

# **High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never Study Guide**

**High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never by  
Barbara Kingsolver**

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## Plot Summary

High Tide in Tucson by Barbara Kingsolver is a collection of twenty-five of the author's essays. The subjects contained in her anthology range from the tough times she experienced as an egghead in high school in her small town in Kentucky to her work as a successful writer. One common thread that touches the diverse subjects that she addresses in this collection is her passion—her passion for literature, societal issues, her family, community, animal and plant conservation and of the care and welfare of her daughter, Camille.

Kingsolver's success can be directly tied to her limitless curiosity. An observant librarian at her high school sensed that Kingsolver had great potential. The teacher recruited her to help organize the school's library, which led to Kingsolver's introduction to the vast world of literature. She read every book she could get hold of—even works of fiction that were banned at one time and non-fiction works that addressed controversial issues such as racism and sexism. Although Kingsolver was an unstylish nerd in high school, she eventually relished in the redemption that success brings on the day when she returned years later to her small town for the book signing of her first published novel.

Together, the essays loosely tell the story of Kingsolver's marriage and its eventual decline and the struggles of being a single parent. She demonstrated great curiosity and knowledge about the status of men and women in society and how they came to be. She traced the traditional roles that have fallen to the males and females in modern society back to the beginnings of human history when men were hunters and herders and women were planters and harvesters. When value and personal property became part of society, men were the natural keepers of property since the first items that were assigned value were animals. From those early years forward, women have taken a secondary role to men. Kingsolver is a strong advocate for the equality of women but recognizes that standing up against the legacy of thousands of centuries is not an easy challenge.

Kingsolver's love of nature—animals and plant—led to her degree in biology. She is passionate about the need for the conservation of the earth and all its inhabitants. Her love of reading and literature, which dated by to her high school days, eventually resulted in a successful writing career. Kingsolver used her writing skills as a medium to display her curiosity about the human condition and her passions for her daughter and family and her advocacy for the conservation of all life on the earth.



# Essays 1 and 2

## Essays 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 1: High Tide in Tucson

When Barbara Kingsolver vacationed in the Bahamas two years before, she had smuggled a hermit crab back with her. The morning after she came home, she allowed her young daughter to open the box of shells she had collected on the islands. Her daughter shrieked with delight to see that one of the "shells" was moving around the room. Of course, the crab was a little confused. The last daylight it had seen was of the beautiful Caribbean. It seemed to get its bearings in a relatively short time and began to explore its new quarters—its dexterity and strength allowing it to climb under the top of the coffee table.

Buster, his new name, was given a terrarium and happily fed on the day's scraps. New seashells were placed in his home periodically, in case he wanted to change his "uniform." Sometimes Buster wouldn't move for days—Barbara and her daughter would think he was dead. Then, he'd move but he seemed like he was very ill. As it turned out, it was just normal behavior for Buster, as these periods would be followed by those of hyper-activity. Buster was manic-depressive. Barbara wondered if Buster was responding to lunar cycles and the high tides of the Bahamas. She finally concluded that Buster's sporadic ups and downs were connected to the beat of his own drum, or perhaps the "tide of Tucson."

On a hike in western Arizona on the Eagle Tail Trail, Barbara ran across a cave with ancient artifacts, which included grinding stones and shards of clay pots. It was exciting to Barbara that perhaps she had been the first person to discover the cave since the original inhabitants. Comparing that simple life with the demands of the modern day, Barbara muses about all the "necessities" that today's human must have. Just as Buster was uprooted from his homeland, Barbara made the adjustment from Kentucky to Arizona. Although things weren't as idyllic as she had naively thought they would be, she didn't regret the change. Everyone is called upon to face changes in his life, but what urges us on is the inner ebb and flow of surviving. It is a kind of poetry—the poetry of endurance.

### Essay 2: Creation Stories

The months of June and July were scorches in the western Arizona desert. The gentle rain that fell between November and March was long gone, giving way to drought conditions. The people, animals and plants were all waiting for the big deluge from the summer storms. The Tohono O'odham native Americans who have lived in the Sonora Desert longer than anyone, drink a wine from saguaro fruits in a ritual to bring on the rain. The year of 1978 was the first late summer storm that Barbara experienced. The rain was so fierce she thought kids were pelting her house with rocks.



The neighborhood is diverse, populated with wild animals like mountain lions and deer who come face to face with barrios and subdivisions. There was something about the region that drew creative people. Like Barbara, there was a surprising number of writers in her neighborhood. She loved the Yaqui village and watched the Easter parade there every year. The masked Yaqui dancers promised with "every vernal equinox to hold the world to its rightful position" (p. 21). Santa Cruz is just across the bridge and the Calle Ventura leads to another state.



# Essays 3 and 4

## Essays 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 3: Making Peace

Barbara decided to move from Tucson to the desert when the high school kids in the neighborhood made such a racket that she couldn't write. On top of that, the kids drew pornographic images on the sidewalk in front of her house and frequently trampled her flowers. To seek peace, Barbara and her husband packed up and bought a small cabin in the desert. Juvenile delinquents weren't the problem there. Their peace was disturbed by the nightly visits of woolly pigs who snorted and rooted and ate every one of Barbara's plantings.

In the beginning, humans were communal and cooperated with one another to survive. Humans developed a complicated communication system to help in this endeavor. Other social animals, like baboons and chickens, have ways of communicating socially. Early human females picked berries and dug roots. Early human males hunted animals for food and hides. Hunting led to the need to walk upright—the hunters needed a vantage point to peer over the horizon to look for prey. Hunting also led to tool making, advanced language and dexterity, which all helped to develop the complex human brain.

There is a dispute about the importance of hunting to human development among anthropologists. Early scientists thought it was more important than it apparently was. Anthropologist Adrienne Zihlman concludes that the African savannah was the most important environment for human development. Zihlman's finding was that early man did not hunt and ate meat infrequently. Ancient agriculture was born around eleven thousand years ago; the domestication of animals followed.

The concept of private property evolved from the natural progression toward controlled hunting and agriculture. Planting was in the woman's domain, and the "hunters" or men were the likely candidates to own animals—like goats and sheep which then became currency, objects of barter. Men, who had the currency, became the head of the household and the keeper of the valuables. Since society dictated that men hold the valuables, sons in the families inherited these valuables. This all led to the modern structure of society and the perceived roles of women and men.

