in a hospital lab.

After saving enough money to buy a '55 Volkswagen bug, Taylor drives. away from .Pittman County. She renames herself Taylor Greer when she runs out of gas in Taylorville. Then she acquires an unwanted and abused Cherokee baby girl outside a bar in Oklahoma. She names the baby Turtle, for her habit of "holding on."

Taylor stops at the Broken Arrow motel, where she works as a maid through the Christmas holidays. The work is uninspiring; she says that "the only thing to remind you you weren't dead was the constant bickering between [motel employees} old Mrs. Hoge and Irene."

Taylor adapts to life as a mother and maid, while the novel shifts its focus to Lou Ann Ruiz, another Eastern Kentucky émigré whose husband, Angel, has left her seven months pregnant. Although Angel generally ridicules and rejects Lou Ann, he also shows unexpected kindness by returning home to help Lou Ann keep up appearances when her mother and grandmother visit.

Meanwhile, Taylor leaves the Broken Arrow motel and heads west, finally ending her journey at the Jesus is Lord Used Tires in Tucson, Arizona, with two flat tires. The shop's owner, Mattie, lets Taylor park her car on shop property until she can afford to repair it.

Taylor takes up residence in the Hotel Republic and gets a short-lived job at The Burger Derby. Her co-worker, Sandi, tells her about Kid Central Station, a babysitting service for mall shoppers. Taylor takes advantage of Kid Central Station until she is fired from her job after six days of work

She decides to find a roommate, which is how she meets up with Lou Ann. The two young women, each parent to a young child, each with a Kentucky accent, become instant friends. Where Lou Ann is fearful, Taylor is confident and vigorous, or so it seems initially.

Taylor begins working for Mattie at Jesus is Lord Used Tires and gradually learns that, besides operating a tire business, Mattie is operating a safe house for Guatemalan refugees. Taylor becomes friends with two of these refugees, Estevan and his wife Esperanza.

When Taylor takes Turtle to Dr. Pelinowsky for a check-up, she discovers that Turtle is probably a three-year-old, even though she is only as developed as a two-year-old. Dr. Pelinowsky explains that Turtle has "failed to thrive in an environment of physical or emotional deprivation."

When Esperanza, who is grieving the loss of her homeland and of her own child, attempts Suicide, Taylor responds, somewhat naively, that it is "worse to never have anyone to lose than to lose someone." Despite her inherent optimism, Taylor begins to despair at the violence in the world, and begins to doubt in her own ability to nurture Turtle in the face of so much violence.

Meanwhile, Lou Ann gets a job and begins to gain confidence. As Taylor puts it, Lou Ann stops "comparing her figure to various farm animals" When Angel sends Lou Ann a calfskin belt and says he misses her, Lou Ann hesitates, considering her "new responsibilities" at work, as well as her responsibilities to her husband.

Turtle, too, begins to flourish. Her first sound is a laugh, her first word is "bean," and she is rapidly becoming versed in the language of horticulture. However, when Taylor's blind neighbor and babysitter, Edna Poppy, is attacked, Turtle's eyes instantly grow black. The child retreats into herself, into silence Taylor begins a parallel retreat, in which she continues to question her own ability to mother when the "whole way of the world is to pick on people that can't fight back."

Enter Cynthia, a social worker who explains to Taylor that she has no legal right to Turtle As Taylor enters her own period of despair, Lou Ann becomes her advocate, reminding her that there is no alternative world to turn to, and that Taylor may not feel up to motherhood, but then, neither does any other mother.

Taylor decides to fight for the right to adopt Turtle and, in collaboration with Mattie, develops a plan to drive Estevan and Esperanza to sanctuary in Oklahoma, while also searching for Turtle's biological parents. They begin their journey. Every time they pass a cemetery, Turtle shouts, "Mama!"

Although the search does not turn up Turtle's biological parents, the three young adults devise an alternative plan. Estevan and Esperanza will pretend to be Turtle's biological parents, the fictional Steven and Hope Two Two. Playing the roles of Mr. and Mrs. Two Two, they will sign Turtle over to Taylor.

The plan is not as far-fetched as it might sound, for Estevan and Esperanza already look and act the part of Turtle's parents. Furthermore, no one expects a child born to the Cherokee Nation tribal lands to have a birth certificate. Lawyer Mr. Jonas Wilford Armistead believes their story, and helps Taylor to draw up the necessary adoption papers.

Taylor says her good-byes to Estevan and Esperanza and calls up her mother, who, it turns out, has recently been remarried and has begun to take up gardening. Finally, Taylor heads back to her home in Arizona, daughter in tow.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The novel opens with a brief anecdote about Newt Harbine's father exploding a tractor tire by over inflating it. He is thrown on top of the service station sign. Mr. Harbine is not killed, but he is never the same. The Harbine family is poor and prolific. The parents do not value education and Newt leaves school, marries Jolene Shanks because she is pregnant, and toils beside his father in the tobacco fields.

The narrator, Marietta Greer, nicknamed Missy, tells the story of how she obtains a job in the lab at the local hospital. A new science teacher, Mr. Hughes Walter, announces that his wife, who is a head nurse at the hospital, needs a student to do odd jobs. Missy wants to apply for the position, but figures he will give it to a cheerleader or one of the better students. She talks it over with her mom, who encourages her to apply. Marietta's mother is a single woman, who cooks and cleans other people's homes. Marietta's mother is always supportive of Marietta, telling her she can do anything she sets her mind to. With the encouragement of her mother, Marietta tells Mr. Walter that she would like the job. He tells her to show up at the hospital the next day. Marietta asks Mr. Walter why he picked her for the job and he replies that she was the first student to ask.

Less than a week after Marietta started her new job, there is a crisis at the hospital. Jolene Shanks Harbine is wheeled in on a stretcher mumbling about guns and shooting. Marietta learns that Newt's father has shot Jolene and her husband, Newt. Newt is brought into the x-ray room next, but he is already dead. After looking at Newt, Marietta goes to the restroom, throws up twice, and goes back to her work in the lab. Later that evening, Marietta tells her mom about the incident. Her mom asks if Marietta is going to quit. Marietta says that she probably will not see anything worse than what she saw today, so she may as well stick with the job.

Marietta holds the lab job for five and a half years, saving enough money to buy a '55 Volkswagen, which Marietta sees as her ticket out of this tiny Kentucky town. Her mother, being wise, realizes as soon as Marietta buys the car that Marietta will be leaving. Marietta's mother ensures that her daughter knows enough about the car to get out of a jam if it breaks down, and then gives Marietta her blessings as Marietta gets in and points the car west. There are two things Marietta vows to do on her trip: Choose a new name, and drive until the car dies, settling wherever that may be. She chooses her name by driving until she is out of gas. At that point, there is a sign that says Taylorville, which Marietta shortens to Taylor.

The second promise, to drive until the car fails, Marietta breaks because she is certain no one could possibly live in central Oklahoma where her rocker arm assembly comes apart. The desolate, treeless and flat terrain is too depressing. Marietta spends most of her savings to repair the vehicle, but decides to continue west. Before leaving the predominantly Cherokee town, she goes into a diner for coffee and a cheap hamburger.

Inside, Marietta notices an Indian woman, who keeps eyeing two semi-drunk Indian men as if she were afraid of them. Marietta prudently decides to leave, goes out to her car, and sits, trying to find the energy to push start the car. The woman she had noticed inside walks up and taps on the windshield, opens a blanket to reveal a baby and tells her to take it. The woman tells her that it is her dead sister's child and places the child on the passenger seat. Taylor protests, but the woman walks away and leaves in a pick-up truck. Taylor decides to continue driving while she figures out what to do with the child.

Taylor keeps a running string of conversation with the child as she drives along the highway that night. Taylor cannot tell if the child is awake, asleep, or dead and suddenly fears that maybe the woman had killed this child and placed it in her car to escape the rap. When Taylor smells the need for a diaper change she realizes the child is alive. Taylor pulls off at a small motel, the Broken Arrow, and asks the elderly desk clerk to put them up for free since she did not have enough money. The woman vacillates, but decides to let Taylor stay when she promises to clean rooms in the morning to pay the motel bill. When Taylor is in the motel room, she strips the child to give it a bath and discovers someone has abused the child, as evidenced by a multitude of bruises. Taylor suspects the child may have also been sexually abused. Although Taylor is horrified, she bathes the toddler, and puts her to bed. The chapter ends with her adding a postscript to a postcard she had been writing to her mother, "I found my head rights, Mama. They're coming with me."

Chapter 1 Analysis

This first chapter gives the reader a clear image of Taylor Greer as an independent, free-spirited young woman, who is able to avoid the customary plight of girls in her hometown, pregnancy and marriage. Not only is Taylor able to resist the pressure of conforming in a small, impoverished Kentucky town, but also she is able to gather the courage to leave home and the only family she has. Already we get the sense that whatever fate throws at Taylor, she will handle with a shrug of her shoulders. The theme of abandonment is evident in this opening chapter. First, when Taylor (who at that time was called Missy) reveals she has never met her father, who had abandoned Taylor's mother when she was pregnant with Taylor. Second, the abandonment of the young Indian girl by her aunt to a stranger in a bar parking lot obliquely reenacts Taylor's own situation. Perhaps healing for both of these characters, Taylor and the unnamed Indian child, will come through their relationship with each other.

The anecdote about Newt Harbine's father over inflating a tire foreshadows the scene in chapter three when Taylor arrives in Tucson, Arizona and stops at a tire station called Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. Taylor ultimately finds employment at Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. Despite her fears stemming from the incident at the start of the novel, the fear surrounding tires, and Taylor's conquering of that fear is symbolic of her growth from the prejudices of her small town to a wider perspective, which she gains through her life in Tucson.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 opens in Tucson, Arizona, introducing a new character, Lou Ann Ruiz, who is also a transplanted Kentuckian. She is pregnant with her first child and due in two months. There is a car shop named "Jesus Is Lord Used Tires" across the park from Lou Ann. Whenever Lou Ann spies the shop name, feels nostalgic for Kentucky because she thinks it sounds like a name you would see in some small Kentucky town. The adult porn shop next door has the opposite effect on Lou Ann. When she looks at the crude painting of a scantily clad, buxom blond on the door, she shivers. When someone opens the handle, it looks as if the person is pushing his hand in the painting's crotch. Lou Ann always hurries past the picture.

On her way home from the doctor visit, Lou Ann has been planning her child's christening. She believes it better to please Angel's mother, who lives across town, than to worry about her own mother's wrath eighteen hundred miles away in Kentucky about a Catholic ceremony. Lou Ann's mother has never accepted that Lou Ann married a Mexican American. Lou Ann has repeatedly explained to her mother that there are many Mexican Americans in professional positions in Tucson. Lou Ann regularly sends her mother newspaper clippings about successful Mexican Americans, but that has not changed her mother's opinion.

When Lou Ann opens the door to their place, she realizes that Angel has left her. Throughout the house, there were empty spaces, which in the morning had been filled by books, a TV, coffee mugs, and other miscellaneous items. Lou Ann had been expecting a divorce to happen ever since the accident, but she is not the type to actively seek it. Angel had become more and more belligerent ever since he had lost his leg in a car accident three years earlier. Lou Ann had given up her job after the accident to nurse Angel back to health. For Lou Ann, it was an idyllic time, despite his accident. They played cards, she cooked what he wanted for meals, and he gradually gained his strength. Angel's leg stump or his prosthesis never bothers Lou Ann, who did not believe that the loss of the leg should change Angel's life much at all. Angel could not wear cowboy boots anymore, but he had given up rodeo riding long before the accident. Angel, though, is never able to accept losing his leg. He convinces himself that Lou Ann thinks him less a man and that she is running around on him.

That Halloween evening when Lou Ann realizes that Angel has moved out, she wants nothing more than go to sleep and think about it later. Unfortunately, the doorbell rings continuously with trick or treaters. Finally, Lou Ann turns out the light and falls into bed still dressed in the only pair of shoes that will fit her since her fifth month of pregnancy. She is unable to reach past her stomach to unlatch them and Angel is no longer there to help her.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Here we meet a woman who finds herself in the same circumstances of Taylor's mother years earlier--pregnant and abandoned by the father of the child she is carrying. The fact that Chapter two brings up a third abandonment scenario indicates that this theme will be important throughout the entire novel. Here, too, the issue of race and the mixing of two cultures again appears with the marriage of a Kentucky southerner to a Mexican American. In the previous chapter, we saw a meeting of two cultures when Taylor Greer accepts a Native American child; albeit, Taylor does have enough Indian blood through a great-grandfather to be accepted on the Cherokee Nation rolls.

Angel exists in the novel as a "flat" character. His sole purpose is to move Lou Ann forward in her growth from a male-dependant female to a self-sufficient single mother. Although the "authorial voice" which exists in this novel certainly has a feminist bent, the reader does not get the impression that this voice suggests marriage is inherently evil, just that this particular marriage is untenable.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

When Chapter three opens, Taylor crosses the border from Texas into Arizona. It is January 2. Taylor had stayed at the tiny motel, Broken Arrow in Oklahoma for the Christmas season, earning enough money to finally move on. It starts to hail when Taylor is on the outskirts of Tucson. Taylor exits the interstate and seeks shelter under the overpass. Once the storm has passed, Taylor jump starts her car, but discovers her two rear tires are flat, due to some glass scattered on the off ramp. Taylor drives her car several blocks until she spies a huge pile of tires and a sign, which reads Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. As Taylor pulls up to the tire store, an older woman, Mattie, appears and tells Taylor to pull onto the rack so Mattie can remove the rear tires and repair the holes.

Taylor's face drops when Mattie informs her the tires are unusable. Mattie invites Taylor into the back room to sit and have some coffee and apple juice for Turtle. The two women chat while Turtle slurps the juice. Mattie can tell the two are hungry, so she hands Turtle some peanut butter crackers. Taylor inquires about the name of the tire store and Mattie explains that her deceased husband was a religious fanatic and had hired some Mexican kids to paint the sign. Mattie had never bothered to change it once her husband died.

While Taylor is waiting for Mattie to return from the back room with a refill for Turtle, two different men stop by. One, a Catholic priest with a large family packed into his station wagon, nervously strolls in and leaves quickly when he learns Mattie is busy. The other waits for Mattie to return to perform an alignment on his vehicle. When Mattie offers more food and juice to Taylor and Turtle, Taylor feels guilty and confesses that she is unable to buy new tires. Mattie says it is of no matter, that she is just being hospitable to two weary travelers. The two women begin talking about gardening and Mattie escorts Taylor out back to show off the vegetable and flower garden. Mattie says that the purple beans came from the Chinese woman next door who had brought the seeds to America all the way from China.

Taylor and Turtle move into the Hotel Republic. Taylor is having difficulty adjusting to the noise and bustle of such a large city. The wide variety of people, from prostitutes to artists, in the neighborhood fascinates Taylor. Taylor is from a town so backward that they did not install a dial-up phone system until 1973. Taylor attempts to land a job in a medical lab, but the employer asks her for her phlebotomist license. Taylor is job hunting when she meets Sandi, a waitress at the Burger Derby. Sandi is horse crazy and reveres Taylor for being from Kentucky, despite Taylor assuring Sandi that Taylor has never been close to a horse. When Taylor notices the help wanted sign in the restaurant window, Sandi fills Taylor in and encourages her to apply. Taylor informs Sandi that she has a young daughter and does not have any childcare arrangements. Sandi tells Taylor that she drops her young son off at the free day care center in the mall, pretending to be a shopper. Sandi points out that there are so many children in the

center that no one would notice another. As Taylor is leaving, Sandi observes that Turtle looks nothing like Taylor. Taylor divulges that the child is just somebody she is stuck with.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Taylor is beginning to establish a home and making tentative contacts towards creating a "family." She seems to have decided to keep Turtle; although, the reader does not see the thought processes which led Taylor to this decision. Chapter three introduces a third important character, Mattie, who is also a woman. The reader gets the sense that Mattie is hiding something both because of the nervous priest and by the oblique reference to some "sort of" grandchildren. Mattie's comment about the "sort of" grandchildren foreshadows her future revelation that she harbors illegal aliens in her home.

The fact that the majority of the characters so far encountered in the novel are female suggests that this is a novel predominantly about women and their worldview. Even though we are introduced in chapter seven to an important male character, Esteban; he has a well-developed feminine, but not effeminate, aspect.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Lou Ann's mother and paternal grandmother, Granny Logan, are visiting Lou Ann to help her with her son, Dwayne Ray, born January first. Angel, Lou Ann's estranged husband, agrees to move back into the house while the two women are visiting to give the impression that Lou Ann and Angel are still married. Even though Angel is ostensibly staying at the house, Lou Ann's family is doing everything possible to avoid interacting with him. The chapter opens with Lou Ann's family packing to return to Kentucky. Lou Ann tries to convince her mother to stay longer, since they have barely had an opportunity to talk to Angel. Her mother insists that the dry, hot climate of an unseasonably warm Arizona winter is unhealthy for Granny Logan. Lou Ann questions her mother's solicitousness of Granny Logan in light of the fact that the two women are not speaking to each other over some imagined, long forgotten wrong. Each of the women uses Lou Ann as a messenger to effect communication between them.

Lou Ann's family continually complains about the heat of the Arizona winter, the lack of rain, and the barrenness of Tucson. Granny Logan admonishes Lou Ann about putting on airs now that she is living in a big city. Lou Ann good-naturedly accepts their complaints, not wanting to cross these two older women who feel like a shelter in the storm. Just before the two older women are about to leave, Granny Logan hands Lou Ann a coke bottle filled with murky water. Granny Logan explains that the bottle contains Tug Fork water to be used in the baptism of her newborn. Granny Logan reminds Lou Ann about Lou Ann's immersion in the Tug Fork River when baptized. Lou Ann wonders how she can immerse her son in the small amount of water in the coke bottle. After a number of exhortations surrounding childcare and breast-feeding, Lou Ann's mother and grandmother are ready to leave. Lou Ann walks them to the bus stop, all the while pleading with them to wait for Angel to return home and drive them to the Greyhound station. They refuse Lou Ann's offer and board the city bus. Lou Ann has the urge to run after the bus and ride back to Kentucky with them. Instead Lou Ann waves one of her son's arms, even knowing they were on the wrong side of the bus to see it.

On the walk back home, Lou Ann notices old Bobby Bingo selling vegetables out of his run-down truck. Lou Ann has had her eye on the tomatoes for a while, but figured they were not affordable, but gathers her courage to ask the price and is pleased to learn they are less expensive than the sickly looking ones in the grocery store. Lou Ann picks out six of them, hands them to Bobby saying that they are the nicest tomatoes she has seen since leaving back home in Kentucky. Lou Ann's heart lurches when she hears "back home," coming from her mouth. Bobby asks about her home while weighing the tomatoes and adds an apple and seedless grapes out of kindness. Bobby makes a wry comment about his son, who is a car salesman, well known for his outrageous TV commercials. Lou Ann apologizes for not having seen the commercial, but Bobby says it is of no mind because it makes Bobby sick every time his son comes on the screen. Bobby explains that his son is always trying to get Bobby to stop selling vegetables and

move into an expensive house that the son would buy for him. Bobby is wise enough to know he is happy doing what he has always done, selling vegetables on the street corner. Bobby warns Lou Ann as she is walking away, "Whatever you want the most, it's going to be the worst thing for you."

When Lou Ann arrives home from the fruit stand, she keeps repeating the last sentence that Bobby Bingo said to her. Lou Ann washes the vegetables and moves about the house, cleaning and straightening while repeating the phrase. The house seems larger now that Lou Ann's mother and granny have left; yet at the same time, it seems empty. Lou Ann feels a yearning, which she cannot identify. Lou Ann opens the curtains in the front room, momentarily taken aback that the sky is an Arizona desert sky, not a Kentucky sky full of water clouds. She notices the coke bottle of Tug Fork water with two of her granny's hairpins lying nearby. Lou Ann feels spooked; similar to a time she had found her dad's garden gloves still molded to his hand shape long after he had died.

Later, as Lou Ann is nursing Dwayne Ray, she tries to remember when she was baptized in Tug Fork. She could remember being tipped backwards and falling into the murky water. Lou Ann knows she felt terror, but cannot recall the feeling. Lou Ann is still nursing Dwayne Ray when Angel comes through the door. Lou Ann hears Angel moving around in the kitchen and realizes that the feeling of his being in the house was different from when her mom and granny were in the house. Lou Ann feels indifferent to Angel's presence and is pleased with that fact. Angel walks into the living room and asks Lou Ann where his ball cap and belt buckle is. Lou Ann tells Angel what he wants to know, and he goes into the bathroom where he asks about the coke bottle full of water. When Lou Ann informs Angel what the bottle contains, Angel dumps the water down the drain. Lou Ann vaguely wonders if the sucking of her infant will suck the ache right out of her heart.

Chapter 4 Analysis

So far in the chapters in which Lou Ann appears, the reader sees a woman who allows other people to create her self-image. Lou Ann believes that everyone knows more about life than she does. She bends over backwards to please her husband, Angel, yet all he does is complain and tell her how incompetent she is. When Lou Ann's mom and granny are visiting, she allows her mother to manage the household, while enduring criticism about the choices she has made in her life.

When Angel returns after Lou Ann's family have left, he expects Lou Ann to find the things he is looking for, even though Angel no longer lives there. Angel dumps the bottle of water belonging to Lou Ann down the drain without even asking her permission. Although Angel has left Lou Ann through his own choice, he continues to act as though Lou Ann's home is his and he can rifle through it and dispose of whatever he pleases. At this point in the novel, Lou Ann is irresolute and spineless when it comes to asserting her rights as an individual. At this point in the novel, Lou Ann is the archetype, or pattern, of the doormat housewife who waits on husband (and eventually children if there are any) hand and foot and puts the needs of all others before her own. One of

Lou Ann's challenges in the novel will be to see herself as someone who deserves respect.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The Republic Hotel, where Taylor and Turtle have taken up residence, is located close to the railroad tracks where the train whistle blows at 6:15 am each day. Taylor learns to incorporate the sound into her sleep cycle and plays games with the whistle to see if she can waken before it sounds. Taylor's financial situation is precarious. She only worked six days at the Burger Derby before fighting with the manager and quitting. The fight, which precipitated the loss of the job, had to do with the uniform and the fact that it had to be dry-cleaned. Taylor believes that for the small amount of pay she receives, she should not have to pay to dry clean her uniform. Taylor mainly regrets not seeing Sandi very often and having to find a new place to eat breakfast after walking off the job.

In her quest for a place to breakfast, Taylor realizes she can read the daily newspaper by pilfering those left behind by paying customers in various diners. Because of her dismal state of funds, she begins searching the want ads for a roommate situation. She contacts two situations listed in the ads. At the first home, Taylor feels as though she is listening to a foreign language for as much as she understands what her hostess is saying about the effects of caffeine and homeostasis. Taylor follows the hostess into a room replete with pillows and no other furniture. Seated amongst the pillows are two other persons, another woman and a man. The three occupants of the home take turns explaining the house rules to Taylor. They are vegetarians and each person in the household must agree to devote seven hours a week to straining bean curd. Taylor thinks about a word that rhymes with curd, turd, and makes rhymes with it in her head as the three occupants drone onward. After further discussion of the rules, and a short treatise on the harmful chemicals in the hot dogs Taylor had given Turtle for breakfast, Taylor tells them that she and Turtle would run along and envision themselves in some other space.

The second ad takes Taylor to Lou Ann's home, across the park from Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. Shortly after inviting Taylor into the kitchen, Lou Ann and Taylor have figured out that their Kentucky hometowns are only two counties apart. Taylor gives Lou Ann an abbreviated version of her first interview this morning, which sets them both howling with laughter. Lou Ann shows Taylor the rest of the house. When Lou Ann asks Turtle's age, Taylor admits that she is not certain because she is adopted. Taylor gives Lou Ann a brief account of how she ended up with Turtle and explains that Turtle is only a temporary name until Taylor figures out Turtle's real name. Taylor then notices that Lou Ann's cat, Snowboots, was making digging motions in the living room, but not actually depositing anything. Lou Ann explains Snowboots often does that. Taylor encourages Lou Ann to send in a story about the cat to *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Lou Ann declines saying that she would be too embarrassed to admit that her cat is obsessed with digging poop holes.

Dwayne Ray wakes up and Lou Ann introduces him to her visitors. Lou Ann is concerned that Dwayne Ray's head is flat. Taylor reassures Lou Ann that Dwayne Ray's head will mold itself correctly. Taylor finally asks Lou Ann if she is willing for her and Turtle to move in. Lou Ann replies that she would be delighted for them to move in if they want to. Taylor asks why Lou Ann would think they would not want to. Lou Ann explains that Taylor is so smart, cute, and skinny, why would someone like her want to live with Lou Ann? Taylor admonishes Lou Ann to stop believing that she was not as good as everyone else was. Taylor points out that she herself is a hick and has a child who everyone believes retarded, so Taylor has nothing on Lou Ann. Lou Ann smiles and admits that it has been a long time since she heard someone talk like herself.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Lou Ann and Taylor seemed slated to meet. These two women, both native to Kentucky have formed the first tenuous bonds of a family, wherein perhaps each one's strength will be the growth of the other. Lou Ann serves as a foil to Taylor. Taylor, self-assured and unafraid, stands in such contrast to the fearful and insecure Lou Ann. Lou Ann, though, may have hidden qualities, which, when nurtured in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, may blaze forth to surprise the unsuspecting reader.

If it can be said that Lou Ann is a foil to Taylor, the opposite is also true in that Lou Ann, as the consummate mother serves as a foil to Taylor's haphazard and uncertain attempts at motherhood. Nurturing does not come naturally to Taylor; whereas, one could almost believe that Lou Ann is gifted with a nurturing "gene."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Despite Taylor's trepidation about exploding tires, she accepts a job at Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. It is not Taylor's first choice as a place to work. It is only due to Mattie's refusal to accept a "no" that Taylor is working there. Mattie had to sweeten the offer with two new tires, twice the hourly pay as the Burger Derby, and a promise to show Taylor how to fix her ignition. It is a perfect arrangement for Taylor because it is close to home and she is allowed to bring Turtle with her when Lou Ann is unable to baby-sit. Mattie's place is busy, not just due to tire customers, but because there is a continual stream of Spanish-speaking people passing through and staying upstairs for a few days at a time. When Taylor questions Mattie about these short-term guests, Mattie alludes to something called sanctuary. The priest who brings the Spanish-speaking people is a young, blond man named Father William.

When Taylor is introduced to Father William, she thinks to herself, "you are old, Father William." However, Father William is not old. Taylor muses as to why that phrase pops into her head with the introduction and she realizes that she used to have a book when she was a child that contained a poem titled, "You Are Old, Father William." This train of thought leads her to wanting to buy Turtle a book.

Mattie is walking out of the store entrance when she notices Taylor jumping when a Chevy backfires. Mattie asks Taylor why she is often jumpy. Taylor offers a vague reply. Mattie asks her if she is in trouble with the law because Mattie has enough of that already on her hands. Taylor does not understand the allusion, but reassures Mattie that she is not a fugitive, but rather has a fear of exploding tires. Mattie partially fills an empty canister with water and tosses it at Taylor, who reflexively catches it. Mattie explains that that is about the force a car tire would feel like if it burst. Taylor explains about Newt Harbine's father being tossed over a Standard Oil sign by an exploding tractor tire, and Mattie says that a tractor tire holds considerable more air and can be dangerous. Mattie assures Taylor that Mattie will handle any tractor tires that come into the store.

When Mattie returns home she, she is carrying a book she bought for Turtle. Once inside, she hears Lou Ann calling out names from a baby name book. Taylor is not appreciative of Lou Ann's efforts to discover Turtle's real name. Lou Ann explains that maybe if she discovers Taylor's real name, the child will develop some personality. Taylor takes offense at this, picks up Turtle and moves off to read the new book to her. Lou Ann apologizes and ladles out the evening soup. Taylor takes a bite and offers some to Turtle. Lou Ann cautions Taylor that Turtle can choke on the peas in the soup. Lou Ann then goes on with a soliloquy about the strange ways she has heard of people being killed.

Later that evening, after the two children are in bed, Taylor informs Lou Ann that they need to talk. Taylor grabs a couple beers and the two women sit on the couch. Taylor explains that she is not interested in being a family with Lou Ann and she does not want Lou Ann to cook for her. She explains that they each have their own separate lives. Lou Ann replies that she wants to cook dinner and help Taylor. As the two women talk, munch on snacks and drink beer, Lou Ann becomes tearful and tries to convince Taylor that she does not mind taking care of Taylor and Turtle. Suddenly Lou Ann begins to giggle and exclaims that she is drunk. Lou Ann tells a story about the last time she was drunk and how Angel never let her live it down. She confesses that she thinks Angel might have left her because of that incident. Taylor points out that it does not matter because Lou Ann has said she is glad Angel left her. Lou Ann explains that she feels like a failure. Taylor gives her take on till-death-do-you-part relationships, which has Lou Ann laughing hysterically. The two women laugh and drink for half the night. As they finally head for their bedrooms, Lou Ann tells Taylor that Angel never would have stayed up all night with her if something was bothering him.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The fact that Mattie may have something to hide is even more apparent when she asks Taylor if she is running from the law. Mattie makes an aside that she has enough trouble with the law already. This comment again foreshadows Mattie's eventual revelation that she is involved in the sanctuary movement.

This story could be classified as a bildungsroman, or a coming of age story, first for Taylor, and perhaps for Lou Ann. Taylor has moved from being an unfettered free spirit to one who has accepted responsibility for a young child. Taylor also faces her worst fear in accepting a job at the tire shop. Taylor not only gains a job, but a potential friend and ally. The reader has to wonder why Taylor takes such great pains to distance herself from Lou Ann and the implication that their household is evolving into a "family of choice." It's not clear what Taylor's fear is surrounding the family issue, but the last chapter of the novel reveals a change of attitude concerning what constitutes a family.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Taylor, Lou Ann, their two children, Mattie, and a young Guatemalan couple embark on a Sunday picnic. Lou Ann suggests the place where she and her estranged husband, Angel, had frequented and had even considered being married there. Cottonwood trees ring deep pools of mountain spring water. It is a paradise among the parched dessert. Lou Ann solicits continual reassurance that the rest of the group was happy with the spot. The young Guatemalan couple is named Esperanza and Esteban. Esteban had been an English teacher in Guatemala before coming to the States. Esteban's wife does not speak English as fluently, so he quietly translates the conversation. Despite his small, compact size, Esteban seems made of steel, but fragility enfolds Esperanza like a cloak. As the rest of the group jokes and eats, Esperanza seems obsessed with watching Turtle.

Taylor decides to go swimming and Esteban joins her. When Lou Ann realizes they are about to go into the water, she yells a warning that they have not waited long enough since eating. Taylor laughs and says she is confident Lou Ann will pull them out if they sink. The water is icy and both of them become more and more rowdy and animated to warm up. They splash the rest of the party, who threaten them with unnamed retaliations. Esteban swims over close to where Esperanza is sitting on an overhanging rock and sings to her. Esperanza has a faraway look and barely notices him. Taylor is smitten with the handsome Esteban. At dusk, they pile into the two cars and head back into the city. Esteban is driving Mattie's car in the lead and he suddenly stops, so that Taylor had to jam on her brakes. They finally see why Esteban had stopped-a quail and her young brood were crossing the dirt road. The occupants of both cars breathlessly watch the mother herd her chicks. After the birds are clear, Lou Ann comments that Angel would have given himself points for each bird he could squash.

Taylor is feeling much better about being Turtle's mom after the picnic because of Turtle laughing during the outing. Taylor sees this as a mandate to continue raising Turtle. Turtle's first real word is "bean," and none of the adults understands its significance. Along with speaking her first word in Mattie's backyard garden, Turtle begins her planting phase, where she wants to plant everything, including the beans she has just named. About the same time that Turtle commences her fascination with gardening, Lou Ann initiates a regular ritual of cutting her hair. Lou Ann has the type of hair, blond and straight, which Taylor remembers was the envy of every high school coed, but Lou Ann is as dissatisfied with her hair, as she is with every other aspect of her body. Whenever Lou Ann passes a mirror, she feels compelled to make a disparaging comment to remind herself of the reality of her physical repugnance. Taylor gives up trying to reassure Lou Ann that she is attractive.

Lou Ann and Taylor invite the two elderly women next door to dinner, along with Esteban and Esperanza. Mattie is to appear on the news to talk about Central American

refugees and the United States' response to the situation. Taylor comes up with the idea of inviting the two next-door neighbors because they have a portable TV which they agree to carry over. As Taylor and Lou Ann are dressing for the party, Lou Ann continually berates her body as being too fat and unshapely. Taylor and Lou Ann start on a conversational tangent about having a sudden compulsion to do something weird, like yelling out in church when the preacher is giving a sermon, or jumping off a tall building when looking over the railing. This leads into a discussion of phobias, of which Lou Ann has many.

By the time the neighbors arrive with the TV the six o'clock news is half over. The women, Edna Poppy and Mrs. Parsons arrive late due to a mix up in their understanding of the invitation. Taylor has not met these neighbors, even though the neighbors watch Dwayne Ray occasionally. Taylor is not particularly impressed with the women upon first introductions. Taylor feels that Mrs. Parsons is sanctimonious and Edna is haughty. Edna is dressed completely in red, even to the red bobby pins in her hair. She enters the room clutching Mrs. Parsons elbow. Edna has an annoying habit of looking past someone when she is speaking to them, and Taylor begins to wonder why in the world Lou Ann would ever ask the two women to baby-sit. Because the news was already half over, they only hear about thirty seconds of Mattie's speech, which was about illegal aliens, sanctuary, and political asylum. Mrs. Parsons expresses her opinion that illegal aliens should be returned and that they made up the idea their lives were in danger just to get into the United States.

The Chinese food which Taylor cooks for dinner is successful; although, the chop sticks, which Esteban supplies, is only moderately so. The chapter ends with Esteban relating a parable about heaven and hell where the set up is the same in both places-a huge banquet with people sitting at the tables with spoons that are several feet long. In hell, the people are starving and frustrated because they cannot feed themselves. In heaven, everyone is happy and satiated because they feed each other.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Lou Ann's personality is quite developed as a fearful, insecure woman. She sees potential danger and death in any situation, no matter how harmless. Her obsession with her looks and abilities begins to sound like a broken record. Taylor and the reader want to grab Lou Ann and shake some sense into her because no one can possibly be deficit in so many ways. The reader can only hope that Taylor's in-your-face confidence will soon rub off on Lou Ann's personality.

It is clear now that the subject matter of Mattie's TV appearance and the presence of Esteban and Esperanza in Mattie's home are not coincidental. Taylor has not clearly made this connection, though, and since Taylor is the narrator, neither does the reader have a clear picture of what is going on in Mattie's home. The parable at the end of this chapter is a blatant clue of one of the most important themes in this novel, that of cooperation and redemption in service to others.

The authorial voice, which wanders throughout the novel is quite evident in the didactic speech Mattie gives over the nightly news show. This voice, in addition to being feminist, has a decidedly politically liberal bent. Mattie is the mouthpiece most of the time for this authorial voice, but occasionally every major character speaks with its authority.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Chapter eight begins with the announcement that Taylor's mom is marrying Harland Elleston. Taylor's tone when she reveals this to the reader clearly indicates she has some reservations about the situation. Taylor is disappointed because she has secretly hoped to convince her mom to move out to Arizona. Lou Ann sets Taylor straight telling her that Taylor's mom deserves happiness. Lou Ann chides Taylor pointing out that Lou Ann thinks Taylor may actually be jealous. Lou Ann goes on to explain that her brother moved to Alaska and married an Eskimo woman. At the time it happened, Lou Ann felt her brother had deserted the family. Lou Ann relates that her mother's name and date of birth is already on the double headstone on her father's grave. Lou Ann believes that it implies her mother should just wait around until she dies and joins her deceased husband. Lou Ann believes it is better to go on with one's life as Taylor's mom is doing.

The announcement of her mother's impending marriage prompts Lou Ann and Taylor into a discussion of men. Lou Ann teases Taylor because Taylor acts as if men are superfluous. Taylor retorts that she likes some men, Esteban being one of them. As Taylor talks about Esteban, she can feel her heart jump. Both Lou Ann and Taylor agree that there were no men worth bothering about in their hometowns. Lou Ann admits that she fell for Angel partly because he seemed so exotic. He was handsome and a daring bull rider.