Barbara realized she was acting like a modern human when she thought that the animals should stay off her "property" in the desert. It was there for all the creatures that inhabited the region. Once Barbara moved her plants and flowers inside her enclosed courtyard, she found a peaceful way to co-exist with the other creatures in the desert.

### Essay 4: In Case You Ever Want to Go Home Again



Just as Barbara's Kentucky accent faded after twenty years from being in Arizona, so did some aspects of her memory simply because some were not possible to revisit—both her grandfathers had died and her elementary school had been leveled. Her grandfather Henry was a farmer; returning after all day in the sun, he'd often click his false teeth in and out of his mouth to the delight of his grandchildren. Only "perfect" photos exist of either Grandfather Henry or the school. It's human nature to want to present our best face for posterity. But history can lose the genuine moment, swept away in favor of the ideal.

Though Barbara first wrote in a notebook for herself, that quickly and forever changed. On the same day she brought her newborn daughter home, her New York publisher called to tell her they were publishing some of her works. She was astonished that her writing, which consisted of her hopes and dreams, would be of interest to anyone else. She wasn't quite sure what would follow and whether or not she'd be ready for it. Although she created all of her characters in her novel entitled, "The Bean Trees," she feared that someone she knew would take what she'd written personally and despise her for it. She based the locale of her novel on her hometown. She loved its down-home charm and hoped that no one would take offense at her quaint descriptions of it or think she was exploiting it.

A year later, when her book was finally published, her worries were alleviated. Her hometown hosted a huge book signing for her and everyone—including the cute boys who spurned her in high school—were there to support her. She had been an outcast in school—an egghead. Her values were different from many of her peers. Her family encouraged the reading of Thoreau over Batman comic books and had lived for a time in Africa to help the needy. She had no dates in high school, finally landing her first boyfriend during summer school at the University of Kentucky.

Barbara's isolation and unpopularity in high school strengthened her—she was able to explore the psyche of the underdog firsthand. Barbara had her great life moment when the whole town stood in line at her book signing. Her isolation during high school had always haunted her, but her success had made her past let go of her so she could be something new. To some writers, the choice to write fiction is a path to some underlying truth within.



# Essays 5 and 6

## Essays 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 5: How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life

The school district in Barbara's home town spent only limited funds on education. As a result, the curriculum was lacking and would not prepare anyone for a professional career. In her senior year in high school, the librarian, Miss Truman Richey, recruited her to help organize the library. She suspects now that Miss Richey saw potential in Barbara and wanted to introduce her to the world of literature. Barbara read all the books she could get hold of. It served to open her eyes up to the world beyond her small town in Kentucky. She learned about controversial issues like racism and evolution.

### Essay 6: Life Without Go-Go Boots

What worked against any hopes of popularity or dates in school was Barbara's wardrobe, which consisted of hand-me-downs and unstylish black lace-up oxfords. One boy would announce Barbara as she entered the cafeteria as the Bride of Frankenstein. Barbara begged for a pair of white go-go boots for Christmas, but her mother didn't quite understand what she wanted and got her a pair of white rubber rain boots. In college, education needs were the priority over fashion and Barbara remained unfashionable. As an adult, she eluded the demands of fashion by moving West where no one cared. The only expensive, chic item in her wardrobe was purchased for an author's meeting in New York. She wore it at that seminar and it was bagged in plastic ever since.





# Essays 7 and 8

## Essays 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 7: The Household Zen

Barbara believed in devoting as little time as possible to housecleaning. It took her mother and women of those days the entire week to clean and launder. During the post-World War II era, one salary was sufficient for a family to live comfortably. Since men could earn more, women were relegated to household chores. When she hears evangelists urging the "little woman" to go back to tidying up the house, she cringes, knowing from personal experience that the man will not always be there to support her. The man's salary usually goes up after a divorce while the woman's plummets and the quality of life for both her and her children declines. Barbara feels she's a living example to her daughter that a woman can be the successful head of the household. She is focusing on helping her daughter with her science projects versus teaching her to form hospital corners when she makes up her bed.

### Essay 8: Semper Fi

Loyalty and monogamy are naturally rare. The pupfish will be monogamous when females are scarce but when there's an abundance of females, his loyalty quickly vanishes. The female elk will copulate with more than one mate on the same afternoon. The mating of the octopus is more violent than loving. The human sports buff is for his team until it loses. The eggs in a songbird's nest are proven to be, on the average, sired by three males. Most primates are promiscuous. Human males are predisposed to promiscuity from an internal drive to pass on his genes. The human female is selective in finding a mate driven by the need to find one who will stay around and support the children.

Barbara rejects sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson's theory described in his work, "On Human Nature," that everything man does is traced to genetics. Her disagreement is based on the fact that Wilson ignores other modern pressures including those of social and economic that influence human decision-making. Wilson claims that women's passivity and men's aggressiveness were keys to survival. This scenario led to men working outside the home [hunting and foraging] while women stayed home and cooked [planted and harvested].

In "The Mismeasure of Man," Stephen Jay Gould addresses the issue of revisionist history that has tended to portray the superiority of the Caucasian male. European scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who were always white males, led the experiments that always confirmed the white male's supremacy. The nineteenth century physician, George Morton, conducted faulty experiments with skulls of various races. His conclusion that the Caucasian brain was the largest ignored relative skull and

body sizes. Although not his original intention, Morton's experiments were later used to justify genocide and slavery.

To stem the tide of immigrants and to keep out intellectually inferior people, psychologist H. H. Goddard devised an "intelligence test" for immigrants. He coined the term "moron" and during the tenure of this biased testing, eighty-three percent of Jews, eighty-seven percent of Russians and many others were found to be morons. The 1994 controversial book, "The Bell Curve," was another attempt to prove the intellectual superiority of the Caucasian race, inappropriately linking IQ s with race. The book was sponsored by the Pioneer Fund, a pro-white group that was lobbying against desegregation and was in favor of the sterilization of intellectually inferior individuals.