Lou Ann and Taylor take the kids to the park where Lou Ann incessantly teases Taylor about her mother getting married. While at the park, Taylor spots Edna Poppy and Mrs. Parsons strolling towards them. Lou Ann and Taylor have been leaving the kids with the two women on a regular basis. Taylor hopes that Edna's kindness will cancel out Mrs. Parson's tartness. Edna is wearing red again and Taylor compliments her. Edna laughs and relates that she began wearing red in her mid-teens and has never stopped. Mrs. Parsons informs Lou Ann that Angel came by looking for her this morning. Taylor asks Lou Ann if she will let Angel move back in with her. Lou Ann replies that Angel is her husband, so what else could she do but say yes.

Taylor apologizes to Esteban about the rude comments Mrs. Parsons had made several days earlier after listening to Mattie speak on the TV about the sanctuary movement. Taylor tries to convince Esteban that Mrs. Parsons really did not mean the things she had said. Taylor remarks to Esteban that she thinks his accent is beautiful. Esteban boards the bus to go to work. Taylor feels depressed after Esteban leaves and goes over to talk to Mattie, who relates the history of Roosevelt Park. Taylor had always assumed it was named after either Theodore or Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The park is actually named after Eleanor who had made a speech from a train platform there.

Taylor is curious about the sanctuary movement. Taylor realizes the bird watching trips Mattie regularly goes on does not involve birds, but rather has something to do with

sanctuary. Taylor questions Mattie why a doctor named Terry often visits, carrying a medical bag. Mattie explains that some of the refugees arrive with burns and other injuries. Taylor finally understands that some of the refugees have been tortured.

Angel returns to tell Lou Ann that he is moving away. While Angel is talking to Lou Ann, Taylor is in the doctor's office getting a physical exam for Turtle. Turtle is not ill, but Taylor thinks it a good idea to make sure she is healthy. The first hurdle to pass is to convince the nurse there is a legitimate reason why Taylor has no past medical information on Turtle. Taylor allows the nurse to assume that Turtle is a foster child. After the doctor examines Turtle, he pronounces Turtle perfectly healthy. Taylor confides she is concerned about possible past abuse. The x-rays the doctor orders reveal a multitude of past fractures all over Turtle's body. Taylor learns Turtle is three-years-old based on skeletal changes pictured in the x-rays. The doctor explains Turtle's abnormally small size as a condition called "failure to thrive."

Taylor and Turtle leave the doctor's office to meet Lou Ann and Dwayne Ray at the zoo. Lou Ann is sobbing when Taylor and Turtle arrive at the zoo. Lou Ann tells Taylor that Angel is moving to Montana to be near the rodeo and that Angel is serving her with divorce papers. Taylor asks what the problem is, since Lou Ann does not want Angel back. Lou Ann laments that she does not know how she is going to get a job because she has no skills. Lou Ann is hurt that Angel does not ask her to move with him. Taylor points out that it would be difficult to follow the rodeo circuit when caring for an infant. Taylor is impatient with Lou Ann still sobbing over Angel after six months.

Lou Ann notices that when Taylor loudly exclaims, "It's April now, for God's sake," Turtle looks up. Lou Ann is suddenly excited because she thinks she has discovered Turtle's real name. Taylor and Lou Ann start interjecting "April" into lists and sentences to see if Turtle reacts to the word. She does. Taylor and Lou Ann conclude that April might have been Turtle's birth name.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This is a pivotal chapter, which wraps up some of the loose ends from the first half of the book and resolves several questions, which had been raised. Taylor now knows how old Turtle is, a possible birth name for Turtle, and confirmation of her belief that Turtle had been badly abused. The threat of Angel returning to Lou Ann's life and displacing Taylor is laid to rest, and Lou Ann now must make choices as a single mother without waiting around for Angel to come to his senses and rescue Lou Ann. Taylor is also more aware of Mattie's involvements with illegal immigrants.

Taylor's struggle with her mom marrying is indicative of her ambiguity towards men. She was raised solely by her mom, never having met her dad, and seems to gravitate towards female companions, because most likely she is more comfortable with them. The only male she feels particularly drawn towards is Esteban, and he is unavailable. Taylor had hoped her mom would move to Arizona to be near Taylor. Now a man is coming into her mom's life and this changes Taylor's exclusive relationship with her

mom. This issue of Taylor's attitude towards men is not really resolved in this novel; although, the sequel to this novel, *Pigs in Heaven*, does have Taylor romantically involved with a man.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Esperanza attempts suicide with a bottle of baby aspirin. Esteban brings the news to Taylor at her home. Esperanza is with Mattie at a clinic and Lou Ann is staying at her in-laws for the weekend. Esteban answers the usual questions about why, how, when, and how Esperanza is. Taylor relates a story about a high school kid, Scotty, who killed himself when Taylor was in high school. Taylor says that Scotty was not a part of any school group. Taylor was a part of a group that the other students dubbed the "Nutters," which were children who gathered nuts to sell during the harvest season. Taylor understood why Scotty had killed himself because he had no friends, but Taylor does not understand it with Esperanza because she has people who care about her. Taylor is judgmental about Esperanza saying it was not fair to Esteban to do this.

Esteban explains about how the Guatemalan police use telephones and electricity to torture political prisoners. They connect the two wires from the phone to sensitive areas of the body, including the genitals, and then crank a wheel sending electricity through the wires. After observing the anguish in Taylor's eyes, as she comprehends what Esteban is telling her, Esteban suggests that he not continue telling her since she would be better off not knowing about the terror of the interrogation rooms of the secret police. Taylor is indignant that Esteban thinks Taylor would want to be protected from the horror of what Esteban and Esperanza went through before fleeing Guatemala.

Esteban suggests that Taylor should not be so hasty to judge Esperanza for attempting suicide without knowing what Esperanza had experienced in her native country. Esteban goes on to explain that their daughter, Ismene, was taken from them in order to force Esteban and Esperanza to reveal the names of the group leaders of a teacher's union. The couple chose to protect the other people at the cost of losing their daughter. Esteban explains that Ismene was probably given for adoption to a government or military couple who were unable to have children. Taylor does not understand why Esteban and Esperanza chose to protect their union compatriots even though it meant losing their daughter. Esteban does not attempt to justify their actions, so Taylor drops the subject.

Taylor and Esteban drop off to sleep. Taylor wakes later and realizes that the two of them are curled up together on the sofa. Taylor finds Esteban's hand, which is clutching her waist, lifts his palm to her lips and kisses it, slides off the couch and goes to her own room. Esteban is unaware of her actions.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Taylor, despite having come from an underprivileged background, has always felt sure of herself and her ideas of right and wrong. Taylor becomes impatient at times with

those around her who she believes to be indecisive or weak in some way. An epiphany occurs for Taylor in confronting her judgmental attitudes towards those who appear to be weak or fearful. Taylor learns of the torture both Esteban and Esperanza suffered in their native Guatemala and faced with those facts, she understands that quick, superficial judgments of others are sometimes inaccurate. This chapter begins to add depth to Taylor's character.

In learning the story of Ismene, Taylor is prompted to think of her own attitudes about motherhood and now having a child. This chapter focuses on the story of Esteban, Esperanza, and their daughter, Ismene; however, the real change and growth takes place in Taylor. Taylor also has to confront her feelings towards Esteban. Although Taylor acknowledges how she feels towards Esteban, as evidenced by her kissing his palm before she goes to her own bed, Taylor sends him off quickly in the morning in order to keep them from violating marital boundaries.

Bean Trees is, on the surface, a straightforward coming-of-age story of Taylor Greer. Underneath, though, the darker side of human nature is explored, both in the revelations of the abuse Turtle suffered before Taylor had custody and in the torture Esteban and Esperanza suffered as political prisoners. The novel subtly contrasts the positive, women-centered atmosphere of Mattie and Taylor's homes, with the violence found in the world at large, where men are included.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The morning after Esperanza's attempted suicide brings the news that Esperanza is fine. Turtle wakes in a good mood, and Lou Ann returns home, further along the road to emotional recovery from her divorce. Lou Ann and Taylor are gradually making their home a space of women and children, moving their feminine touches to fill the holes Angel left when he departed.

Lou Ann, Taylor, and the kids roam out to the arbor to sit and enjoy the perfect late spring day. Lou Ann fills Taylor's ears full of the gossip from her ex's side of the family. Several of the family members were moving to California. Lou Ann, in her predilection for doom and gloom is adamant that she will never move to California, since any day now, an earthquake is going to drop most of the state into the ocean. Turtle interrupts Lou Ann's contemplation of California becoming shark bait by pointing and saying, "beans." Taylor corrects her daughter telling her that those are bees. Turtle shakes her head, points and says, "bean trees." They all look to where Turtle is pointing and notice that the wisteria has long seedpods hanging off the vines. Taylor is amazed and thinks to herself she is witnessing a miracle of the flower trees turning into bean trees.

Lou Ann is involved in serious job hunting. As Lou Ann walks to pick up the daily newspaper, Taylor and Turtle head for Lee Sings market. Lou Ann has been avoiding going into Lee Sings market ever since Dwayne Ray had been born. Lou Ann feels guilty that the elderly Sing grandmother's prediction that Lou Ann would deliver a girl was incorrect. Lou Ann believes the old woman gives her the evil eye every time she goes into the market because of having a boy. Once inside Sing's Market, Taylor spies Edna Poppy in the paper goods aisle. Edna is sniffing at the different brands of toilet paper and she seems confused. When Taylor catches up to Edna, she is dumbfounded to see Edna carrying a white cane. Taylor realizes that Edna is blind.

When Taylor arrives back home, she informs Lou Ann of the startling news that Edna Poppy is blind. Lou Ann believes Taylor is joking, which Taylor vehemently denies. Taylor goes over all the evidence, which in hindsight demonstrates the truth of the matter. Lou Ann is appalled that she may have inadvertently insulted Edna when Lou Ann has said such things as "see you later," or thanks for "keeping an eye on Dwayne Ray." Taylor reassures Lou Ann that Edna would not have minded such references.

When Taylor arrives at work the next day, she goes to the second floor to visit with Esperanza. Taylor has never been upstairs and is amazed to find a finely tuned clutter. Books, children's toys, clothing, and lots of gadgetry are strewn about on every surface. Taylor notices that most of the children's drawings tacked up everywhere contain images of guns and bullets. Taylor finds Esperanza sitting quietly in the back room. After sitting down near Esperanza, Taylor feels awkward and tongue-tied. Taylor asks Esperanza how she is feeling. Esperanza nods and smiles slightly. Taylor and

Esperanza are silent until Taylor relaxes and opens her heart to tell Esperanza that she knows about Ismene. Taylor apologizes for own lack of compassion when she first heard what Esperanza had done. Taylor urges Esperanza to hold on to the meaning of Esperanza, which is hope. Taylor says she does not know firsthand what it is like to lose someone, but she believes it is worse not to ever have had anyone to lose. As Taylor stands to go back to work, she states that Esteban is crazy about Esperanza.

Several days later as Taylor finishes her last chores at work, she spies Lou Ann getting off the bus. Taylor waves Lou Ann over, who gives Taylor the low down on her latest job interview. The manager at the convenience store is more interested in Lou Ann's chest than her skills. Lou Ann is disgusted, and even more so after glancing over at the adult store next to the tire shop. Taylor says Mattie figures being next to Jesus Saves Tires is probably bad for their business. Lou Ann admires Taylor for not letting others walk all over her.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter, for which the book is named, is fairly short, but much occurs which helps move the story forward. The chapter opens with the news that Esperanza is fine. Lou Ann returns from the weekend at her in-laws. Taylor admits to herself her feelings for Esteban, whereas in the last chapter, she knew of them, but did not consciously acknowledge them.

The miracle of the bean trees is possibly a metaphor for this entire novel. The seedpods hanging on the wisteria vines closely resemble edible bean pods. When Turtle points out the pods on the hanging vines, she says, "bean trees." Taylor and Lou Ann see what Turtle is pointing to and Taylor says, "Will you look at that.... it was another miracle. The flower trees were turning into bean trees." This is a theme found throughout the book- the miracle of transformation. Each of the major characters in the book is gradually changing. The metaphor of the bean trees, which are actually wisteria plants, is explored further in the final chapter of the novel, which is titled Rhizobia. See that chapter analysis for an in-depth discussion.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Lou Ann obtains a job at Red Hot Mama's salsa factory. She stands in a production line, chopping the ingredients. It is a veritable sweatshop, both because the air conditioning is often malfunctioning and because the fumes from the red chilies cause eyes to burn and water. Lou Ann loves the job. Not only is she an enthusiastic worker at the shop, she constantly brings home samples and creates recipes to try out on Taylor, Turtle, and guests. Lou Ann had ceased her weekly hair cutting rituals and the self-deprecating remarks in front of the mirror.

The high temperatures of the season were keeping Lou Ann and Taylor awake until late in the night. They often sit at the kitchen table fanning themselves, talking, and reading the newspaper. Inevitably, various articles in the newspaper set Lou Ann off on the many dangers of life. Taylor finally asks Lou Ann one evening why she is such a worrier. Lou Ann relates a dream she had one week after Dwayne Ray was born. An angel comes to her in the dream and tells her that Dwayne Ray will not live to see the year two thousand. The morning after the dream, Lou Ann's horoscope states that she is to listen to the advice of a stranger. Lou Ann believes that the horoscope means the angel. Dwayne Ray's horoscope for that same day says to avoid unnecessary travel. Lou Ann interprets travel as the journey of life.

Lou Ann continues explaining her fearfulness by telling Taylor about a game she and her brother played when they were young. Lou Ann and her brother would ask a fortune doll about their futures. Lou Ann's brother would "peer" far into the future, seeing himself as an old man with a long, white beard. Lou Ann would only look a couple weeks into the future. Lou Ann was always afraid that if she asked the doll a question far into the future, she would look into the box and see she was dead. Taylor tries to talk Lou Ann out of her unreasonable fear of the future, but to no avail. Lou Ann shakes her head saying she is totally messed up. Taylor reassures Lou Ann that she has her good points, one of which is that she cares, which is why she worries so much.

It is June. A package arrives from Angel in Montana with presents for both Lou Ann and Dwayne Ray. Angel includes a note asking Lou Ann to join him in Montana, where Angel is living in a yurt, a Mongolian tent home. Lou Ann debates with herself as to whether she should go join him or not. Lou Ann is thrilled that Angel says he misses her. Lou Ann, though, says that she now has responsibilities at her new job where she had been promoted to floor manager. Taylor believes Lou Ann will probably go to Montana, but she does not express this thought to Lou Ann.

Mattie, who has just returned from one of her increasingly frequent "bird watching" trips, tells Taylor that Esteban and Esperanza are going to move to another safe house, probably in Oregon or Oklahoma. Taylor is aghast to learn that immigration would barge into Mattie's home and deport the couple immediately. The only way Esteban and

Esperanza can legally stay in the States is if they can prove their lives would be in danger if they return to Guatemala. Unfortunately, they, as many others, fled with just the clothes on their backs and have no hard evidence as to their peril. Taylor struggles with the revelations of the injustice in the world.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Lou Ann is balanced between the confident, secure person she is becoming, and the mousy, fearful woman she was at the opening of the book. Lou Ann admits to Taylor her fears about Dwayne Ray. Lou Ann feels validated when Angel writes and asks her to join him, but she has not pulled out a suitcase and started packing.

The confidence Lou Ann gains from her promotion at work is slowly transforming her self-image. The reader does not yet know if it will be enough for her to say no to Angel. Taylor doubts that Lou Ann will be able to resist the siren call of safely that Angel seems to offer. This chapter introduces conflicts, which will have to be resolved by the end of the book. Will Lou Ann move on with her life? What will happen to Esteban and Esperanza? How will the change in Taylor's worldview change her as a person?

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

It is four o'clock and Mattie and Taylor hear thunder, as they are getting ready to close shop. Mattie flips the open sign around, gathers Taylor, Esteban and Esperanza into the cab of her truck, and heads into the dessert. Mattie is mum on where she is taking them; just that she wants them to smell "this." Taylor feels as though they are on a "blind date with destiny." Mattie tells them as they are driving that today would be New Year's Day for the Indians who lived in the dessert before the white men came. Taylor does not understand what is so special about July the twelfth, today's date. Mattie replies that it is not the date, but the fact that it is the first rainstorm of the summer.

Mattie pulls up to a spot where the entire Tucson Valley was visible. The group can see the thunderstorm slowly moving their way. Taylor surveys the scene and remembers how she used to believe there was nothing alive in the dessert. Taylor chides herself for her ignorance. Suddenly, the rain was upon them, and the hard, cold drops plummeted like soft bullets from the sky. They all shivered and Esteban dances with Esperanza, then with Taylor. Esteban uses his handkerchief as a prop in a flirtatious dance to life. Suddenly, they all stop and smell the rain. The smell is caused by the dampness of the greasewood bushes. It is neither a pleasant nor an unpleasant odor. The beauty of the smell is in the reason for it-the first rain of the year. As the group is driving home, they hear thousands of spadefoot toads croaking around them. Taylor asks how they survive in the dessert and Mattie replies that they go into a sort of hibernation until the rain falls. The toads will be laying their eggs all night and in a couple days time, tadpoles will be swimming in the puddles.

When Taylor arrives back home after the outing, Lou Ann is waiting for her on the front porch. Taylor immediately perceives that something is wrong and rushes into the house. Taylor finds Turtle sitting on Edna's lap. Turtle's eyes are vacant; similar to the way they were when Taylor first met Turtle. Turtle had been in the park with Edna when Edna heard a thump and sounds of a struggle. Edna swung her cane above Taylor's height connecting with something soft. The perpetrator fled. Lou calls the police as soon as Edna returns home. The police and social worker arrive soon after Taylor. The medical examiner finds no evidence that Turtle was molested. During part of the time that the police and social worker are with Turtle, Taylor is busy trying to chase a bird back outside, which has flown into the house through the chimney.

The social worker reassures Taylor that kids are resilient and Turtle will be herself soon. After everyone leaves, Lou Ann criticizes Taylor for not staying in the room and holding Turtle, instead of chasing a bird around the house. Taylor defends herself, saying how could she have done anything for Turtle that Edna was not already doing. The next week after the incident, Taylor stays at work late every day, while Lou Ann takes the week off work to stay home with Turtle. Lou Ann canvasses the neighborhood, trying to

find a witness. At night, Taylor looks up words such as pedophile in order to understand what the person who attacked Turtle is like. Taylor eats less and less and withdraws.

One night, Lou Ann takes a bowl of soup and crackers to Taylor in the bedroom. Taylor dismisses the food and Lou Ann, but Lou Ann insists that Taylor is not going to solve anything with a hunger strike. Taylor explains that she is upset, not just because of what happened to Turtle, but also because the incident is indicative of the world at large. Taylor despairs because she sees the way of the world is for those who are stronger to pick on those who are weaker. Taylor recites a list of social ills she has recently noticed. Taylor believes it has become unpatriotic to feel sorry and concern for those who are less fortunate. Taylor concludes her soliloquy by saying she does not feel capable of raising Turtle in such a world. Lou Ann replies that no one is capable any more than Taylor is.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The reader gets the sense in this chapter, more than most other ones, that this novel is not simply entertainment, but that perhaps the author has an agenda in the penning of it. There have been glimpses of socio-political undertones in previous chapters, particularly the sections concerning the sanctuary movement, which was an ongoing movement in the United States at the time this novel was written. Now we read in the early part of this chapter about a Native American culture, which was extinguished by the coming of white men, and then about the social injustices of a capitalistic society, which ignores the plight of the homeless and other disenfranchised groups. Taylor has evolved from a happy-go-lucky woman who believes that most problems can be conquered with enough determination into a person who recognizes her heretofore naivety.

The attack on Turtle in the park by a pedophile again touches on the theme of the darker side of human nature. Turtle, in her innocence, is a stark contrast to someone who would prey on a child being cared for by a blind woman. It would be amiss to suggest the author holds the socio-political views expressed in this chapter, and throughout the book, personally; however, the authorial voice is quite consistently outside the mainstream. The involvement of a Catholic priest, Father William, suggests that Mattie might be a proponent of liberation theology, a doctrine, which advocates the involvement of the church in political issues concerning the poor and oppressed. This theology never gained Vatican support.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Within a few weeks of Turtle's trauma in the park, she was back to talking and acting as if nothing had happened. Turtle talks about a bad man that Ma Poppy hit with her cane, so Taylor knows that something did happen. Taylor and Turtle visit the social worker, Cynthia, twice a week. The rains have begun in earnest and Taylor cannot believe she used to rue the dryness of the earlier months. Cynthia, Taylor, and Turtle discuss Turtle's earlier experiences of abuse from before Taylor had Turtle. Unfortunately, Cynthia informs her that she has no legal claim on Turtle and that unless she can produce legal adoption papers, Turtle will be taken into state custody and placed in a foster home. Cynthia fills out the paperwork informing the bureaucracy of Turtle's status and tells Taylor it will be about three weeks before any action is taken.

Lou Ann rages about the legal system when Taylor comes home and tells her about Turtle. Lou Ann cannot believe the state would take Turtle out of a good home and dump her in an orphanage. Taylor was ready to capitulate and let the legal wheels move forward and lose Turtle. Taylor questions whether Turtle would be any better off with Taylor than in a foster home. Lou Ann is appalled that Taylor would even consider giving up Turtle without a fight. Lou Ann relates a story about a girl in her high school whom Lou Ann thought defined the word chutzpah, but that when Lou Ann met Taylor, the high school friend was a mouse in comparison. Lou Ann hounds Taylor for the next couple weeks, to motivate Taylor to take action to keep Turtle. Taylor keeps saying that this was a lousy world in which to bring up a child. Lou Ann points out that there is no other world available.

Mattie, in the meantime, is searching for a safe house for Esteban and Esperanza, but has been unsuccessful. Plans are made and fall through several times. Mattie tells Taylor that there are ways to adopt a child without going through the state. Taylor confides that she is not sure keeping Turtle is in Turtle's best interest. Taylor tries to convince Mattie that she is not mother material. Mattie reassures her that Taylor has as much potential for being a good mother as anyone. Mattie suggest that the question Taylor should ask is not whether she can give Taylor the best possible upbringing, but whether she is willing to try to do so.

Taylor goes in to speak with Cynthia without Turtle. Cynthia tells Taylor that she needs a paper from the legal parents or guardians stating that they were giving up their rights to Turtle and transferring those rights to Taylor. Taylor and Cynthia discuss all the legal ins and outs of gaining custody of Turtle. Taylor insults Cynthia by asking her if she ever got out of her office and saw what life was like in the real world. Cynthia points out that she came to Taylor's house the night Turtle was assaulted. Taylor blames Cynthia for the problem with Taylor not being Turtle's legal guardian. Cynthia offers to help Taylor by researching the adoption laws in Oklahoma. Taylor realizes that Cynthia is not opposed to Taylor keeping Turtle. Taylor asks Cynthia if she believes Turtle is better off with

Taylor than going into a series of foster homes. Cynthia affirms that she thinks Turtle is just fine living with Taylor. Taylor drops the combative attitude she has demonstrated towards Cynthia.

That night and the next day, Taylor is restless, trying to make a decision about whether to pursue legal adoption of Turtle and how to do so. Taylor goes to work and talks to Mattie about driving Esteban and Esperanza to Oklahoma where there is a safe house ready for them, and, at the same time, try to find some of Taylor's relatives in order to begin the process of legal adoption. When Taylor returns home in the afternoon, she tells Lou Ann of her decision. Lou Ann tries to persuade Taylor to reconsider saying that there is the possibility that Turtle's family may see how well Turtle is turning out and want her back. Taylor does not believe that is likely, but says she will worry about it if it happens. Mattie's biggest concern about Taylor driving Esteban and Esperanza to Oklahoma is that Taylor could be charged with a felony and be fined and sentenced to prison. Taylor insists she is willing to take that risk.

As Taylor is packing that evening, Virgie Mae Parsons comes over and invites the household over to witness the opening of the night-blooming cereus plant. The flowers bloom only one night each year. Taylor, on several other occasions, had noticed the cereus shrub climbing over the trellis and onto the porch and had wondered why they didn't cut back such a homely plant. Tonight, though, it was apparent why the shrub is allowed to sprawl around the porch--voluminous, silver flowers blanketed the plant. Turtle walks up next to a blossom, which was larger than her face. Taylor almost warns Turtle about the plant's thorns, but holds her tongue. Virgie Mae points out that if the blossom is touched, it shrivels. The flowers were intricately wrought of silvery threads and had a faint, sweet smell. Lou Ann believes the magical images of the flowers is a sign of "something good." Virgie Mae offers to cut one for Lou Ann, but she declines, saying she wants to remember the bush as she saw it here in the dark with the moon reflected off the petals.

The next morning, Taylor walks over to Jesus Is Lord Used Tires and loads Turtle into Mattie's Lincoln. Several people show up to say goodbye to Esteban and Esperanza. After the hugs and goodbyes, Mattie spends a few minutes giving last minute instructions. Mattie is still concerned about Taylor getting in trouble. Mattie hands Taylor an envelope of money for the trip. Taylor tries to refuse it, but Mattie insists, saying it is contributions from many people. Mattie reminds Taylor that she only hired her for fixing tires, not for chauffeuring refugees about the country. Taylor nods and they creep away from the tire shop. On the way out of town, there is a dead blackbird on the centerline. Taylor instinctively starts to brake for it, but then realizes there is no reason to stop for a dead bird.

Chapter 13 Analysis

One of the recurring themes, which again is evident in this chapter, is the idea of governmental interference in the lives of the powerless. This theme is apparent in the immigration laws, which prevent aliens, who are in danger, to apply for visas unless they

are able to thoroughly document why they are in danger. In chapter thirteen, this nameless government is telling Taylor she has to document her right to provide Turtle a home. Taylor is in a similar situation to Esteban and Esperanza in that, due to the circumstances, she has no proof she was given custody of Turtle, just her own word. The tone throughout the novel has been anti-establishment.

The authorial voice of this novel suggests that the government is incapable of any flexibility, and hence, it is moral for one to circumvent or ignore the laws in order to do what is "right." Because the two main legal situations in the novel are presented under such compelling drama, the reader is drawn by pathos to champion the cause of Esteban and Esperanza's receiving legal alien status and for Taylor to be able to legally adopt Turtle. These may be worthwhile causes and legitimate reasons to break the law, but if one were to use this rationale for something such as murdering the pedophile in the park, would that be a moral action? The reader is wise to understand to what purpose the authorial voice exists and think clearly through the implications of what it suggests.

Lest the reader discount the anti-government sentiment of the novel as too biased, the author uses the social worker, Cynthia, as a contrast to the nameless, pitiless bureaucracy, which is incapable of veering from the letter of the law. Ultimately, though, in this chapter as in all previous ones, what is important is the nurturing of relationships. Success is measured by one's treatment of others rather than material wealth.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Taylor and her passengers are stopped by immigration close to the New Mexico border. Esteban and Esperanza had dressed as "American" as possible. Traffic was moving slowly, which gave them all time to become nervous. It was a routine check; nonetheless, Taylor was shaking inside. The border officer asks if they are all citizens and who were Turtle's parents. Esteban claims her. They are waved onward with a cheery "Have a nice day." As they left the border patrol behind, Esteban apologizes for telling the officer that Turtle was his child. Taylor says it is of no matter, but she is bothered by that and by the fact that Turtle calls Esperanza "Ma." Turtle calls every woman in her life, Ma something. They decide to drive quite late, so Taylor and Esteban chat while Turtle and Esperanza sleep. Esteban asks if the alligator is the national symbol of the United States, since he sees so many people wearing an alligator on their shirt just above the heart. Taylor explains the alligator is the symbol for a company called Izod, which makes the shirts. Esteban relates that the national bird of the Indian people of Guatemala is the quetzal. Taylor asks if that bird is similar to a macaw. Esteban replies that unlike the macaw, the quetzal will die if it is caged. Taylor questions Esteban about his home and asks if he ever gets depressed so far away from there. Esteban admits that he does not even know where home is anymore. He explains that Spanish is not his native tongue and that he and Esperanza speak Spanish to each other because their native Mayan dialects are different. Their names are not even their birth names. Esteban says their birth names would be unpronounceable to Taylor. Taylor tells Esteban the story about how she changed her name after leaving Kentucky. The two become silent and Taylor thinks about Guatemala--the one she had always pictured of birds and native women in colorful dresses, and the one Esteban talks about where the natives are continuously moved off their land to make room for the capitalist.

The second day of the trip sees them enter Oklahoma. Esperanza feels nervous at the limitless horizons of the plains of Oklahoma. Turtle seems completely unperturbed by the scenery and tells an ongoing story to Esperanza. By late afternoon, they reach the Broken Arrow Motor Lodge, where Taylor and Turtle had stayed for a couple months on their way to Arizona. Mrs. Hoge, the elderly woman who had taken in Taylor and Turtle, is deceased. Her daughter-in-law, Irene, is running the place. Irene is excited to see Taylor and Turtle again, and offers them a couple free rooms for the night. Irene feeds them all dinner and after everyone else went to bed, she and Taylor stay up talking. The next morning Taylor presents two options to Esteban and Esperanza. One was to go straight to the safe house and the other was to spend one more day with Taylor and Turtle, while they search for Turtle's family. Not long after leaving the motel, they drove into the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation. Taylor asks Esteban if Cherokees look like Mayans. He replies no. Taylor then asks if a white person would know this. Esteban does not think so. Taylor believes that Oklahoma might be a good place for the couple to blend in, so she becomes more resigned to the situation.

Esteban practices his family "history," while Taylor searches for the bar where Turtle had been handed to her. They agree on a last name for the couple: Two Two, a common Cherokee name. Esteban and Esperanza become Steve and Hope Two Two. Taylor finds the bar and drives past it, saying she is too afraid to go inside. After encouragement from Esteban, she u-turns and pulls to a halt in the parking lot. Leaving the other passengers in the car, Taylor goes into the bar. Taylor questions the waitress, trying to determine how to find the Indian woman who had pressed Turtle onto her. The bar has changed hands since then, and the waitress has no idea of any former customers. The waitress explains that this diner is just on the edge of the Cherokee nation and that the main concentration of Indians is closer to the mountains in the East. Taylor is shocked to learn that Oklahoma has mountains. The rest of the group comes in and they have lunch and leave, not having any more information about Turtle's family than before. Taylor does not know what to do at this point. She admits to herself that she did not really believe she would find any relative of Turtles, even before leaving Arizona. Taylor suddenly decides she wants to go to the Grand Lake o' the Cherokees and asks Esteban and Esperanza if they want to join her, or go to the safe house. They all decide to have a mini vacation for one night at a cabin on the lake.

Chapter 14 Analysis

As Esteban and Esperanza drive deeper and deeper into the "heartland" of America, they work on shedding their Mayan identification to become Americans. It is ironic, though, that they are finding refugee in the Cherokee Nation, which is situated close to the absolute center of America. It is their "Indian" appearance, which will ultimately allow them to blend into the Cherokee tribe and find a home in America.

The irony of taking sanctuary in the Cherokee Nation is particularly poignant in that the Cherokee tribe was moved and hounded by the American government until the trail of tears led them to Oklahoma, a homeland that no one wanted at the time the Cherokees were relocated. They, like the Mayan Indians, were moved out of their native lands, which were also coveted by wealthy whites. The authorial voice is consistent in its anti-government tone; this theme pervades these last chapters, leading to an interesting climax in chapter sixteen.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Esteban and Esperanza become more and more relaxed as they drive deeper into Cherokee territory. They begin to encounter very few white faces, and it is obvious that Esteban and Esperanza have missed feeling like they belong while living in Tucson. Taylor is feeling better about Oklahoma than she had been on her first trip. She realizes she had been hasty in her earlier attitude towards Oklahoma. As they were driving along, Turtle suddenly yells, "Mama." They were passing a cemetery. Turtle and Esperanza were inseparable. Taylor really warms up to Oklahoma when they arrive at Lake o' the Cherokees and she spies the forests and hills. The group sit on the porch and watch Turtle play in the flowers by the creek. Esteban risks a dunking to grab a couple flowers for the two women. Even Esperanza laughs when he soaks one leg up to his knees. Taylor observes that Esperanza is changing. She is less turned in on herself. Taylor has a difficult time calling Esteban and Esperanza Steve and Hope. Taylor points out that their names are all they have left of their former life. Esteban and Taylor rent a rowboat and go out always onto the water. The two of them loll in the middle of the lake, soaking up sun and barely talking. Taylor finally admits that she is going to miss him a lot. He suggests that they throw a penny overboard and make a wish. She declines, saying it is wasteful. He offers her a pop-top from the bottom of the boat and says they will wish on that, they being appropriate for American wishes. Taylor makes two wishes; only one could possibly become true.

When Taylor and Esteban row back to shore, they arrive to a spread of travel food, which Esperanza had spread out on the picnic table. Turtle spends more time running around the table and trees, picking up pinecones, then sitting and eating. She alternately hands Esperanza and Taylor a cone. Taylor tries not to take note of who is receiving the most cones. Taylor notices it is difficult to be depressed around a three-year-old and the drama of adult life seems dreamlike in contrast. Turtle attempts to bury her doll in the dirt, but Taylor explains to her that beans grow in the dirt, but not doll babies. Turtle pats the mound where she had buried the doll and says, "Mama." It is the second time Turtle had said "Mama," that day and both in context with burial. Taylor holds Turtle and asks if she saw her mama get buried. Turtle replies, "Yes." Taylor rocks Turtle and explains that Turtle's mama loved her, but she had to go away and leave Turtle with Taylor. Turtle crawls out of Taylor's lap and pats the ground and says, "Grow beans." Taylor asks Turtle if she wants to leave her doll buried there, to which Turtle nods. Later that night, Taylor asks Esteban and Esperanza if they would help her with something, but it would involve minimal risk. They readily agree.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Taylor is growing up. When she first came through Oklahoma, she saw nothing positive about the state. When she had left Kentucky, she was resolved that she would settle

wherever her VW first broke down. That occurs in Oklahoma, but Taylor is unable to fulfill that promise to herself because she couldn't bring herself to stay in such a flat, dry country. Throughout the book, Taylor has had to confront her own prejudices and hasty judgments and recognize that she is often incorrect in her assumptions. The fact that she is able to admit her errors demonstrates her strength of character.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Taylor, Turtle, Esteban and Esperanza are sitting in Mr. Jonas Wilford Armistead's law office. Esteban and Esperanza have agreed to pose as Turtle's parents who are giving Turtle up for adoption to Taylor. They use the aliases Steven Tilpac Two Two and Hope Roberta Two Two. Turtle is named in the official adoption papers as April Turtle Two Two. They explain to the lawyer that Esteban and Esperanza want to give Turtle up for adoption to Taylor. Although Esteban and Esperanza have no official identification, the lawyer and his assistant seem to take it in stride - Taylor merely has to swear that she knows them and they are who they say they are. The lack of a birth certificate for Turtle seems to be no great obstacle either. Esteban attests that Turtle was born in the back seat of a Plymouth on the Cherokee reservation. Both Taylor and Esteban elaborate on the circumstances, creating a past where the three of them have been good friends for years.

The natural prejudice of the white lawyer enables the proceedings to move forward without a hitch. At one point, Esteban lifts Turtle from Esperanza's lap and renders a brief heart to heart talk to Turtle about behaving for Taylor and being a good girl. Turtle merely replies, "Okay." Esperanza unhooks the St. Christopher medal from around her own neck and clasps it around Turtle's. Esperanza is so emotionally distraught during the time in the lawyer's office that it lends an anguished veracity to the adults' story. Taylor feels no compunction about lying to the lawyer in order to obtain legal adoption papers. The lawyer briefly questions Esteban and Esperanza as to their intentions and warns them that once the process is legalized, a new birth certificate will be issued and the old one destroyed. At that point, they will not be able to change their minds. Esteban speaks for both him and his wife, assuring the lawyer that they are aware of what they are doing. Esteban adds that they want Turtle to have a stable home with someone who can financially provide for her.

Once the paperwork is completed, they shake hands all around and wait while the legal aide finishes typing. Taylor imagines how shocked the lawyer and his staff would be were they to know the truth about Turtle. As Esperanza is walking across the parking lot to the car, Taylor notices her face seems changed in some way. Taylor describes it as having a polished look. Taylor studies Esteban and Esperanza as they climb into the Lincoln. Taylor is sad that they had to wear grubby, poor clothing so as to look impoverished enough to need to give up Turtle. Taylor appreciates their willingness to sacrifice their pride to help her secure rights to Turtle.