# Essays 9 and 10

## Essays 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 9: The Muscle Mystique

Barbara joined a health club. She had always been weak, barely reaching three digits on the scale during her last year in high school. She didn't join the health club out of vanity; she just wanted to feel strong for once in her life.

### Essay 10: Civil Disobedience at Breakfast

When Barbara's daughter Camille was in the Terrible Twos, she was a handful. She took her good old time getting ready in the mornings, ignoring her mother's urging to pick up her pace. One morning, after Barbara cautioned her not to knock over her orange juice—she did just that and on purpose. The Terrible Twos and the teen years are those most dreaded by parents—but they are both ages in which the individual is discovering himself and attempting to establish independence. Children have to be allowed to make some mistakes on their own. Parents must strike a balance between bondage and boundaries. Bondage is a quick fix for misbehavior while establishing boundaries allow for individual interpretation.

When Barbara was a child, mothers could focus all their attention on their children. In more recent times, most women work outside the home. Barbara feels that a mother can provide as much support for her children even though she has less time with them. To survive the Terrible Twos, Barbara got in the habit of taking Camille to the zoo, the park or just take time play with her, allowing for periods that were free and unstructured. During these outings, Barbara allowed Camille to take the lead on how they used their time.

Psychologist Laurence Steinberg conducted a study on the impact of children on their parents' mental health. Not surprisingly, the most trying time for parents was found to be during their children's adolescence. The study showed that parents with satisfying careers made it through tough times most successfully.



# Essays 11 and 12

## Essays 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 11: Somebody's Baby

For the majority of Camille's fourth year, the family lived in Spain. Everyone in Spain, regardless of age or position, loves children. Camille was told she was pretty every day. There is a stronger sense of community in Spain and Europe in general than in the US, where a child is often viewed in terms of economics. There is no predictor on who will become a good parent. Suggestions that parenting should require a license are absurd. There will always be parents who don't measure up—who find parenting impossible. It is the responsibility of society to participate in the care of all children since they are the future. Although humans have the innate capacity to see the big picture and strive for the collective good, US society is sliding downhill to a "self" mentality. That's why many school bonds are voted down—those who have no children, or whose children are grown, feel they have no stake in education. Most countries spend more on education than the United States.

### Essay 12: Paradise Lost

For Barbara, getting away to Spain and settling on Tenerife in the Canary Islands during 1991 was an escape from the war worship in the US that had originated with the Gulf War. They lived in a small apartment, located on Avenue Franco. In the afternoons, Barbara would take Camille on outings, always on foot. Camille was becoming bilingual, without even knowing it. Barbara moved her small desk against the window overlooking the street. Despite the many activities and people in the neighborhood, she was not inspired to write. She got the chance to spend a weekend in La Gomera, one of the other Canary Islands and the locale of Columbus' launching on his way to the New World. The trip by ferry took over an hour. As the ferry arrived, Barbara took it as a good omen that dolphins were swimming alongside, greeting them.

Barbara stayed at the Parador Conde de la Gomera, where the balcony of her room overlooked the harbor. She drove up into the island's highlands of small villages and vineyards. La Gomera, a volcanic island, had patches of rich farmland that reminded Barbara of her grandfather's Kentucky farm. She discovered a small, unnamed town that was not on her map where pottery was made in the tradition of the Guanches who once lived there. She hiked through the forest, which seemed enchanted, to the mountaintop known as Pico de Garajonay. From that clear mountaintop air, she descended to the shoreline that was windy and rocky. She collected beautiful shells on the black sand beach.



# Essays 13 and 14

## Essays 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 13: Confessions of a Reluctant Rock Goddess

Barbara was asked to play keyboard in a band of fellow author. The band was named the Rock Bottom Remainders. She was reluctant to join since she hated embarrassing herself and the band seemed like a sure path to embarrassment. She had almost completed another novel and knew she'd be on the road more than she wanted with that tour. The thought of being a "rock star" was not only intimidating, it was totally unappealing. On top of everything else, her marriage was ending and she was being indoctrinated into the new role of single mother.

Barbara's fellow authors/band members convinced her that she needed to relax and have some fun—it would do her good. As it turned out, Barbara wasn't the only author with stage fright—all the professional authors were only amateur musicians. Everyone had a featured song—Barbara's was "Dock of the Bay." No one wanted to be humiliated so everyone practiced diligently. Barbara had studied classical piano and had won a music scholarship, so she had a leg up on most other band members. The tour started in Boston where she found herself regretting her decision to join the band and missing her child who was two thousand miles away. The band opened at the Shooters Waterfront Cafe. In the end, Barbara was glad that she did something so out of the ordinary. She got to be an audacious rock star for two weeks, and most important, Camille thought it was really cool.

### Essay 14: Stone Soup

Being a single mother was an adjustment. When Barbara grew up, she had two parents who always were there for her. When your family isn't the ideal—like the paper doll family she played with as a child that featured mom, dad, sis and junior—others can look at your family as lacking and as an impostor of the real thing. Anything less than the ideal is viewed by some to be a failure and "children of divorce" are viewed as casualties of divorce.

The divorce was difficult. Everything was taken from Barbara at once—companionship, shared responsibilities, her own identity. She grew up believing that she would find Prince Charming and together they would create the ideal family. When friends would ask if she wanted the divorce, trying to answer was like trying to decide if she still wanted a gangrenous leg. Sociologists attribute divorce to three main causes: 1) an overly romantic notion about marriage versus a practical one; 2) a change in women's expectations; and, 3) longevity. The only time Camille feels bad about being the child of divorced parents is when people say they feel sorry for her.



The paper doll family emerged after the Depression in the mid-century. Women had to give up jobs to returning soldiers who became the breadwinners of their families. As economics changed, one working adult proved to be insufficient. Society has changed in many ways from those "ideal" days after the War. The incidence of divorce has increased, families plan when they have children, teenage girls are less likely to get pregnant and the elderly are more likely to be self-sufficient. The myth that families can succeed in isolation—whether a couple stays married or not—is beginning to be exposed. The acceptance of the "it takes a village" mentality is being recognized. Barbara's favorite childhood story is about weary soldiers who came upon a village. One of the villagers heated a large pot of soup and placed a stone in it—it was stone soup. One person threw a carrot in, another a potato and on and on until it was a delicious soup.