Chapter 16 Analysis

One of the principle themes in this novel is the idea that there is a greater law than municipal law. This theme is first demonstrated through the sanctioning of aiding illegal

aliens to establish a life in the United States. A second demonstration occurs in this chapter when Taylor commits perjury and fraud by she swearing both that Esteban and Esperanza are Mr. and Mrs. Two Two and that they are Turtle's parents.

A second theme encountered throughout the novel also appears in this chapter; that is, the disenfranchisement of non-whites. It is implied in various scenes dealing with the sanctuary movement and immigration laws that non-white refugees from impoverished countries find it quite difficult to receive legal status in the United States. The irony in this chapter is that because Esteban and Esperanza pose as Cherokee Indians, Mr. Armistead is willing to accept their story at face value, rather than requiring proper documentation, such as IDs and a birth certificate. This willingness can be attributed to one of two reasons: either he believes that an Indian would very likely have a baby in the back seat of a car and not record the birth. Or he does not really care whether Taylor, Esteban and Esperanza are telling the truth because what difference does it make if two Indians give up their child for adoption to a white woman. Most likely the white woman will provide a better home anyway.

Although there have been a series of minor crises throughout the novel, Chapter Sixteen contains the climax to the novel's two major crises - first, the problem of Turtle and secondly, Esperanza's continued emotional fragility. The situation with Turtle climaxes in the scene in the lawyer's office where Esteban, and Esperanza put themselves in a precarious legal situation by pretending to be Turtle's biological parents. Likewise, Taylor, in swearing to false names for Esteban and Esperanza and affirming that she knows they are Turtle's parents, has placed herself in legal jeopardy. Ironically, the climax to Esperanza's suicidal mental state also takes place in Mr. Armistead's office as she experiences an emotional catharsis by substituting the relinquishing of Turtle as symbolic of her letting go of her own daughter, Ismene. The denouement, or resolution, of Esperanza's crisis is the will and ability to survive her new life in America.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

After leaving the lawyer's office, Taylor, Esteban, Esperanza and Turtle start the search for the sanctuary church where Esteban and Esperanza will stay. After locating the address Mattie had given them, they discover the church had moved. They finally find the newly built church and meet the Reverend and Mrs. Stone. The couple had been somewhat worried about Taylor and her passengers because they had expected them several days earlier.

Turtle was sound asleep as the others unloaded and sorted possessions. Esteban and Esperanza thought Turtle should just sleep, since they had really said their goodbyes in the lawyer's office, but Taylor was adamant that Turtle see the church where Esteban and Esperanza were staying and see that they were fine. Taylor explained her belief about waking Turtle by saying that Turtle had had too many people disappear in her life without saying goodbye. Turtle groggily waves and lies back down to sleep.

Taylor, on the other hand, is struggling with her farewells. She hugs Esperanza and shakes hands with the Stones, but is distraught over her losing Esteban. She confesses to him that she has never lost someone she loves. He nods when she admits she is afraid for Esteban and Esperanza - what they will do, how they will live. He tells her to think of them as back in Guatemala with their families. Taylor expresses to Esteban her concern that Esperanza may actually believe that she left Ismene, her daughter, with Taylor, and that is wrong. He replies that in this world, all that can be done is to "make things as right as we can." Esteban kisses Taylor and walks into the rectory. Taylor thinks to herself "all four of us had buried someone we loved in Oklahoma."

After leaving Esteban and Esperanza at the church, Taylor finds a pay phone and calls her mama in Kentucky. Her mama immediately perceives that something is wrong because Taylor's voice is stuffy from crying. Taylor tells her mama that she has just lost someone she is in love with. Her mama asks why Taylor let him go. Taylor replies that he is not hers to have. Her mama reassures Taylor that she will someday find someone else who turns her head. Taylor swears she does not think she ever will find someone else. Her mama reminds Taylor that her mama, in her advanced age, has just gotten married.

Taylor's mama tells Taylor that she has retired, but before she did, she told off the condescending rich lady whose house she had cleaned for decades. Her mama laughs and tells her that all the rich women whose houses she cleaned live in fear that she will take out an ad in the local paper and tell all their secrets. Taylor tells her mama that she has an awful lot of guts for a little person. Taylor then realizes that her mama always used to say the same thing to Taylor.

Taylor's mama asks about Turtle. Taylor explains that she is fine and she would put her on the phone, but she was asleep, and you never know what Turtle is going to say. Her mama says that Turtle comes by that honestly. Taylor is taken aback, saying that that saying means that someone is your biological child. Taylor's mama refutes that statement saying that a child can come by honesty by means other than genes. Taylor's mama believes that the main way is by what you tell them. Taylor's mama uses Newt Hardbine as an example. All Newt heard as a child growing up was that he was no good and would not amount to anything, so he fulfilled the prophecy. Taylor told her mama that Turtle is now her legal child; therefore her grandchild. Taylor's mama is thrilled. The two women say their goodbyes, and then Taylor drove to Oklahoma City to wait for the adoption papers to clear the courts.

While Taylor and Turtle were driving around Oklahoma City, Taylor explained to Turtle that Taylor was now the only Ma she would have, even though there were lots of friends in her life. She concludes the conversation with Turtle by telling Turtle that her name was now April Turtle Greer. Taylor and Turtle spend the afternoon in the public library while waiting for the adoption paperwork. They peruse a horticulture book and Turtle points out the wisteria with the bean pods, similar to the one in Roosevelt Park near their home in Tucson. Taylor figures Turtle may grow up to be a horticultural genius. Taylor reads the information about the wisteria and is surprised to learn that the wisteria actually belongs to the legume family, which is what beans belong to also. Wisteria thrives in poor soil because of their microscopic rhizobia, which collect nitrogen from a large area around the plant. Taylor draws an analogy between the invisible systems of support, which cause the wisteria to thrive, with the system of support, which people gather around them as a means of survival.

Taylor and Turtle leave the library for the courthouse. Taylor finds the correct office and inquires about the paperwork she is to collect. She is told that it will be awhile; so she phones Lou Ann collect in order to squelch her nervousness. Taylor inquires if Lou Ann is going to join Angel in Montana. She replies with an emphatic "no" saying that even Angel's mother had told her that Angel just wants what he can't have and that as soon as Lou Ann joins him, he would be ready to leave her again. Lou Ann confides that she is dating a black guy who works with her at Red Hot Mama's. Lou Ann laughs and jokes that her mama would drop dead were she to meet him. Cameron is a Rastafarian and owns a Doberman pincher named Mr. T. Lou Ann is amazed that she has the courage to step out of her comfort zone and actually date Cameron; she attributes this to living with Taylor.

Lou Ann reveals to Taylor that she told somebody that Taylor, Turtle, and Dwayne Ray are her family, even though Lou Ann knows that Taylor had once said that she did not want Lou Ann to start thinking they were a family. Taylor is silent after hearing Lou Ann, but Taylor finally confirms the idea that they are a family. Lou Ann points out that nothing is ever permanent and she considers Taylor and Turtle to be on loan. Lou Ann then asks Taylor if she still has Turtle. Taylor announces that Turtle is now her legal daughter. Lou Ann wants to hear all the details, but Taylor tells her she will explain it all when they get back to Tucson. Lou Ann screams her delight and admits she was scared that Taylor would be returning to Tucson without Turtle.

Later that evening, Taylor and Turtle leave Oklahoma City to return home. Taylor shows Turtle the adoption papers and explains that the paper means that Turtle is her kid now and nobody can separate them. As they were driving, Turtle entertains Taylor with a vegetable song, but now it has people mixed in and Taylor was "the main ingredient."

Chapter 17 Analysis

This final chapter contains the elements of the classical denouement, or outcome, of the plot. Taylor has delivered Esteban and Esperanza safely to their new home in Oklahoma. She has also obtained legal adoption papers, albeit the acquisition was accomplished illegally.

Turtle is acting more and more as a normal three-year-old. She regales Taylor with an extemporaneous, complicated story as they begin their journey back to Arizona. This trip, which mimics the earlier one when Taylor first gained custody of Turtle, is a study in contrasts. Turtle is an open, verbal and happy child compared to the withdrawn, fearful one of a few months earlier.

Taylor has found a home and has matured into a woman who views the world more in gray, rather than the black and white one she had embraced as she left her Kentucky home. And finally, Lou Ann lays to rest any thoughts of reconciliation with Angel and is moving forward in her life as a single mother and member of a "family," defined by the mutual love and support, rather than blood or marriage.

Characters

Cynthia

The social worker who informs Taylor that she has no legal claim to Turtle but encourages her to try to adopt the little girl.

Esperanza

Esperanza, Estevan's wife, speaks little English and is silent throughout much of the novel; she also has a sad, distant quality about her, which makes Taylor wonder what has happened to her in the past. Upon meeting Esperanza for the first time, Taylor feels Esperanza's depression and notes that she "took up almost no space." Eventually Taylor learns that her sadness is due mostly to the fact that the small daughter she and Estevan had in Guatemala was taken from them by the government in a raid on their neighborhood. Esperanza's brother and two of their friends had also been killed in this raid. Taylor's daughter Turtle reminds Esperanza of her own lost daughter, and Turtle's presence often seems to be painful for Esperanza. When Esperanza tries to kill herself while at Mattie's, and Estevan comes to tell Taylor about the suicide attempt, Taylor learns for the first time from him of the violent political events in Guatemala that led to their escape to the United States. Following this conversation, Taylor begins to see Esperanza and Estevan in a new light, saying that "All of Esperanza's hurts flamed up in my mind, a huge pile of burning things that the world just kept throwing more onto."

Estevan

A gentle, handsome young English teacher who fled with his wife to the United States from Guatemala, Estevan becomes friendly with Taylor and teaches her about real pain and loss when he describes to her the brutal world he and Esperanza left behind them. Estevan and Esperanza have found sanctuary at Mattie's house, and it is through Mattie that they eventually meet Taylor and Lou Ann. As she gets to know him better, Taylor feels herself falling in love with Estevan; she has never known anyone else like him. He has impeccable manners, speaks "perfect English," and is sensitive and wise. He loves Esperanza dearly and is utterly devoted to her, and Taylor respects their relationship. Although Estevan was an English teacher in

Guatemala, and also speaks Spanish and his native Mayan dialect, his job in Tucson is as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant. Taylor is outraged that such a learned man as Estevan should be reduced to such a lowly position, but he is humble, knowing that he is fortunate to have escaped his dangerous Circumstances in Guatemala. Estevan's story of these circumstances teaches Taylor to see her own life in a new way: she realizes that her own life has not really been as hard as she has thought, that her "whole life had been running along on dumb luck and [she] hadn't even noticed."

April Turtle Greer

See Turtle Greer

Taylor Greer

Taylor Greer's wise, colorful voice narrates the novel, and she serves as its central consciousness. A smart and spirited young woman who drives across the country alone to escape the monotony of her hometown, Taylor knows who she is and what she wants, but she is no rugged individualist-she needs other people to be part of her world. Born Marietta Greer in Pittman County, Kentucky, Taylor possessed a strong sense of identity even at a young age. While she was growing up, her Mama cleaned houses for wealthy people, and she heard her Mama call her employers "Miss this or Mister that." At the age of three Taylor knew she too deserved that kind of respect; she insisted on being called *"Miss* Marietta," and then "Miss Marietta" evolved into "Missy.'"

When Taylor leaves Pittman County for good as a young woman, she decides "that I would get myself a new name" for her new life, and she chooses the name Taylor because her broken-down, 55 Volkswagen bug runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. By fleeing her home, Taylor intends to escape the seemingly narrow life that her peers in Pittman County lead. But ironically, in her new life in Arizona she ends up with a child and employed at a used tire repair shop. She tells Estevan that "I spent the first half of my life avoiding motherhood and tires, and now I'm counting them as blessings." Taylor is a survivor and makes the best of her circumstances. She values loyalty and community, and in spite of her long-held desire to avoid motherhood, is fully committed to raising Turtle. She learns about nurturing and mothering from Mattie and Lou Ann, and she discovers through Estevan and Esperanza that her life has not been nearly as difficult as she has often thought-in fact, "even bad luck brings good things."

Taylor's low point comes when the safe world she has created for Turtle is violated, and she begins to feel helplessly that "the whole way of the world is to pick on people that can't fight back." However, when she sees that she can help Estevan and Esperanza, and simultaneously figures out a way to adopt Turtle, she begins to feel more powerful in the face of a cruel world. Taylor ultimately is willing to risk danger to help her friends and to adopt Turtle.

Turtle Greer

Turtle is a silent, needy Cherokee toddler Taylor has foisted upon her by a frightened woman-Turtle's aunt-in the parking lot of a roadside bar in Oklahoma. The woman seems to want to save Turtle from something; she is nervous and appears to be afraid of a man who waits for her in his truck while she gives the baby to Taylor with no explanation: "Just take it," she begs Taylor. Taylor resists at first, telling the woman that "you can't Just give somebody a kid," but she finally feels she has no choice, so she takes the baby. Taylor names her Turtle because of "the way that child held on." She

tells the baby, "You're like a mud turtle. If a mud turtle bites you, it won't let go till it thunders."

Taylor soon discovers that Turtle has been badly abused and decides that she will keep her and take good care of her. Turtle begins to flourish under Taylor's care. In the dry Arizona weather, she grows and begins to talk, and all of her talk centers on growing things: flowers and vegetables. She loves Mattie's huge garden, learns the names of everything in the seed catalogs, and pretends that she is planting and tending to her own gardens. Taylor eventually must face the fact that she is keeping Turtle illegally, but by then the two feel like a real mother and daughter, so Taylor decides to adopt Turtle. The adoption process Taylor undertakes is unorthodox and not really legal, but it works, and the pair is able to stay together.

Newt Hardbine

Newt is one of the notorious Hardbine clan in Pittman County, Kentucky. Taylor knows Newt as "one of the big boys who had failed every grade at least once and so was practically going on twenty in the sixth grade." Taylor is at work at the hospital when Newt is wheeled in on a gurney, shot to death by his father, who had once been thrown by an exploding tractor tire up over the top of the Standard Oil sign. Throughout the novel, Newt and the Hardbines represent to Taylor the sordid world she left behind in Pittman County

Ismene

Ismene is Estevan and Esperanza's young daughter, who was taken from them by the Guatemalan government. Turtle resembles Ismene and reminds Estevan and Esperanza of her.

Granny Logan

Lou Ann's paternal grandmother, who accompanies Lou Ann's mother from Kentucky to visit after Dwayne Ray is born. Granny Logan is suspicious of the Arizona weather-it is hot and dry in January-and of her granddaughter's new life in this strange place. Granny is prickly and is not speaking to her daughter-in-law during their visit.

Ivy Logan

Lou Ann's mother, who travels by bus from Kentucky with her irritable mother-in-law to help Lou Ann after Dwayne Ray is born. Ivy is a hard worker, dispenses maternal advice to Lou Ann about breastfeeding and her weight, and misses her daughter. She and her mother-in-law are not on the best of terms with one another and are not speaking during their visit with Lou Ann; they ask Lou Ann to act as a go-between for them

Mother Logan

See Granny Logan

Miss Marietta

See Taylor Greer

Missy

See Taylor Greer

Mama

Taylor's Mama is the biggest influence on her as she grows up, and after Taylor leaves her Kentucky home and changes her name from Manetta to Taylor, she can still feel her Mama's support from a distance. Taylor says that Mama "always expected the best out of me [and] whatever I came home With, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good."

Mattie

Mattie is the strong, nurturing widow who owns Jesus is Lord Used Tires, helps Taylor and Turtle when they first arrive in Tucson, and shelters Estevan and Esperanza and other Central American refugees in her home. Mattie is a kind of conductor on the underground railroad-like system that locates such refugees-termed "illegal aliens" by the United States government-and gives them sanctuary. Mattie impresses Taylor at first as a "woman with. . . know-how," and as the two women get to know each other, Mattie becomes a surrogate mother to Taylor and surrogate grandmother to Turtle. Mattie's nurturing personality is also expressed in her garden, "a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts."

Mrs. Parsons

See Virgie Mae Parsons

Virgie Mae Parsons

A sour and stodgy woman, Virgie Mae Parsons lives with Edna next door to Lou Ann and Taylor. She eventually warms up to the young women and their children as she gets to know them. Mrs. Parsons always has a "grip" on Edna's elbow, as she guides her blind friend from place to place.

Edna Poppy

Sweet, kind, and always dressed in red, white-haired Edna lives with Virgie Mae Parsons next door to Taylor and Lou Ann. The two older ladies frequently help their young neighbors by watching the children. After knowing Edna for several months, Taylor is stunned to discover one day that she is blind, but she says to Lou Ann when sharing this information with her, "[Edna] has her own special ways of keeping an eye on things." In spite of her sensitivity to whatever is going on around her, Edna depends largely on her friend Virgie to guide her through the physical world.

Angel Ruiz

Angel is Lou Ann's estranged husband. He left her on Halloween, three years after losing half of his leg-and "something else that was harder to pin down"-in an accident. Angel left Lou Ann when she was pregnant with Dwayne Ray. Lou Ann often has "the feeling that [Angel] didn't really like her or anyone else for that matter He blamed people for things beyond their control." Angel is from a large Mexican-American family that loves Lou Ann and does not understand why he left her. He had been a cowboy when Lou Ann met him and dreams of being one again.

Dwayne Ray Ruiz

The infant son of Lou Ann and Angel Ruiz, Dwayne Ray is the object of Lou Ann's extreme, often verging on hysterical, safeguarding.

Lou Ann Ruiz

Before Taylor moves in with her, Lou Ann is abandoned in Tucson by her husband Angel two months before their first baby is born. A country girl at heart, Lou Ann is far away from her own family in Kentucky and has neither friends nor a job. In the wreckage of her marriage, she and her infant son forge a new kind of family life with Taylor, Turtle, and their neighbors and friends. Taylor says that "For Lou Ann, life itself was a life threatening enterprise. Nothing on earth was truly harmless." Lou Ann reads her horoscope, as well as Dwayne Ray's and Taylor's, every day and worries constantly that terrible things are going to happen, especially to her child She lacks self-confidence and is always criticizing her appearance, complaining that "I ought to be shot for looking like this" or "I look like I've been drug through hell backwards." But Lou Ann has a kind heart and cares deeply about those who are closest to her, and as much as her self-criticism annoys Taylor, the two women help each other grow into motherhood.

Sandi

The perky teenage mother whom Taylor briefly works with at Burger Derby, Sandi is a survivor. Taylor says that "life had delivered Sandi a truckload of manure with no return address" but that "nothing really seemed to throw" her.

Alice Jean Stamper Greer *See* Mama

Hope Two Two

See Esperanza

Steve Two Two

See Estevan

Hughes Walter

Hughes Walter is the handsome young science teacher who helps Taylor get her first real job, working at the Pittman County Hospital.

Mr. Walter

See Hughes Walter

Themes

Friendship

At the center of the novel, friendship is portrayed as having the power to transform even the loneliest and most broken of lives. When they first appear, most of the main characters-Taylor, Turtle, Lou Ann, Estevan and Esperanza-are broke, hurt, lonely, frightened, or just unlucky. However, as their friendships and fierce loyalty to one another grow, these forces begin to sustain the characters' lives. Alone in a city far from their homes, Taylor and Lou Ann make a new home by creating a kind of family with each other and their children. Mattie rescues Taylor and Turtle when they first arrive in Tucson by talking to them sympathetically and by giving Taylor a job. Mattie also rescues Estevan and Esperanza by giving them shelter and keeping them safe. Virgie Mae and Edna Poppy watch out for each other and help Taylor and Lou Ann with the children. Throughout the novel, the characters develop ties with one another by helping each other to survive in a difficult world. The community the characters build grows in the dry Arizona earth, just as the flowers and vegetables in Mattie's garden grow.

Choices and Consequences

Part of learning to survive is learning to make wise choices and realizing that one's choices have consequences. The novel shows how each character has faced important choices and then had to live with the consequences. The choices a character makes can also serve to define that character, showing him or her to be, for example, generous or selfish, strong or weak The do-or-die moments portrayed in the novel include Taylor's choice to leave Pittman County; her split-second decision to keep Turtle when Turtle's aunt insists she "take this baby"; Estevan and Esperanza's choice not to turn in their friends to the police and also not to pursue Ismene after she was kidnapped; Lou Ann's choice not to return to Angel after he has left her; Taylor's choice to drive Estevan and Esperanza to a new safe house in Oklahoma; and her choice to adopt Turtle for good. Each of these choices is difficult-a viable option exists in each case-but a choice has to be made, and each of these choices has changed the character's life and defined the character.

Human Rights

Human rights involve personal safety and freedom, which most United States citizens take for granted. In the novel, Latin American refugees Estevan and Esperanza, whose personal safety and freedom had been denied them in Guatemala, provide the obvious symbol for the theme of human rights. In addition, Turtle, as an abused member of the Cherokee Nation, represents two groups that have been denied human rights: abused children and Native Americans. But Taylor, as a sensitive and empathetic narrator, does not get bogged down in politics when she feels the injustice of human rights violations-

she simply worries about people she loves. Her narrative is imbued with concern for human rights regardless of nationality or political views, and her view of the world changes as she becomes more exposed to the reality of human rights violations. Taylor begins to feel overwhelmed by sadness over what Turtle and Estevan and Esperanza have been through, saying to Lou Ann, "There's just so damn much ugliness. Everywhere you look, some big guy kicking some little person when they're down... it just goes on and on, there's no end to it... the whole way of the world is to pick on people that can't fight back." Her anger over what she sees as the "way of the world" leads her to try to fight against that way, as she chooses finally to adopt Turtle and to risk danger to deliver Estevan and Esperanza to safety. Taylor's rage and despair over human cruelty transforms her by motivating her to work against cruelty and oppression.

Human Condition

Although not all of the characters in the novel endure human rights violations, all of them find life to be hard in some way. No one in the novel has had an easy life: Taylor has always been poor, Turtle has been abused and abandoned, Lou Ann perceives herself as inadequate, Estevan and Esperanza have lost their child and fled their home country in political danger. But the novel's treatment of the theme of the human condition does not stop with the notion that life is difficult. The humor and friendships generated by the characters in spite of their troubles redeem the novel from presenting a bleak view of the human condition. The novel's stance is that friendship and the support it provides relieves the characters from life's oppressiveness. Mattie provides shelter, work, love, and moral support. Taylor takes care of Turtle. Lou Ann and Taylor make each other laugh and help each other with their children. Taylor and Estevan admire the way each other uses the English language. Virgie Mae and Edna watch Turtle and Dwayne Ray for Taylor and Lou Ann. The characters in the novel have to cope with poverty and may fear for their safety, yet the novel shows that even the most dismal of lives can be transformed by a community of friends.

Style

Point of View

Up until chapter five of *The Bean Trees,* the narrative point of view is split between a first-person narrator and a third-person narrator. In the chapters dealing with Taylor Greer, Taylor tells her own story, but the chapters that focus on Lou Ami Ruiz are narrated in the third person. After Lou Ami and Taylor meet in chapter five, Taylor's point of view takes over and the third-person narrative disappears. Taylor's first-person narration fleshes out her character and puts her at the center of the novel. The third-person narrative in Lou Ann's chapters has limited omniscience, which means that the narrator is able to see into the minds of only some of the characters. In these chapters, the narrative reveals Lou Ann's feelings and motivations, although there is some distance between Lou Ann and the reader. When the two narrative points of view merge in chapter five, a sense of harmony is created, as the chapter's title suggests. Taylor and Lou Ann's decision to make a home together becomes reflected in the unified point of view.

Narrator

Taylor's narrative voice is part of her characterization and the vision of the novel. Her speech is natural, colorful, and often humorous. She describes herself to Lou Ann at their first meeting as "a plain hillbilly from East Jesus Nowhere with this adopted child that everyone keeps on telling me is as dumb as a box of rocks." But Taylor is more than "a plain hillbilly." She is "the one to get away" from her hometown: she flees her familiar surroundings and settles in a new world because she perceives that her options are limited at home. Taylor is bright, articulate, and honest; thus she is able to come to understand and speak for the refugees and lonely souls she encounters in Tucson. As the narrator, her sensitivity to the other characters and openness to new experiences allow Taylor to learn and mature, and the story she tells is really more about her than about the community she helps to create.

Setting

The arid landscape of Arizona, the setting for *The Bean Trees,* is strange and often exotic to Taylor and Lou Ann, who are far away, both geographically and psychologically, from their Kentucky homes. The women often find Arizona beautiful, but they are transplants, and Taylor tells Estevan that sometimes she "feels like. .. a foreigner too .. Half the time I have no idea what's going on around me here." Estevan and Esperanza, as refugees, are also strangers here As he explains his Guatemalan past to Taylor, Estevan admits, "I don't even know anymore which home I miss. Which level of home." In a way Taylor and Lou Ann are also refugees, fighting to survive. When Lou Ann's mother and grandmother from Kentucky visit her, their reactions to the hot

January weather and lack of rain-to them, bizarre weather for January-reflect their belief that Lou Ann has changed since she moved to Arizona. Granny Logan complains, "I don't see how a body could like no place where it don't rain Law, I'm parched," and Lou Ann replies, "You get used to it," reinforcing Granny's sense that her granddaughter is not the same person she was in Kentucky. The dryness of the Southwestern landscape and the Arizona earth' s seeming hostility to growing things serve as a backdrop to the personal struggles of the characters to put down roots and prosper in this new place.

Symbolism

The main symbols throughout the novel concern the improbable growth of things in the dry desert of Arizona. Taylor notices and appreciates the world of flourishing flowers and vegetables throughout the novel; she always seems amazed that anything can grow in the dry earth of this strange place. When Taylor's first spring in Tucson arrives, she is astonished: "You just couldn't imagine where all this life was coming from. It reminded me of that Bible story where somebody or other struck a rock and the water poured out. Only this was better, flowers out of bare dirt" The tenacious natural world symbolizes the difficult courage and tenacious nature of the characters, showing them that they, too, can put down roots and flourish in this dry land. Mattie's garden, part junkyard and part Eden, is an important representation of the persistence of living things. Taylor describes the garden as "a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. Heads of cabbage and lettuce sprouted out of old tires. An entire rusted-out Thunderbird, minus the wheels, had nasturtiums blooming out the windows." Mattie has made something beautiful and productive out of an ugly, dry landscape, and the characters who create a loving, sustaining community against this same landscape are part of that urge for life and caring. Turtle's interest in all growing things stands in stark contrast to her past abuse, which resulted in her having been a failure-to-thrive baby. She has a fascination with planting seeds and nurturing them to make them grow, and when she finally begins to talk all she says is the names of plants. Taylor discovers that wisteria vines-the bean trees that Turtle loves-"often thrive in poor soil" and are supported by "a whole invisible system" of "microscopic bugs that live. . . on the roots." This system of bugs, called rhizobia, that help the wisteria by turning nitrogen gas from the soil into fertilizer for the plant, makes Taylor think of people. She tells Turtle, "The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by . .. but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles."

Historical Context

Human Rights Struggles in Guatemala

Widespread violence and political upheaval marked a 36-year period in Guatemala that spanned the 1960s through the mid-l990s During this period, Guatemalans lived in fear and oppression as opposing forces both tore apart the government and terrorized its citizens. Anti-government left-wing guerrilla groups systematically attacked the Guatemalan government on many fronts, assassinating leaders and denouncing the series of governments that rapidly succeeded one another. In reaction to the guerrillas, extreme right-wing groups tortured and killed tens of thousands of citizens-among them teachers, doctors, peasants, students-that they believed were in league with the leftist groups. Many of those tortured and killed in the conflict were Mayans, a people native to the region, and thousands of those persecuted fled the country as refugees, seeking safety in countries like the United States

Conservatism in the 1980s

Taylor's statement after Turtle is molested in the park that "nobody feels sorry for anybody anymore. . . Not even the President. It's like it's become unpatriotic," addresses the fallout of the 1980s mood of conservatism in the United States. During the Reagan era-the two consecutive terms of the hugely popular conservative president some conservative groups used words like "patriotism" and "traditional family values" in ways that excluded people and encouraged intolerance. When conservatives celebrated "family values," some critics asserted that they were referring to values culled from a nostalgic, unrealistic view of family life as it supposedly was in the past. Many right wing conservatives blamed families that did not fit into this stereo, much as single-parent or blended families-for a host of social ills. Some Christian fundamentalists, believing that what is written in the Bible should guide daily life, condemned any group-homosexuals, liberals, feminists, divorced individuals-that seemed incompatible with their Biblical interpretation. The 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act included an amnesty program for illegal U.S. immigrants, yet some people seemed to confuse anti-immigrant sentiment with patriotism. Immigrants were often blamed for taking away jobs from "real" Americans.

Division Between Rich and Poor

In 1980s America, the rich got richer while the poor got poorer, and the middle class struggled to bang on. In essence, economic changes were creating a two-tiered society. By the mid-1980s, Wall Street saw the start of the most successful bull market in American history, creating more wealth for investors. Many of those who benefited spent their money showily on expensive cars, designer clothing, and real estate. Yuppies-young urban professionals-emerged in the early 1980s. At the other end of the

spectrum, homelessness in the United States rose by about 25 percent a year in the 1980s, due in part to cuts in government spending for low-income housing and mental health services. The price of health care rocketed out of the reach of low-income and many middle-income Americans, and the infant mortality rate in America's inner cities neared and even surpassed those of Third World countries. Drugs and violence tore apart low-income urban neighborhoods, and residents of these neighborhoods saw their educational and employment opportunities shrink.

Child Abuse and Native Americans

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1974 led to a dramatic increase in reporting of child abuse cases. The number of cases reported in 1988 was four times the number reported in 1980, and in 1989 alone, 2.4 million cases were reported. In 1990, hearings before the first Congress led to passage of the Indian Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. Congress passed this act after learning how underreported incidents were of child abuse on Indian reservations. The main purpose of the act was to provide Federal enforcement of reporting of child abuse incidents on Indian lands, as well as mental health support and treatment programs for Native American children who had been victimized.

Critical Overview

When *The Bean Trees* was published in 1988, critics received it enthusiastically. Early reviews praised Kingsolver's character development, her ear for voices and dialogue, her portrayal of friend ship and community as necessary for survival, and her ability to comment on serious social issues without allowing those issues to overwhelm the story.

A 1988 review of *The Bean Trees* in *Publishers Weekly* called the novel "an overwhelming delight, as random and unexpected as real life." Focusing in part on the character of Taylor, the review referred to her "unmistakable voice" as "Whimsical, yet deeply insightful," and it described the novel as "a marvelous affirmation of risk-taking, commitment, and everyday miracles."

Karen Fitzgerald, in her 1988 review of the novel in *Ms.,* called *The Bean Trees* "an entertaining and inspiring first novel." She judged the novel's strength as coming from its characters. She perceived Taylor-and the rest of the characters in *The Bean Trees-as* remaining "firmly at the novel's center," in spite of "the large sweep of [its] canvas." Fitzgerald asserted that in spite of the novel's strong political views, Kingsolver's characters are vivid and believable enough that they never become "mouthpieces for the party line," causing politics to overshadow plot. She praised Kingsolver's portrayal of women's friendships and placed her within a tradition of women writers-such as Doris Lessing-who have written about women's friendships and communities as being "havens in a hard world."

In his 1988 review in *The New York Times Book Review,* Jack Butler stated admiringly that "Barbara Kingsolver can write" and viewed *The Bean Trees* "an accomplished first novel" that "is as richly connected as a fine poem but reads like realism." But while he praised Kingsolver's clarity and artistry, Butler had reservations about her character development and her skill at creating a plot. Unlike Fitzgerald, Butler did not think the characters are wholly believable, seeing them "purified to types" as the novel progresses, and thus lacking depth and color. He was impressed, overall, with Kingsolver's ability to write, but maintained that the novel's problems come from "over manipulation," or Kingsolver's attempt to make things happen.

Another early reviewer, Diane Manual, wrote in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1988 that the novel is based upon "character development at its richest, with Taylor growing from happy-go-lucky hillbilly to caring friend and parent." Manual pointed to Taylor as "something that's increasingly hard to find today-a character to believe in and laugh with and admire" and called the novel a "neatly constructed tale." Like Fitzgerald and *Publishers Weekly,* Manual saw the "wonderfully outrageous characters" as being the strongest element of the novel, but added that *The Bean Trees* is not "merely laugh-a-minute fluff." The novel's political views, according to Manual, serve to deepen the characters, particularly Taylor, as she "gradually learns about the suffering some of her newfound friends have endured [and] begins to make her own significant commitment to protecting their hard-won freedom."

Margaret Randall, writing in 1988 in *The Women's Review of Books,* admired the way *The Bean Trees* balances humor with serious topics. She considered the novel "hilariously funny" in spite of its being "a story about racism, sexism and dignity." Like other critics, Randall pointed to Kingsolver's ability to create realistic, human characters. "It's one of those old-fashioned stones... in which there are heroines and anti-heroines, heroes and anti-heroes, ordinary humans all. They go places and do things and where they go and what they do makes sense for them... and for us." Randall discussed Kingsolver's treatment of the theme of invasion-"the sexual invasion of a child's body and the political invasion of a nation's sovereignty"-and said that although not new in literature, this theme in Kingsolver's novel "occupies a new territory, that of the commonplace, mostly undramatic, story, told and lived by commonplace people, most of them women."

More recently, assessments of *The Bean Trees* have examined Kingsolver's first novel alongside some of her later works and found trends. In 1993, Michael Neill compared Kingsolver's first three novels and wrote in *People Weekly* that while women's relationships are central to each of these novels-including *The Bean Trees-the* role of male characters is typically insignificant. Neill saw Kingsolver as writing about a different kind of American West-more focused on women than on men-than traditionally Western American literature.

In a 1995 article in *Journal of American Culture,* Maureen Ryan derided Kingsolver's first three novels, including *The Bean Trees,* for being conservative at heart in spite of their apparent "political correctness." She asserted that in spite of their stand against human rights violations, they also exhibit an unrealistic and thus dangerous belief that devotion to family and friends can make things all better. Ryan perceived this conservatism cloaked in political correctness as being the reason for Kingsolver's popularity: readers can feel good about reading a socially conscious novel while feeling secure about the novel's underlying message of traditional values.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

A doctoral student at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Esdale reads The Bean Trees *as a lyrical and critical account of family in America.*

Readers and critics of a Barbara Kingsolver novel agree that politics and aesthetics wed in an often inspiring fashion. Reviewers have praised the freshness of the prose and the realism of her characters, who typically battle prejudice and a feeling of dislocation with great determination. Unfortunately, aesthetics and politics usually have a troubled marriage since-in the critic's eye-the one tends to undermine the other: books can be either works of beauty and genius or vehicles for political change. And since Kingsolver's politics are popular or "correct," her work has achieved more popular than critical success. Kingsolver, most likely, would not want it any other way. Leaving this debate to her readers, this essay instead focuses on the politics of names in her first novel, *The Bean Trees,* and how seeing connections between the human and the natural worlds expands our definition of what a name-such as "family"-might mean.

A contemporary poem by the Canadian P.K. Page, "Cook's Mountains," will help introduce the Idea that the act of naming says as much about the giver as the receiver. The poem juxtaposes two moments of seeing the Glass House Mountains in Queensland, Australia. First is the scene of Captain James Cook, an eighteenth-century British explorer, naming these mountains "Glass House" because from a distance they appear as "hive-shaped hothouses." Two hundred years later, the poet sees them and is told their name by her driver. Page suggests that although the name is appropriate, "It was his gaze / that glazed each one." The mountains reflect "Cook upon the deck / his tongue / silvered with paradox and metaphor." Learning Cook's name for the mountains compromises Page's appreciation of their natural beauty not only because they become more "man-made" and artificial, but because she is reminded of Australia's past as a British colony. Cook and other explorers actually renamed these lands by effacing the aboriginal names. Metaphorically, Cook was in a glass house-was at a remove-when he renamed them. It frustrates Page that by using Cook's name for the mountains she is complicit in the colonial project of wiping out the original inhabitants and their history. Set largely in southern Arizona, ancient Native American country, *The Bean Trees* also explores the politics of naming in the context of Old and New World conflicts. It moves beyond Page's poem 'because it looks closely at naming in family relationships. The novel asks that we recognize the contiguity between the national and the personal.