# Essays 15 and 16

## Essays 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 15: The Spaces Between

There were many Native Americans who lived in Barbara's neighborhood and surrounding areas. Barbara and Camille visited the Heard Museum in Phoenix, which is one of the greatest cultural centers of Native American heritage. Barbara wanted Camille to become familiar with Native American history and appreciate their culture and contributions. The museum was established by Dwight and Maie Bartlett Heard, who settled in Phoenix in 1895.

Camille was drawn to the "Old Ways, New Ways" section, which was an interactive display where kids could learn to play Yaqui drums and use a computer to design a Navajo rug. Barbara and Camille learned how to make animals out of small twigs. There were displays of ancient as well as modern Native American artwork. The life, history, struggles and survival of these people were all contained in the walls of the museum. Barbara and Camille were able to walk through a replica of a Zuni pueblo adobe, which was equipped with the items and tools they used in their daily lives. They saw displays of a traditional and a modern dance.

### Essay 16: Postcards from the Imaginary Mom

Barbara took off on a four-week book tour, during which time she would be visiting a different city each day. Her friends were jealous that she was getting to see the USA. What she was really seeing was the inside of bookstores, TV studios and her hotel room. She disliked being asked what her book was about—it was about so much that she felt like telling them to read it themselves. Not to compare herself to Tolstoy—but how would he explain what "War and Peace" is about, she mused. The worst thing about the tour was missing Camille. Barbara could have refused the tour, but it would have been a bad move given her the reputation of being uncooperative.



# Essays 17 and 18

## Essays 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 17: The Memory Place

Barbara took Camille on a visit to her hometown in Kentucky. She recalled how she and her brother and sister would play and explore in the woods, catch crawfish, watch birds build nests and collected leaves to press and keep. Whenever life would get her down, Barbara would remember those times.

Horse Lick Creek, a tributary to the Rockcastle River, runs for eighteen miles and is a protected preserve. Sand Gap is the small town at the end of the valley and is the remains of an old mining camp. Jim Hays, an employee of the Nature Conservancy, took Barbara and Camille on a tour of the region. The woods and pastures were interspersed with tobacco fields and small residences. Turner's General Store was a local landmark that provided goods and services—hunting licenses could be purchased at Turner's. Horse Lick Creek is at risk, threatened by herbicides, abandoned strip mines and other pollutants.

They drove down through the forest to Cool Springs and found a rushing underground stream. Across the pastures of the Cumberland Plateau, they found another section of the creek where Camille collected mussel shells, which made Barbara a little sad since she knew that the animals were a dying species. They discovered crayfish holes and heard the deep croaking of frogs. Camille was thrilled when they spotted fresh deer tracks leading away from the creek, reminding Barbara of how she felt the first time she saw them as a child. She silently thanked her parents for encouraging her love of nature which she now passed onto her daughter. Their new home, the desert, had its own unique treasures—roadrunners and coyotes and lizards. Barbara expressed the hope that the desert will be preserved and that Camille will be able to enjoy those treasures thirty years from now.

### Essay 18: The Vibrations of Djoogbe

Barbara traveled alone to visit Benin, West Africa. Her friends were worried when she told them her plans and that she had no itinerary for her stay. She was staying in Benin's largest city, Cotonou. The streets of Cotonou were crowded with women vendors in brightly colored, flowery dresses, selling everything from grilled bananas to gasoline contained in wine bottles. Barbara's hotel was so dilapidated that it looked like it had been shelled. Her room had a cot and a sink but no lock or even a doorknob. She woke the first morning to the sounds of young girls herding pigs and young delivery boys zooming by on motorcycles. Women shoppers balanced their purchases precariously on their heads. The town was not equipped for tourists—it existed primarily for the residents. To travel to another town, Barbara had to wrangle price and timing with a bush taxi operator.





Barbara had been in London on business. Since Africa had touched her from childhood on; she couldn't resist taking the side-trip to the continent. She chose to visit Benin in Western Africa—some friends lived there and told her to visit. It is a small, diverse country that lies between Togo and Nigeria. Its climate ranges from the hot, arid savannahs in the north to the cooler humid coastal plantations in the south. Like many other African nations, multiple languages are spoken in Benin. The faces of those in the southern region are marked with scars and tattoos, which serve to identify their tribal associations.

Barbara traveled in a bush taxi from Cotonou to Natitingou, passing fields of high grass and forests that were recovering from a drought. There she would visit her friends, who were Peace Corps volunteers. When they stopped at villages, children selling bananas would swarm the cab. Most were stunned to see a white woman emerge from the vehicle. It was common for the people to greet Barbara with, "Hello, white person." She contrasted that in America where no one would ever use such a greeting. But to them, it was a means of identification—not a racial slur. It would be taken differently in America, she thought.

The region was populated with the Somba people, whose huts were called tatas. She was told that the Somba people were very private. One day, after coming back from the market, she came too close to a tata and a woman came bursting out of her hut, holding a large sweet potato over her head, ready to fire it at Barbara, who quickly ran the other way. She caught sight of the tata's inner court, however, which was splashed with blood. The region is the birthplace of vodoun, a form of voodoo, in which animal sacrifice is an important ceremonial element. The Djoogbe is the most powerful of the rituals. Somba people use the powers of vodoun to illicit the deaths of others.

Barbara and her friends visited the Royal Palace Museum at Abomey which had been home to the twelve successive kings of the Dahomey Empire until it was toppled by the French in 1892. The museum was filled with artifacts—carved animal sculptures, tapestries, and thrones of the Dahomey kings. They visited Ouidah, which was the historic site where West Africans were sold in slave trade. The International Vodoun Festival was being celebrated in the streets of Ouidah. The streets were filled with vendors selling animals skins, turtle skulls, monkey hands and other offensive ware.



# Essays 19 and 20

## Essays 19 and 20 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 19: Infernal Paradise

Barbara visited the island of Maui in Hawaii. At sunrise, she and her traveling partner, Steve, took in the island's famous dormant volcano, Haleakala. They ventured down the trail that led to the bottom of the volcano. It was an unusual experience—the strange topography of the crater creates its own climate—both arid desert and moist fern forests.