Just as the mountains appear more like glass houses once Cook names them, the name we receive at birth instantly becomes central to our identity. We identify with our family name and are identified with it. Within the name are a record of the past and predictions about the future. As well, the act of naming separates one child from another. Some people can afford to ignore the fact that a name says as much about you as your clothing or hair color, but many cannot. For Instance, Esperenza and Estevan-Mayan refugees from Guatemala-have to change their names to Hope and Steven so that new American acquaintances, employers and immigration officers will accept them into the American Family. And this name change was not their first: earlier, in

Guatemala, their Mayan names were forced into hibernation because of political and racial persecution. This fact emerges in stones only when the cleansing rains of spring occur-only when they are surrounded by friends who offer acceptance and love. And when Lou Ann's family back in Kentucky hears that she has decided to live in Tucson and marry Angel Ruiz, they assume Immediately that Angel is "one of those" illegal Mexicans. Angel, Estevan and Esperenza all know that naming is a political act; they know that assumptions are made about a person based on a name, and that sometimes those assumptions can cost you your life. Esperenza and Estevan run from Guatemala for their lives because they refuse to give up the names of 17 friends to a government that feels threatened by a small teacher's union.

This feeling of being threatened by groups of people who have different names and political affiliations circulates freely in America. In the novel, Virgie Mae Parsons-the seeing-eye friend to blind Edna Poppy-feels this threat and mutters: "'Before you know it the whole world will be here jibbering and jabbering till we won't know it's America.' / 'Virgie, mind your manners,' Edna said. / 'Well, it's the truth. They ought to stay put in their own dirt, not come here taking up jobs.' / 'Virgie,' Edna said." Although Edna's eyes may not allow her to distinguish unaided between a small lemon and a lime, she figuratively sees or reads people much better. Virgie is responding to Estevan, who-though he taught English in Guatemala-is working as a dishwasher for a Chinese family in their restaurant. Estevan has said that only the young daughter speaks English. The irony is, of course, that Virgie is not just talking Ignorantly to Estevan, but about Estevan: unlike Angel, Estevan is "one of those" illegal immigrants. Yet the characters confess that in their group he is the most fluent English speaker. Taking our cue from Mrs. Parsons, we can ask: How does a person recognize America? And how does America recognize a person? Virgie believes that language has a transparent logic, that a word means what it says or cannot mean more than one thing. Perhaps surprisingly, this logic is manifest in Edna herself. Edna tells us that when she realized as a young woman that she was named "Poppy," she decided to be one: from that moment on, Edna Poppy has dressed almost entirely in red.

Edna's decision to fashion herself in red was one that embraced chance. Chance also plays its part when the novel's first-person narrator, Taylor Greer, heads west out of Kentucky in an old, weathered Volkswagen Bug, and changes her name. Named "Marietta" but known as "Missy,"' Taylor exchanges her old name for a new one as part of the process of leaving the old for the new. Before she leaves Pittman County, she decides that where the first tank of gas runs dry, she would find her new name-Taylorville. "Greer" is the last name of a father who left even before she was born. So what can we say about "Taylor Greer" Without slowly coming to know her? Very little; or, at least nothing that would not be arbitrary Taylor's decision teaches us that identity can be multiple. She learns later that these identities do not necessarily conflict with one another. We also learn about the instability of appearances, which can be both frustrating-to the disillusioned immigrant expecting in America the freedom to belong-and rewarding-such as when a withered vine suddenly bursts forth in bloom. Patience, the right conditions, a respect for things you do not yet or may never understand-these are the requirements: "There seemed to be no end to the things that could be hiding, waiting it out, right where you thought you could see it all." Months pass before Taylor

discovers that Edna makes her way through the world with plenty of help and indirection.

Out on the road, when a rocker arm on the car demands repair at a rest stop in Oklahoma, near the lands of the Cherokee Nation, Taylor becomes "Mom" when a small Cherokee baby is put on her passenger seat The unexpected responsibility of Turtle (named for an unrelenting grip that reminds her of a mud turtle), plus two flat tires and no money to repair them, convince Taylor that if A is Pittman County, Kentucky, then B is Tucson, Arizona. As with Estevan and Esperenza, Taylor and Turtle arrive in Tucson with nothing except each other. Unlike the Mayan immigrants, Turtle and Taylor are not even family. And each of them sees little in this new place that reminds them of family or feels like home. But these people soon discover that underneath the unfamiliar is the familiar. The names may have changed, but given half a chance new places and people soon metamorphose into everything thought gone and dead, and potentially more. "What I really hate," Estevan says, "is not belonging in any place. To be unwanted everywhere." The obstacles for these new Americans are many, but even they, the novel implies, will find a place to call home.

While Esperenza and Estevan wait for the chance to belong-hoping to get past all the roadblocks-Taylor's struggle is more internal and typically American. Once in Tucson, Taylor moves in with Lou Ann, who-because Angel leaves her-is also a single Mom. They quickly discover that while their personalities spark off one another, they have much in common. This growing bond initially contradicts Taylor's sense of independence: "It' s not like we're a family, for Christ's sake. You've got your own life to live, and I've got mine. You don't have to do all this stuff for me." Taylor left Pittman County to escape motherhood and domestic servitude. Her escape meant that she was no longer responsible to anyone but herself, and the act of choosing a new name was a function of her desire for independence. "My culture, as I understand it,"_ writes Kingsolver in her collection of primarily autobiographical essays, *High Tide in Tucson,* "values independence above all things-in part to ensure a mobile labor force, grease for the machine of a capitalist economy"; "It took a move to another country to make me realize how thoroughly I had accepted my nation's creed of every family for itself." In *The Bean Trees,* Taylor gradually learns that her independence is not necessarily compromised by motherhood or family. "Everybody behaved as if Turtle was my own flesh and blood daughter,'" says Taylor. "It was a conspiracy." By the end of the story, once she legally adopts Turtle, Taylor is fully part of it. "Families change, and remain the same. Why are our names for home,'" Kingsolver asks in *High Tide in Tucson,* "so slow to catch up to the truth of where we live?" Taylor catches this truth when unrelated roommates, employers, children and friends all become part of her new family.

Taylor is employed and adopted by Mattie, who owns a tire sales and repair business. Taylor soon discovers that Mattie's business is more than fixing flat tires, though helping people such as Esperenza and Estevan find new homes corresponds with getting motorists back on the road. Mattie's garden also plays a symbolic role because these people who arrive at her door have been ripped from their home soil; their roots dangle vulnerably and need a gentle transplanting. Mattie is a gardener of people. Kingsolver studied biology and ecology at university, and into her work she weaves tills knowledge

in bold colors. This metaphor of person as plant is part of a larger system of resemblance between nature and humanity. When an author uses metaphor consistently, as Kingsolver does, the apparently disparate and unrelated elements of the world begin to coalesce. An early instance occurs when Taylor limps into Tucson, and focuses on a discarded cigarette: "Some truck had carried that tobacco all the way from Kentucky maybe, from some Hardbine's or Richey's or Biddle's farm, and now a bunch of ants were going to break it into little pieces to take back to their queen. You just never knew where something was going to end up." There are no metaphors in Virgie's world; Virgie lives in just one world. Taylor understands more about the world when she discovers connections between all the different worlds. What was singular becomes plural.

Taylor's focus, however, usually centers on Turtle. This little girl's first couple of years were full of deprivation, and put her in a condition similar to a desert plant waiting for summer rains. During this drought, Turtle stopped growing, trusting and talking. But under Taylor's care and commitment to her as a daughter, Turtle blooms. Turtle then dramatizes best the overlap between the related worlds by exchanging fluently human names for vegetables ones. As a gardener, Taylor frees herself from a national obsession With family and gender lines, and insularity. She frees herself by becoming more dependent on the people around her. The novel represents women as strong and fulfilled, but also employs identities (gardener instead of mother) that are gender neutral to troubled binary thinking. In this way, a person's family members can speak different languages, have different last names and live in different houses. Taylor learns that a family is not just something that you are born into-that is given to you-but is a collection of people that you make into a home (or a garden). Turtle grounds this argument, and is compared to the wisteria vines that grow out of bare dirt in a park near the house. These Vines bloom one anonymous day in March. When the flowers turn to seed, they remind Turtle of beans. To her a wisteria vine is a bean tree. Taylor and Turtle learn later that wisteria vines are indeed part of the legume family, and that they depend on microscopic bugs, or "rhizobia," for food: " 'It's like this,' I told Turtle. 'There's a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you'd never guess was there.' I loved this idea. 'It's just the same as with people. The way Edna has Virgie, and Virgie has Edna... and everybody has Matlie. And on and on.' / The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by ... but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles."

Source: Logan Esdale, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Elyse Lord is a writing instructor at the University of Utah and the author of a Utopian novel entitled Everything is Lovely and the Goose Honks High. *In the following essay, she defends Kingsolver's use of Utopian and feminist ideals in* The Bean Trees.

As excerpts from the reviews will reveal, Critics generally rave about Barbara Kingsolver's prose in her first novel, *The Bean Trees.* Kingsolver blends "common language with beautifully constructed Images," Writes one Critic. She "delivers enough original dialogue and wry one-liners to put this novel on a shelf of its own," Writes another. "Ming solver doesn't waste a single overtone. From the title of her novel to its ending, every little scrap of event or observation is used, reused, revivified with sympathetic vibrations," writes another.

What divides, even troubles critics is the novel's Utopian Impulse. Writes Jack Butler, Taylor Greer (the novel's heroine) "confronts prejudice, trauma, self-abnegation, chauvinism, and always, always has the right attitude. The other characters are purified to types as well "

Drawing upon Butler, Maureen Ryan describes Kingsolver's fiction as "aggressively politically correct." Kingsolver, she says, "wrestles the beasts of contemporary society: child abuse, labor unrest, political repression, feminism, the disintegration of Native American culture, and environmentalism. But she proffers her medicine sprinkled with Nutrasweet." By creating "perfect" mothers, and "intrepid and resilient" women, concludes Ryan, Kingsolver may unwittingly suggest that "If we love our children and our mothers... the big bad world will simply go away."

In other words, neither Butler nor Ryan find the danger in the novel to be "real"; the characters in *The Bean Trees,* despite Kingsolver's careful attention to serious problems, are, in the end, too good to be true. This "lightness" in the novel, suggest the critics, may partially account for its astonishing popularity-more than 400,000 paperback copies were sold in one year.

Though the critical Critics may be right that the novel's "happy ending" partially accounts for its popularity, there is much room for speculation as to whether their standards for Judgment are fair, or even relevant. For what these critics have failed to discuss is the context of Kingsolver' s work, and the historically "male-centered" literary canon that Kingsolver is trying to stretch.

In a Kentucky Educational Television video, Kingsolver describes her own coming of age in the following way. "In the time and place of my adolescence there was enormous pressure on girls to playa kind of Russian roulette with our bodies. And If you won, you could be the most popular girl in the class. But if you lost you were a pregnant l5-year-old girl, way out of luck. I saw this happen to my classmates, beginning in the 7th grade"

Taylor Greer's childhood experiences parallel Kingsolver's and, one might argue, the experiences of many young women. Taylor resists pressures to have sex, manages to, in her own words, escape "getting hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife," and dreams of living in a place that is not so behind the times. Many of Taylor's classmates, in contrast, are not so lucky. They are "dropping by the wayside like seeds off a poppy seed bun."

Says Kingsolver in the same television interview, "Along about Junior high this thing happens to teenage girls. It occurs to you that you're going to be a woman when you grow up. And you start to look around to see what that means. And in the mid-to-late sixties the news was not all that good.

.. You were not gonna drive the car, you were gonna be in the passenger's seat. The voice of reason, the voice of authority and the voice of God were male."

Thus, for Kingsolver, the problems she had to overcome in order to even *imagine* herself writing about Taylor Greer included: How could she write a literary work that was based not on the literature of "old, dead men," but on the experiences of working poor and single mothers? How could she dramatize something so rarely dramatized? How could the threat of unwanted pregnancy, for example, function as a meaningful danger in a literary novel? The questions are not easily answered, particularly when one considers the lack of literary models that Kingsolver had to emulate.

Although Kingsolver does not mention her female influences, one could place her in the context of other popular, literary women writers, all of whom created characters who were "too good to be true," like Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden,* Pollyanna, Anne of Avonlea, Heidi, and numerous other 19th century paragons of virtue.

One could even speculate that Taylor Greer, evolving consciously or unconsciously out of this "progressive Utopian" literature, becomes the first such "too good to be true" female to adopt an abused child. She could be considered the first "too good to be true" female to fear unwanted pregnancy-and the first such "too good to be true" female who, by seeking conversation and communion with other women, begins to reform *herself,* rather than her community.

The problem is not that Kingsolver's "real" social concerns are trivialized by her insistent hopefulness in *The Bean Trees.* The problem is that Kingsolver's readers, trained by reading a male centered canon, are unable to recognize that Taylor Greer is a wonderfully new and revolutionary character. She is new and revolutionary because she is a mother with a voice, because she is a mother who can tell the tale of her daughter's physical and sexual abuse, because she is a young woman with a "lottery of limited prospects" who feels authorized to author her own life.

Rather than discussing whether or not Kingsolver's fiction meets the not too relevant criteria of realism, critics would be better served by discussing the ways in which it is difficult to dramatize the taboo (such as sexual abuse), and the ways in which it is difficult to dramatize an adventurous female. To reframe this discussion would be to

locate Kingsolver's work where it belongs: in the center of a problematic cultural and literary tradition.

At the heart of *The Bean Trees* is a feminist question. How can a young girl, who is good and kind, and yet who resists the idea that her purpose in life is to give birth and raise children, create her own identity? How can this same girl overcome her culture's indifference to her talents, hopes, and aspirations? Kingsolver's answer is that Taylor must ultimately learn to author her life in connection with others. This is a new and different answer to a most vexing-and all too familiar-question.

Thus the critics may be correct in viewing Taylor to be a bit too good to be true, insofar as she seems more skilled at authoring her life than the average teenager. However, Taylor's approach to authoring her life is psychologically convincing, and follows patterns familiar to young women in search of self.

In fact, Kingsolver has set up her growth in convincing ways. Taylor may be unusual, but her unusual goodness does not, in the end, undermine her authority, as It might in a less complex story. Specifically, the novel sets up an ongoing dialogue between Turtle's growth, Lou Ann's growth, and Taylor's growth.

Turtle symbolizes the young girl who has not yet left home and begun to develop her own voice. Lou Ann symbolizes the young woman who has left home, but carries with her derogatory internal voices that limit her growth. Taylor symbolizes the young woman who is strong in voice, but seeking to keep her strength and voice while also connecting with - and listening to, hence being changed by - others. All females are at different stages in their development. All face similar (and believable) obstacles.

At the start of the novel, girlhood is seen as a liability, a source of diminishment. Upon discovering that Turtle has been sexually abused, Taylor says, "The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine." Similarly, Taylor observes that, like many girls, "Turtle's main goal in life, other than hanging on to things, seemed to be to pass unnoticed." And when Turtle and Mrs. Parsons are attacked, Turtle's response is to stop talking. This, according to the logic of the novel, is the danger for all young women - loss of speech, loss of voice, loss of personal authority.

Lou Ann represents a young woman who has not yet developed her voice and, therefore, does not author her own life. She, like Turtle, tries not to attract attention, often by diminishing herself. For example, as she takes the bus home from the doctor's, she notes that it was "pure pleasure not to have men pushing into her and touching her on the bus." Then she rushes home, concentrating on "not being afraid." Meanwhile, though she resents and fears the attention she gets from men, she hates the way she looks. On an "ordinary" day she says, "I look like I've been drug through hell backwards Like death warmed over. Like something the cat puked up." Lou Ann is not likely to "create" an alternative self-image to the one she has internalized, for Lou Ann is not the kind of person to correct "anybody on anything." She does not even speak up when the nurse mispronounces her last name.

Both Turtle and Lou Ann begin to flourish and grow in striking ways in the story. Both develop in noticeable ways into speaking, self-creating rather than self-diminishing-females. Taylor's growth, on the other hand, is more subtle.

At the start of the novel, Taylor has something of a negative Identity. She does not want to be like the girls she grew up with, and she has the confidence to try other ways of being-but not the experience.

One obstacle she must overcome is her lack of positive relationships with men, whom she tends to view as dangerous. Early in the novel, Taylor encounters a wounded classmate, Jolene, whose father-in-law has just shot her, killed her husband, and beaten her baby. Jolene tells Taylor that her own father has been "calling me a slut practically since I was thirteen." The Implication is that Jolene (like Lou Ann) did not have any alternative to living out a life already scripted for her. Taylor responds "... I didn't have a daddy I was lucky that way." The moment is important, because Taylor has recognized that fathers have the power of naming their daughters. Since Taylor is fatherless, she need not fear being named-created-by her father's descriptions of her. However, she needs to overcome the absence in her own Identity, and she can only develop this more complete identity in relation to others, including men.

Given the novel's logic, it is appropriate that, at the start of the novel, Taylor carries with her a sense that men are dangerous. For example, she bypasses a motel because "the guy in the office didn't look too promising," and selects instead the Broken Arrow Motor Lodge, where "there was a gray-haired woman. Bingo."

Taylor's journey, then, is concerned with redefining herself so that she has an identity, not a negative identity. She must also recreate her perception of the world as part of her self-authorship, so that she is fully present in the moment. This she begins to do when she renames herself in Taylorsville, when she becomes a mother whose child looks to her for guidance, and, when, in a psychologically convincing journey, she retraces her route back to Oklahoma, this time with a sense of mastery-and with company.

The point is that Taylor finds believable strength from her connections with others. Without her relationships with Mattie, Lou Ann, Estevan, and Esperanza, Taylor would never have been able to legally adopt Turtle. And without Turtle, she could never have been the "main ingredient" in Turtle's song. Without these connections, Taylor would not have been able to find what she was seeking, a place where she belonged, a place where she could be herself, rather than a young woman whose identity was based largely upon resistance.

This feminist/feminine psychological journey grounds the utopia Rather than unwittingly suggesting that "if we love our children and our mothers ... the big bad world will simply go away," as Ryan worried, Kingsolver is suggesting that a young woman who finds her voice is a powerful force in the world. This power does not make the world any less of a frightening place, but it does make the notion of home and sanctuary possible.

Though critics may take issue with the way that Taylor blithely adopts an abused Cherokee child, as well as the unrealistic way that Estevan and Esperanza take time out from their search for a homeland to help Taylor to adopt Turtle, and the far-fetched way that Lou Ann becomes a manager in three weeks of work at a salsa factory, it is clear that Kingsolver's characters are engaged in very recognizable and real growth. It is also clear that, given the literary and social context of her work, Kingsolver is breaking new, and very important ground-and that she paves the way for others to investigate more thoroughly (and perhaps more realistically) the questions and issues that she raises. Source' Elyse Lord, in an essay for Novels for Students, Gale, 1999

Critical Essay #3

Ryan dissects Kingsolver's writing style in The Bean Trees *and finds it lacking in substance although well-meaning and "lively"*

Kingsolver's work... consistently floats among the verbiage that vies for our dwindling reading time. Her novels and stories are seductively appealing, offering, as they do, sympathetic, interesting characters; well-paced plots with clear resolutions; and a breezy, colloquial, eminently readable style. That is to say, they give us all the comforting conventions of old-time realistic fiction, flavored with the cool contemporary lingo favored by so many of the truly hip young guns. In short, Barbara Kingsolver's novels and stones are a good read. But I would argue that more importantly-and interestingly-Kingsoiver's fiction is so very popular because it is the exemplary fiction for our age: aggressively politically correct, yet fundamentally conservative.

Kingsolver knows what she's about. In the battle that rages in literary magazines for the elusive soul of contemporary American fiction, she unabashedly proclaims herself to be "old-fashioned." It's a popular position: on the attack against so-called minimalist writing and in defense of his very popular behemoth, *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* Tom Wolfe in 1989 bemoaned what he perceived to be the sterility and social irresponsibility of contemporary American fiction and called for a return to the "big, rich" social novel of Dickens and Steinbeck.

Reviewers of Barbara Kingsolver's work perhaps inadvertently betray their sympathies with the call for a return to traditional realistic fiction, generally welcoming her mobilization of political themes and her dissimilarity to the ostensibly clever, narrow, MFA-burdened writers-the Absurdists and Neo-Fabulists and Minimalists-that Wolfe and so many others decry. Karen Fitzgerald, for instance, finds *The Bean Trees* to be "refreshingly free of cant and the self-absorption of...overrated urbane young novelists." Diane Manuel applauds *The Bean Trees* for giving readers "something that's increasingly hard to find today-a character to believe in and laugh with and admire." Margaret Randall likes the novel because "it is one of those old-fashioned stones, thankfully coming back onto our literary scene, in which there are heroines and anti-heroines...ordinary humans [who] go places and do things and where they go and what they do makes sense for them...and for us."...

Kingsolver herself makes clear that her commitment to tackle the social issues of our day is conscious-and central to her undertaking. "I only feel it's worth writing a book if I have something important to say," she asserted in a 1989 interview. And she, like Wolfe, dismisses the fashions of contemporary fiction, claiming that she sees "a lot of beautifully written work that's about-it seems to me-nothing."' One of the generation that came of age in the 1960s, and consequently believes that "we can make a difference in the world,"' Kingsolver too laments the "divorce" between "politics and art" in our culture. "I am horribly out of fashion,"' she boasts. "I want to change the world I believe fiction is an extraordinary tool for creating empathy and compassion."' Kingsolver wrestles the beasts of contemporary society: child abuse, labor unrest, political repression, feminism,

the disintegration of Native American culture, and environmentalism But she proffers her medicine sprinkled with Nutrasweet. This is fiction for everyone. "I have a commitment to accessibility," she asserts [in an August 30,1990, *Publishers Weekly* interview], "I believe in plot. I want an English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want one of my relatives-who's never read anything but the Sears catalogue-to read my books.'" In fact, Barbara Kingsolver's books do appeal to both the literary scholar and the Sears shopper. And why not? The problem is that for all their apparent attention to the pressing social problems of our time, Kingsolver's light and lively books-which purport to give us food that's both nourishing and appetizing-leave all of us feeling just a bit too fine.

Kingsolver's critically acclaimed first novel, *The Bean Trees,* introduced the elements of her fictional world, which she develops in the recent sequel, *Pigs in Heaven.* When plucky, ingenuous Taylor Greer leaves Kentucky and "lights out for the territory" at the beginning of *The Bean Trees,* she sets out on a physical and spiritual journey that thrusts her into a world fraught with danger, evil, and the unexpected. In Oklahoma, enroute to Tucson, Taylor has found herself entrusted with the care of a silent, abused three-year-old Native American child who clings to Taylor with such ferocity that she christens the girl "Turtle.'" Like it or not, Taylor becomes an instant mother, a "bewildered Madonna,'" with a new understanding of the hazards of contemporary life. An afternoon at the zoo promises "stories of elephants going berserk and trampling their keepers; of children's little hands snapped off and swallowed whole by who knows what seemingly innocent animal." Taylor wonders "how many... things were lurking around wailing to take a child's life when you weren't paying attention.'"

Of course, the trip to the zoo is a pleasant afternoon in the park, but there are real dangers in the world that Taylor encounters in her new life. When she first bathes Turtle and discovers the child's "bruises and worse," Taylor acknowledges that "I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl". *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* are Taylor's story, and they present Taylor's education into the perplexities of contemporary society, as she ventures out of her small, rural Kentucky hometown into a heterogeneous, confusing world. But Taylor's lessons are finally less of the hazards and atrocities of the world than they are about its consolations and strategies for survival For despite the peril and attendant vulnerability that pervade these characters' lives, real danger is displaced and diffused by the characters' resilience and the inherent goodness of the world. The indifferent aunt who abused, then abandoned Turtle is, for example, only a fleeting, fading presence in *The Bean Trees....* And Taylor, whose commitment to and competence at motherhood develops throughout both novels, puts her worried friend Lou Ann's anxieties into proper perspective: "The flip side of worrying too much is just not caring. If anything, Lou Ann, you're just too good of a mother."...

Perhaps Taylor has always known that a father and mother and 2.3 children don't necessarily make a family, but she has an important lesson to learn about families nonetheless. When the much-loved Turtle innocently tells a social worker that she has no family, Taylor is astonished and hurt, until she figures out that feeling like a family isn't enough; she tells Alice,

She's confused, because I'm confused. I think of Jax and Lou Ann and .of course you, all those people as my family But when you never put a name on things, you're accepting that it's okay for people to leave when they feel like it.

They leave anyway, Alice says My husbands went like houses on fire

But you don't have to accept it, Taylor insists That's what your family is, the people you won't let go of for anything. [from *Pigs in Heaven]*

Taylor learns what Codi must discover, too; that family-blood or found-must be claimed.

Taylor is right, but so is Alice. Men do leave in Kingsolver's world; and in fact, her protagonists are nearly always women, women confronting the vicissitudes of being women in late twentieth-century America Kingsolver's feminism is unassailable. Writing [in *Utne Reader,* Jan.-Feb., 1993] about her failure to appreciate the current men's movement, she notes that "women are fighting for their lives, and men are looking for some peace of mind The men's movement and the women's

movement aren't salt and pepper; they are hangnail and hand grenade." Kingsolver's novels are set in an unpredictable, baffling, imperfect world that is always a women's world.

It's not that men are cruel or boorish in *The Bean Trees;* they're simply irrelevant. Taylor's father is "long gone," and Taylor suspects that she's all the better for his absence. Lou Ann's husband slides quietly out of her life, and the novel, as Taylor pulls into Tucson. His absence doesn't matter much either; Lou Ann listens to him packing up his belongings and notices that "his presence was different from the feeling of women filling up the house. He could be there, or not, and it hardly made any difference."

Taylor has spent her life avoiding the likely prospect for a girl like her in Kentucky, getting "hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer's wife." She knows that "barefoot and pregnant" is not her style. And her (and the novel's) attitude toward men is best articulated by the Valentine's card she sends her mother: "On the cover there were hearts and it said, 'Here's hoping you'll soon have something big and strong around the house to open those tight jar lids.' Inside was a picture of a pipe wrench.". . .

Kingsolver's is a world, not simply of women, but, significantly, of women and children, mothers and children. When Taylor steers her' 55 Volkswagen west at the beginning of *The Bean Trees,* she leaves behind her beloved Mama (the Alice who discovers her independence, acquires her own name, and becomes an important character in *Pigs in Heaven).* Mama has struggled to raise Taylor alone, and has always let her daughter know that "trading Foster [Taylor's father] for [her] was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase." All of the women in *The Bean Trees* raise children alone; in fact, child-rearing and marriage seem mutually exclusive.. ..

Motherhood-and its concomitant values: family, community, sacrifice, caring-are sacrosanct in Kingsolver's world. In the "different world" that she envisions throughout

her fiction, we'd all care for everyone's child; in our world, exhausted, selfless mothers get the nod-and the approbation. Indeed, Kingsolver's apparent appreciation for non-traditional families is compromised by her unrelenting admiration for mothers. And though undoubtedly she means to suggest a vision for improving society; in fact, her privileging of family values works to compromise her message about the injustices of our society, which finally just don't seem all that ominous.

Barbara Kingsolver wants to say something important in her fiction about contemporary society and our responsibility to try to make the world a better place. She wants to challenge us to confront and do something about child abuse, the Native American Trail of Tears, and the American backed crimes in Central America Hers is a considerable and admirable undertaking. As Jack Butler writes in his review of *The Bean Trees* [in *New York Times Book Review,* April 10, 1988], "who can be against the things this book is against? Who can help admiring the things this book is for?" "But," Butler continues, "reality suffers. At one point late in the book, Turtle experiences a frightening reminder of her early horrors, and much is made of the damage this sort of recurrence can do but then the subject is dismissed." The problem with Barbara Kingsolver's fiction is that the big subjects, the looming dangers, are always dismissed. Everyone in her books turns out to be inherently good and well-meaning; the men sensitive and sexy, the women intrepid and resilient (and always perfect mothers) The dangers in Kingsolver's novels are not the challenges and perils that her characters all too easily overcome; they are the soothing strains of that old-time religion, lulling us into oblivion with her deceptive insistence that if we love our children and our mothers, and hang in there with hearth and home, the big bad world will simply go away....

The conventions of traditional realistic fiction that Wolfe and Kingsolver's reviewers miss in so much contemporary writing are the meat of Barbara Kingsolver's writing, which she serves with a soupcon of sentimentality for seasoning; and for dessert, the funny, slick patois of so much of that very hip recent fiction. She even gives us a healthy helping of vegetables: we may not like learning of Nicaraguan Contras and child abuse, but we know it's good for us. Finally, however, Kingsolver's work is contemporary American fictionlite. It's what we're supposed to eat these days, and it's even fairly tasty, but it's not very nourishing-and we go away hungry.

Source: Maureen Ryan, "Barbara Kingsolver's Lowfat Fiction," *Journal of American Culture,* Vol. 18, No 4, Winter, 1995, pp. 77-81.

Adaptations

The Bean Trees was recorded on tape, read by C. J. Critt, in 1994. Available from Recorded Books.

Topics for Further Study

Research 1980s U.S. immigration policies for Central American refugees. In what kinds of Situations were refugees granted asylum in the United States? What was the nature of United States-Guatemala relations?

Investigate the political situation in 1980s Guatemala. Who was in power, and what did the government expect of its citizens? Why would Estevan and Esperanza' s teachers' union be considered a threat?

Research weather patterns in Arizona: when and where does the rain fall, and what are the average temperatures throughout the year? Compare actual Tucson weather to its weather in the novel. Compare Tucson weather to Kentucky weather in terms of rainfall and temperatures.

The teenage Cherokee girl in the bar tells Taylor that "The Cherokee Nation Isn't anyone place exactly. It's people" Research the Cherokee Nation in terms of its places and people: map its location(s) in Oklahoma, and investigate its values, government, and customs. Why might Taylor, as a white American, be confused about the definition of Cherokee Nation?

Taylor's narrative often focuses on the vegetation she and her little community find and foster in Arizona. Investigate farming and gardening practices in the Tucson area and compare what you learn with Mattie's garden and other organic vegetation in the novel.

Research the incidence of child abuse on Indian reservations in the 1970s and 1980s. How did the passage of the Indian Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act change the Native American child abuse rate?

What Do I Read Next?

Pigs in Heaven (1994) is Kingsolver's sequel to *The Bean Trees* and follows Taylor and Turtle as they struggle against an Indian-rights attorney who insists that Turtle be removed from her adopted mother and returned to her people.

In *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), a collection of twelve short stories by Kingsolver, characters like an elderly Native American woman and an estranged mother and daughter strive to make places for themselves-to find homes-in the world.

Another America/Otra America (1992), Kingsolver's first book of poetry, treats the subjects of social and political oppression in the lives of ordinary Latin Americans and the prejudices of North Americans towards their neighbors. The book presents each poem in English and Spanish.

Vince Heptig's color photographs and an introduction by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchu Turn make up *A Mayan Struggle; Portrait of a Guatemalan People in Danger* (1997). Heptig's more than 100 photographs depict the Mayans as a strong people struggling to improve their world as they go about their daily lives in the midst of political strife

Searching for Everardo: A Story of Love, War, and the CIA in Guatemala (1997) by Jennifer K. Harbury is the author's own story of her three-year search for her Guatemalan husband, Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, who was taken PriS0ner and eventually killed by the Guatemalan army Harbury's quest led to her discovery of links between the CIA and the Guatemalan military.

Further Study

Jack Butler, "She Hung the Moon and Plugged in All the Stars,"' in *The New York Times Book Review,* April 10, 1988.

Butler admires Kingsolver's poetic style, but derides the novel for only permitting "upbeat" resolutions.

Brenda Daly, *Authoring a Life, a Woman's Survival in and Through Literary Studies,* State University of New York Press, 1998.

A collection of essays that utilize both personal narrative and feminist theory in order to explore the connection between feminine Identity development and language arts studies.

David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, "Barbara Kingsolver,"' in *Writing the Southwest,* edited by David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, Plume, 1995, pp 93-107. Dunaway and Spurgeon combine biography, interview and excerpts to give a relatively comprehensive introduction to Kingsolver and her work characterized as much as a writer as an activist, Kingsolver fits well in the American Southwest tradition.

Robin Epstein, "Barbara Kingsolver,"' in *The Progressive,* Vol 60, No.2, February, 1996, pp 33, 35.

Kingsolver contends that she does not write her books "mainly for women,"' and discusses how her desire to change the world and how her concern for children, community, politics, and social justice motivate her to Write fiction

Karen Fitzgerald, "A Major New Talent,"' in *Ms,* Vol 16, April, 1988, p. 28.

Fitzgerald describes the novel as "Vivid and engaging,"' and praises its exploration of women's friendship-which she links to a contemporary feminist ethic-concluding that the novel is an "entertaining and inspiring" first effort.

Greta Gaard, "Living Connections with Animals and Nature,"' in *Eco-Feminism: Women, Animals, Nature,* edited by Greta Gaard, Temple UP, 1993, pp 1-12

Gaard discusses how Kingsolver's fiction and the work of other women writers deconstructs the tradition that links woman and nature, categories too often held below man and culture.

Karen M. and Philip H Kelly, "Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* A New Classroom Classic," in *English Journal,* Vol. 86, No.8, December, 1997, pp 61-3.

The authors maintain that *The Bean Trees* is an "eminently usable text for faculty and an engaging novel for students," and offer strategies for teaching the novel

Kentucky Educational Television, "Barbara Kingsolver," in *Contemporary Southern Writers,* Annenberg CPB Multimedia Collection, 1996.

The film features interviews with Kingsolver and her friends, relatives, editors, and critics.

Edward C Lynskey, "The Bean Trees," in *Library Journal,* Vol. 113, February I, 1988, p. 76.

Lynskey finds the novel "refreshingly upbeat," and speculates that subsequent Kingsolver novels will "probably generate more interest than this one".

Diane Manual, "A Roundup of First Novels About Coming of Age,'" in *The Christian Science Monitor,* April22, 1988, p. 20.

Describes *The Bean Trees* as "refreshingly perceptive," and praises the novel for giving readers "a character to believe in and laugh With and admire".

Roger Matuz, editor, "Barbara Kingsolver," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook* 1988, Vol. 55, Gale Research, 1988, pp. 64-8.

Features excerpts from Criticism on *The Bean Trees.*

"Briefly Noted," in *New Yorker,* April 4, 1998, pp. 101-02.

The reviewer finds the parallel growth of Turtle and Taylor "predictable," but the novel as a whole enjoyable.

Donna Perry, "Barbara Kingsolver,'" in *Backtalk' Women Writers Speak Out,* edited by Donna Perry, Rutgers UP, 1993, pp. 143-69.

Perry questions Kingsolver on the Circumstances of becoming a writer, and then the challenges of being one. Each of Kingsolver's books is discussed in detail, including her book of poems, *Another America/Otra America.*

Margaret Randall, "Human Comedy," in *The Women's Review of Books,* Vol V, No.8, May, 1988, pp. 1, 3.

Randall interprets the novel as a story about invasion, the resolution of which she finds "as believable as It is gratifying." She admires Kingsolver's "deep female consciousness," which she says feels like "bedrock when put up against some of the preachier, more explicitly feminist works".

Patti Capel Swartz, "'Saving Grace': Political and Environmental Issues and the Role of Connections in Barbara *Kingsolver's Ammal Dreams,* in *1sle,* Vol l, No I, Spring, 1993, pp. 65-79.

Swartz explores the way that characters' actions lead to personal growth in Kingsolver's "subversive" fiction, and compares Kingsolver to Writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Tillie Olsen, and others who call for social change.

Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Bound for (More) Glory," in *Entertainment Weekly,* No. 429, May I, 1998, p. 58.

Schwarzbaum reflects on the popularity of *The Bean Trees,* now out in a 10th-anniversary edition.

Meredith Sue Willis, "Barbara Kingsolver, Moving On," in *Appalachian Journal' A Regional Studies Review,* Vol. 22, No I, Fall, 1994, pp. 78-86.

Willis discusses how the Appalachian traditions of restlessness and a hatred of oppression are influences in Kingsolver's work.

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Jack Butler, "She Hung the Moon and Plugged in All the Stars," in *The New York Times Book Review,* Apri1 10, 1988, p. 15.

Karen Fitzgerald, "A Major New Talent," in *Ms,* Vol. XVI, No. 10, April, 1988, p. 28.

Diane Manual, "A Roundup of First Novels about Coming of Age,'" in *The Christian Science Monitor,* Apri122, 1988, p. 20.

Michael Neill, "La Pasionaria," in *People Weekly,* Vol 40, October 11, 1993, pp. 109-10.

Publishers Weekly, Vol 233, No 2, January 15, 1988, p. 78.

Margaret Randall, "Human Comedy,'" in *The Women's Review of Books,* Vol. V, No 8, May, 1988, pp. 1, 3.

Maureen Ryan, "Barbara Kingsolver's Lowfat Fiction,'" in *Journal of American Culture,* Vol. 18, Winter, 1995, pp. 77-82.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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