It was just by random chance that life plant and animal life began on the rocky Hawaiian islands a million years ago. The Polynesians were the first humans to inhabit the islands. Eventually, sugar cane and pineapple plants crowded out the original endemic plants. The natural forest was destroyed by logging. At least two hundred plants that were endemic to Hawaii are extinct, with another almost one thousand threatened. Literally hundreds of original birds are extinct, including the flightless dodo bird. It is likely that one who visits modern-day Hawaii would not find one of Hawaii's original plants or animals. The Haleakala Crater is a protected preserve but its existence is in peril because of the fragile nature of its ecosystem. The silverwood plant, which grows nowhere else on earth, has been stolen for leis, souvenirs and Asian medicines. Finally, Hawaii deterred this activity by establishing pricey fines for such poachers. Barbara was astonished by the beauty of the silverwoods when she first happened upon them in the crater.

On the way to their cabin in Paliku six miles away, Barbara and Steven observed the last vestiges of the natural rainforest that was contained in the vertical rocks rising before them. The next morning, they took a different path back through the crater. They climbed the Halemau'u trail, which led up the face of a cliff and provided one breathless panoramic view after another.

Back home, her friends couldn't understand the appeal of the grueling hikes she took during her vacation, but she would do it all again. Seeing the pristine Haleakala Crater was a once in a lifetime experience. Sadly, it's a treasure that will one day vanish.

### Essay 20: In the Belly of the Beast

Although she couldn't imagine what could be learned by visiting a nuclear museum, Barbara's curiosity finally got the best of her and she made her way to the Titan Missile museum on the outskirts of Tucson. She joined others in the auditorium where they viewed a film about the history of the Titan and Titan II missiles that surrounded Tucson that were active between 1962 and 1984. The missile is 103 feet tall, weighs 150 tons, has a speed of over 15,000 mph and can reach a destination half way around the world. In the twenty-two years that the Titan was in readiness, it was never called to duty.



The Pentagon decommissioned the Titans in 1980 because they reportedly were technically obsolete, but in reality they posed a threat to the US itself. Concerned physicists demonstrated through their studies that if one Titan were to be set off, it would create a chain reaction and literally fry Tucson. Even though they were decommissioned, Barbara still felt a threat of being encircled by Titan missiles. Since that visit, Barbara visited a museum in Hiroshima where there was no elaborate explanations about the artifacts—melted watches, tin cups melted together, the burned dress of a young girl who died twelve hours after the bomb struck. Thousands died on the impact of the bomb while hundreds of thousands died slow deaths of toxic poisoning. What was jarring to Barbara was seeing a replica of the dark green bomb itself.

Since World War II, a political debate has raged about the cost of and need for nuclear arms. She is adamant that weapons such as the Titan missiles should be banned throughout the world. They can only cause destruction and misery no matter who is in charge of them. The billions spent for these arms could be used to make life better for the sick and poor.



# Essays 21 and 22

## Essays 21 and 22 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 21: Jabberwocky

During protest marches against the Gulf War, Barbara would often be told to "love it or leave it." She was sure that most Americans had no idea that both Iraq and Kuwait had oppressive governments. Kuwait was particularly oppressive to women and was not the democracy that administration led everyone to believe it was. Barbara felt she was being patriotic by protesting the war. The bombings by American had decimated Iraq's water system' contaminated the drinking water; and destroyed mosques, factories and irrigation and agricultural systems—all violations of the Geneva Conventions.

Some of her friends wanted to set up a booth in a mall to hand out pamphlets containing the truth about the Gulf War. The mall manager rejected the request. Disinformation campaigns came from the top—the Pentagon denied public access about the deaths of Iraqis because, as director of the national security program at Georgetown University was quoted as saying, "you avoid talking about lives lost, and that serves both an esthetic and a practical purpose" (p. 231). The purpose of keeping the public in the dark was to keep the public's support of the war from waning.

Barbara took the advice of a proponent of the war to "love it or leave it" and went to Spain for a year. But when she returned, it was not in defeat. Barbara came to the realization that if you love your country, you will stay and try to improve it.

### Essay 22: The Forest in the Seeds

Barbara became a rookie animal behaviorist at twenty-five years of age. Her assignment was to study a species of territorial lizards. During her endless hours of observation, the majority of the time the lizards didn't move. During these years, Barbara spent extensive periods of time reading the writings of Henry David Thoreau. She was greatly influenced by his works and by the man himself. He had a way of integrating himself into his writings in ways that could not be easily ignored. Thoreau's "Faith in a Seed" was one of her favorite Thoreau works. In the book, his limitless curiosity, devotion to science and patience was inspiring to Barbara.



# Essays 23, 24 and 25

## Essays 23, 24 and 25 Summary and Analysis

### Essay 23: Careful What You Let in the Door

Although some writing colleagues complain about their job, Barbara recognized writing as challenging and flexible and, if you hang in there long enough, rewarding. Her fan mail was entertaining—she received letters containing everything from concepts for new novels to students asking for help on their term papers. Although some readers criticized her writing, most were of a positive nature.

Barbara's older works tended to have some violence—later she learned that subtext and rhetoric like metaphor were much more powerful tools in telling her stories. She felt that many books and movies exploited the vulnerability of women—like "Silence of the Lambs"—and have a negative impact on society. Many sociologists agree that watching violence can lead to one acting out violently. A book or film that has violence with no consequences sends the wrong message. After the film or book is completed and distributed, it is up to the reader or viewer to be highly selective as to what he exposes himself to and in particular, what he allows his young children to view or read.

### Essay 24: The Not-So-Deadly Sin

Ironically, readers tend to question facts when they read one of Barbara's non-fiction books but believe every word of her fiction works. Readers often assume she based her characters on herself and her family—something she does not do. Characters that she creates from her imagination are much more cooperative in doing what she wants them to do and do them convincingly. Those who don't have a talent for writing are skeptical that a person can make up a whole story from scratch. Since honesty was an important attribute in her family, the freedom that writing fiction allowed her in telling a pack of lies was cathartic.

### Essay 25: Reprise

Buster the crab is alive and well and still in his terrarium. His claws show a little age and wear, but that's to be expected. Barbara had a landscaper create a small, permanent pond behind her house. After it was completed, a very short while later the pond was teeming with life—tadpoles, dragonflies, whirligig beetles, and various species of birds, found a new homeland. Coyotes and javalinas come to drink from the pond. A Cooper's Hawk hung around and was Barbara's significant other for years until he was replaced by her second husband, Steven. They were drawn to each other from the mutual love of nature.



# Characters

## Barbara Kingsolver

The twenty-five essays in Barbara Kingsolver's anthology, *High Tide in Tucson*, cover a range of subjects that include elements of her personal life as well as such lofty issues such as the roots of sexism and racism in today's society. Kingsolver began her life in a small town in Kentucky. Her well-educated parents focused the family's attention on good literature and science as opposed to faddish notions and pop culture. As a result, throughout her years in school, Kingsolver was considered an egg head who was in the main ostracized by her classmates. Kingsolver didn't have stylish clothes and was slight and skinny and easily ignored. She didn't have her first date until college.

Kingsolver eventually married and had a daughter; however, the marriage soon ended after Camille was born. Barbara connects with a large segment of women in those essays that deal with single parenthood. Kingsolver's innate love of nature and all its plants and animals led to her degree in biology. However, her love of literature, which can be traced back to her early years, eventually resulted in a successful career as a writer.

It is quite apparent that Kingsolver's biggest priority had always been her daughter. It was important to her that she instilled in her daughter the confidence to become whatever she wanted to become in life by the successes of her own life and career. By example, she demonstrated to her daughter that women can balance successful careers, advocate for the concerns that are dear to them, be head of a household and be a loving and caring parent.

## Camille

Camille is author Barbara's Kingsolver's daughter. At the time of publication of this collection of essays, Camille was seven years old. In *High Tide in Tucson*, the reader is first introduced to Camille when Barbara surprises her with a "gift" from a trip in the Bahamas. Barbara smuggled home a hermit crab that she found along the Caribbean shore. Camille, a nature lover like her mother, was thrilled with the new addition.

When Camille was just a toddler, she and her parents left the US to live the city of Tenerife in the Canary Islands. It was kind of a silent, peaceful protest against the Gulf War in 1991. Barbara quickly found that Spaniards love little children. She couldn't take Camille anywhere without people making over her cute little daughter. But Camille liked the attention—she told her mother she liked being called pretty. A short while after their sabbatical to Spain, the marriage of Barbara Kingsolver and her husband broke up. Not a lot of detail is written about the details of the breakup, but Camille apparently lived the majority of the time with her mother but maintained a good relationship with her father.



Barbara had to deal with a rowdy youngster during her "terrible twos." Once Camille passed through this stage, however, she settled down into a well-behaved little girl who shared many of her mother's interests, including those in history, nature and reading.

## **Buster**

Buster was the hermit crab that Barbara smuggled home in her suitcase from the Bahamas. The title of the book comes from Barbara's observation of Buster's behavior, which led her to believe that the moon has an effect on animals whether there's an ocean or not.

## **Steve**

Barbara's friend, Steve, accompanied her on a trip to Hawaii, where they hiked in the valley of a dormant volcano. They shared a love of nature and eventually Steve became Barbara's second husband.

## **F. A. Brown**

F. A. Brown was a researcher who began in 1954 tracing the cycles of intertidal oysters. He discovered that cycles of the moon can have an impact on living creatures who do not leave near the ocean.

## **Henry David Thoreau**

Henry David Thoreau was an inspiration to Barbara Kingsolver. She admired the honesty and consistency of his writings and his love of science. His works as a naturalist and his writing skills were one of Kingsolver's greatest influences.

## **Somba Tribe**

The Somba tribe of Western Africa practice a form of voodoo and live in huts called tatas. These people are very private, and when Barbara came too close to one of their homes one day, she was threatened and chased away by a Somba woman.

## **Tohono O'odham Tribe**

On a hike, Kingsolver found relics from the Tohono O'odham Native Americans who lived in the Arizona desert before any other humans. Barbara and her daughter enjoyed learning about the cultures and traditions of this tribe and other Native Americans.



## **Laurence Steinberg**

Kingsolver references a study by Psychologist Laurence Steinberg, which focused on the impact of children on their parents' mental health. The most trying times, the research found, was during the terrible twos and adolescence.

## **Adrienne Zihlman**

Kingsolver references the works of modern-day anthropologist Adrienne Zihlman, who concluded in a study that the African savannah was the most important environment for human development. Zihlman found no evidence that early man made meat the main source of their diets.





# Objects/Places

## Rural Kentucky

Barbara Kingsolver was raised in a small town in rural Kentucky. She attended elementary and high school in the town. She was very concerned about the encroachment of the habitats of the endemic plants and animals in this region.

## Nicholas County High School

Barbara's love of literature began at Nicholas County High School when she was recruited to help the school librarian organize the library. She was not popular and was considered an egg head. She had a triumphant return years later when the school held a book signing for her when her first novel was published.

## Tucson, Arizona

After graduating from college, Barbara moved from the small town in rural Kentucky where she was raised and attended school to Tucson, Arizona.

## Bahamas

On a trip to the Bahamas, Barbara ran across a hermit crab that she smuggled back home in her suitcase. She and her daughter named the crab Buster and made a home for him in a terrarium.

## Eagle Tail Trail

Barbara found artifacts from inhabitants who dwelt in a cave on a hike on the Eagle Tail Trail in western Arizona.

## Sonora Desert

Barbara and her friends often explored the Sonora Desert in western Arizona. As a young biologist, she studied the behavior of the lizards that lived in the desert.

## Canary Islands

In a mild protest of the Gulf War of 1991, Barbara, her husband and daughter moved to the Canary Islands off of Spain for a year.



## **Western Africa**

Barbara traveled to a remote community called Benin in Western Africa to visit some friends who were with the Peace Corps. She stayed in the rugged city of Cotonou during her visit.

## **Rock Bottom Reminders**

Barbara was recruited to play keyboard in a band comprised of fellow writers. She was reluctant to join, but after she toured with them, she enjoyed the opportunity to be a rock star for a few weeks. The band's name was Rock Bottom Reminders.

## **Haleakala Volcano**

Barbara hiked through the dormant volcano named Haleakala when she visited Hawaii. During her hikes through the valley of the volcano, she was able to observe plant life that occurred no where else in the world.



# Themes

## Conservation

The author's passionate advocacy for the survival of the earth's animal life and plant life is a powerful theme throughout the collection of essays that comprises *High Tide in Tucson*. When she and her friend visit the Hawaiian Islands and hike through the dormant volcano called Haleakala, she is amazed to see the fragile new ecosystem that had developed in the valley of the volcano. A beautiful plant called the silverwood grows in no other place in the world. Because the ecosystem that has emerged in the volcano is new, it is fragile and its longevity is uncertain. Until stiff fines were recently established, poachers and tourists would uproot the unusual plants so they could sell them or use them for their own purposes.

The original plant life in all of Hawaii was destroyed years ago when man first discovered the islands and settled there. These plants were destroyed in favor of large pineapple and sugar cane crops that were grown for profit. Hawaii's natural forests were decimated by the logging industry which was trying to keep up with the demands for homes for newly arriving people. The destruction of the plants has been devastating. Modern visitors to Hawaii probably will not see a single original plant. Hundreds of original birds that were endemic to Hawaii are extinct, including the flightless dodo bird.

In Kentucky, near Kingsolver's hometown, a species of the river mussels are becoming extinct. The caves in rural Kentucky are home to the endangered Indiana bat. There are many other species of animals and plants that are vulnerable and endangered. The threat to these forms of life can be traced to the nearby abandoned strip mines and use of herbicides and pesticides. The encroachment on habitats is the biggest threat to endemic animal and plant life. Poverty is one of the root causes of endangered animals and plants since it is difficult to appeal to those in need that one of the biggest concerns to mankind are the threats man has caused to natural habitats.

## Sexism

A number of Kingsolver's essays touch upon sexism in the modern society. She discusses the one-family model that emerged after the good times that followed World War II when only one salary was sufficient. This mentality led society to begin to view the woman as belonging in the home. When economics changed and it was obvious that one salary would not be enough, the woman returned to the workforce but was at a great disadvantage, having lost many years to housework and laundry duties at home. But women had long ago been relegated to a secondary position.

Sexism had its roots in the various earliest of human experiences. Man gained dominance over women in those ancient times. The concept of private property heralded in the beginning of the status difference between males and females. This



"pecking order" evolved from the natural progression of controlled hunting and agriculture. While planting and harvesting was in the woman's domain, the men in early societies were first "hunters" and then later the "herders" of domesticated animals. During these eras, the role of men and women were relatively equal since grains and produce were as important to survival as meat.

When bartering was first conceived, domesticated animals—like goats and sheep—were in great demand. When a value or currency was assigned to these animals, they became the world's first personal property, which could be used to improve the lives of families. Since domesticated animals were the responsibility of men, men naturally became the keepers of this property. The man in the family evolved as the overseer of the valuables, which gave him a disproportionate power over the woman. The establishment of personal property began the tradition of man as head of the household. In early times, valuables and money were inherited by the sons from their fathers. This all led to the modern structure of society and the perceived roles of women and men.

Kingsolver is a strong advocate of women's equality but realizes that she and others like her are fighting the tide of centuries of tradition. Women like Barbara Kingsolver are prime examples to young women and girls that a woman can function as the head of the household, have a successful career, be passionate about issues that concern her and be a loving and devoted parent.

## The Life of a Writer

Barbara Kingsolver was trained as a biologist but later focused much of her attention on a writing career. However, her interest in nature never waned; in fact, it grew as she attained more knowledge about conservation and endangered species. Her talent in writing, however, allowed her to articulate her views and share her knowledge about the need for everyone to focus on conservation as a global concern.

In *High Tide at Tucson*, a collection of Kingsolver's essays, she devotes a good deal of attention to her writing career. As a lover of literature, the teenaged Barbara acquired the habit of writing about her thoughts and experiences and dreams and fantasies in a notebook that was just for her own eyes. Later, as an adult who had maintained the practice, she began submitting some of her writing to publishers. She was shocked when she got the word that the editor of a publishing company wanted to publish her first novel, *The Bean Trees*. The book became an award-winning success. Being an unpopular egg head in high school, it was her happy revenge to return to her small town high school where a book signing for the first work was held for her.

Kingsolver is an honest writer who is careful not to portray writing as a profession without its downsides. Writing is an isolated pursuit which requires discipline and the ability to be guilt-free when its demands cause other parts of the writer's life to suffer from lack of attention. A shy, conservative person by nature, Kingsolver disliked the book tours across the country that she was required to participate in; in fact, these tours

were one of her least favorite aspects of her writing career. Kingsolver makes the point that writers need a support system and was fortunate enough to find a group of writers in the Tucson area with whom she could commiserate—these friends helped her keep her sanity.



# Style

## Perspective

Author Barbara Kingsolver's *High Tide in Tucson* is a collection of twenty-five of her essays, which range from episodes about her personal life to her passionate advocacy of all the creatures and plant life of the earth. All of the essays are written in the first person narrative and are, of course, written from her perspective. No one would be better suited to write about Kingsolver's thoughts, feelings and opinions on such topics as her experiences in school, her career, marriage and motherhood along with her ardent championing of such causes such as conservation equality for women and minorities.

Kingsolver is both a biologist and a renowned writer. Her knowledge about endangered species is without question and is obvious through these works. The creatures of the earth could have no better advocate than Barbara Kingsolver, who possesses the knowledge about the threats to life on the planet and has the ability to articulate the cause with both clarity and conviction. Her range of works include poetry, nonfiction and three novels, *The Bean Trees*, *Animal Dreams*, and *Pig in Heaven*, which were all award winning works. Kingsolver also authored a collection of short stories titled *Homeland*.

Kingsolver, in writing about episodes of her life that were difficult—her failed marriage, a still-born baby, struggles with single parenting—provides accounts that lack bitterness and emanate honesty in her avoidance of placing blame or being overly defensive. As with any successful writer, Kingsolver has talent and is scrupulous about the veracity of her accounts.

## Tone

Barbara Kingsolver, author of *High Tide in Tucson*, is a renowned biologist and successful writer. In this collection of twenty-five of her essays, Kingsolver displays passion and sincerity about some of the elements of her life that are most important to her including her daughter, her family, literature and the conservation of the earth's plant and animal life. With her skills as a writer, she is able to convey her thoughts and feelings with clarity and conviction.

Kingsolver uses rhetorical tropes such as personification and metaphor that serve to impassion her writing. For example, she writes in one section that the trees "are beginning to shrug off winter" and refers to maple trees as dark and "leggy." Kingsolver draws a picture for the reader when she depicts the woods as "shot through with beaming constellations of white dogwood blossoms." She speaks about the ground "yawning" to reveal an underground stream. Not only does the reader benefit from the



richness of her descriptions and the strength of her literary abilities, the passion that she has for the subjects she writes about is made more apparent.

Kingsolver's tone throughout her essays is one of student more than teacher. Her limitless curiosity and fervor to learn everything about such diverse subjects as the conservation of the earth to the range and power of Titan missiles display her eagerness to learn about anything—even those things which she does not advocate or approve of.

## Structure

High Tide in Tucson by Barbara Kingsolver is comprised of twenty-five essays by the author. There are loose relationships between the essays, many of which focus on her family, her writing career and various conservation issues. Through this loosely connected structure, Kingsolver brings the reader from her childhood in a small Kentucky town through her struggles as an adult who faces a failed marriage, single motherhood and the demands and isolation of a successful writing career.

Kingsolver has amassed a collection of essays that have common themes which are the passions of her life. In her writings, it is obvious that she is grasping for an understanding of the role and struggles for equality of modern women in society, the beginnings of which she traces back to ancient times. Of paramount importance to her is that she provides a good example to her daughter that a woman can be the head of the household, have a successful career and be an involved and loving parent.

The passion of Kingsolver's concern over the extinction and endangerment of the earth's plants and animals is a common theme throughout her essays as well. Her position that man's importance is tied to all the other creatures and plants of the earth and is not more important or essential is a passionate argument that appears quite frequently in her collection of essays.



## Quotes

"Years ago when I was a graduate student of animal behavior, I passed my days reading about the likes of animals' internal clocks. Temperature, photo period, the rise and fall of hormones—all these influences have been teased apart like so many threads form the rope that pulls every creature to its regulated destiny."

Essay 1, p. 5

"The hiker's program in a desert like this [western Arizona] is dire and blunt: carry in enough water to keep you alive till you can find a water source; then fill your bottles and head for the next one, or straight back out. Experts warn adventurers in this region, without irony, to drink their water while they're still alive, as it won't help later."

Essay 1, p. 10

"I tend to be at home with modesty, and suspicious of anything slick or new. But naturally, when I was growing up there [in Kentucky], I yearned for the slick and the new."

Essay 4, p. 38

"If there is a fatal notion on this earth, it's the notion that wider horizons will be fatal. Difficult, troublesome, scary—yes, all that. But the wounds, for a sturdy child, will not be mortal."

p. 53

"The wide variety of mating strategies we adopt across different cultures would suggest anything but biological determinism. But the battle of the sexes is such a persistent, bittersweet mystery the popular imagination seems convinced we are hard-wired for la différence."

Essay 8, p. 72

"We are to remember our children are only passing through us like precious arrows launched from heaven, but in most states we're criminally liable for whatever target they whack."

Essay 10, p. 89

"The most remarkable feature of human culture is its capacity to reach beyond the self and encompass the collective good."

Essay 11, p. 105

"As I get comfortable with the middle stretch of my life, though, it's occurred to me that this is the only one I'm going to get. I'd better open the closet door and invite my other





selves to the table, even if it looks undignified or flaky."  
Essay 13, p. 131

"Arguing about whether nontraditional families deserve pity or tolerance is a little like the medieval debate about left-handedness as a mark of the devil. Divorce, remarriage, single parenthood, gay parents, and blended families simply are."  
Essay 14, p. 140

"From what I've overheard, a writer who won't travel is viewed as an ingrate, a coot, a hermetic unknown who deserves anonymity, or just plain stuck-up. As Garry Trudeau has pointed out, America is the only place where refusal to promote yourself is perceived as arrogance."  
Essay 16, p. 163

"It's quite possible now to visit the Hawaiian Islands without ever laying eyes on the single animal or plant that is actually Hawaiian—from the Plumeria lei at the airport (this beloved flower is a Southeast Asian import) to the farewell bouquet of the ginger (also Asian)."  
Essay 19, p. 198

"Love of one's country should be like love of one's spouse—a give-and-take criticism and affection. Although it is hoped one prefers one's spouse to other people. . . one does not prove that one loves one's wife by battering other women."  
Essay 21, p. 224



## Topics for Discussion

Why was Barbara Kingsolver ridiculed at school as a young girl? How did she later triumph in the eyes of the small town where she was raised and went to school? Why did it give her a feeling of freedom?

Why did Barbara and her family move to Spain? What did she learn about supporting one's country? How were anti-war protesters treated during the Gulf War? What did most people not realize about the Gulf War?

What did Barbara dislike most about book tours? What question did Barbara find difficult to answer relative to her books? Who did Barbara base her characters on? Why did she fear that her hometown might be upset about her first novel?

What experiences did Barbara have in Western Africa? Why did she first travel there? What unnerving run-in did she have with a Somba woman? What were some of the unusual rituals and traditions of those who followed vodoun in Western Africa?

Barbara hiked in what unusual place in Hawaii? What plant life exists only in the crater of a dormant volcano in Hawaii? How many of Hawaii's original animal and plant species are extinct? Who were the first humans to inhabit the Hawaiian Islands?

What unusual creature did Barbara bring home from the Bahamas? What kind of den was made for Buster? Why did Barbara sometimes think that Buster was ill or even dead? What did she attribute Buster's sporadic behavior to?

What danger did the Titan missiles present to the Tucson community? What was the weight and range of the Titan missile? Why were the Titans officially decommissioned? What was the underlying reason for retiring the Titan missiles?