

“Dwellings of Enchantment: Writing and Renchanting the Earth”

Writers’ interviews with Barbara Kingsolver

What is your favorite place in the world?

The farm where I live, in the Appalachian mountains of southwestern Virginia.

What do you like about it?

Everything. It has all that I need. The mountains that rise behind our farmhouse are covered in green forest where I can walk in every season. Directly below us are rolling fields we cultivate for vegetable production, and pastures for our sheep and cattle. I live among farmers who speak the poetic language of my childhood, and whose instincts are toward community rather than self. I live on land that feeds us and nourishes my soul. I have the solitude I need for a writing life, and companionship for the physical labors that also make me happy. In the first decades of my adulthood I lived in several cities on three different continents, and learned a lot about what the world has to offer. When I was able to make my own best choice, I chose to live here.

What place does nature occupy in your writing?

I've never quite understood the word "nature." People generally use it to mean "everything that is not human, or human-made." That's almost everything. Look around. Your desk is transmogrified trees, and so are the books on your shelves. The lunch you just ate was comprised of many formerly living, not-human things. (I certainly hope.) When asked what place "almost everything" occupies in my writing, I find that such a weird question. I was educated as a biologist, so I think of the world as a vast, interconnected network of living forms and elements. That world occupies my writing. People are in it. Like members of most other species, I find my own fascinating. But far too full of ourselves for anyone's good. Leaning on that word "nature" reminds me of the cultures that use the word "people" to describe their own tribe or nation, and "ghost" or some other pejorative to describe everyone else. It's dangerously reductive.

Do animals play a great role in your writing?

See above. Yes. Plants also. And oxygen, and water.

How about plants, minerals, and elements?

Yep.

To what extent are your characters related to the environments you create for them?

They breathe oxygen that was made inside a leaf. They eat, they exist. Some of them might believe they live in a world of humans and nothing else, but I don't, and can't. Ever.

To what degree might your writing be based on a scientific understanding of the world?

Approximately one hundred percent.

Do various myths and mythologies inform your writing or inspire you? (Could you quote a couple of examples?)

I'm interested in the stories humans use to explain our existence, especially the ones that help us get comfortable with injustices and cruelties - for example, that humans are intrinsically entitled to use all other life forms to our own advantage. Or that anyone can be wealthy if only he is smart and works hard. I like to blow these myths to smithereens. Of course, in an entertaining way.

Do other fields from arts and humanities have any impact on the vision of the world you try to (re)create in your writing? (Could you quote a couple of examples?)

Cinema, maybe. I'm very visual in my writing process. I create a movie in my head, and then translate it into words.

What is your preferred form or genre to write about nature?

Oh, damn. That word again.

Which writers, if any, might have been the most influential on your writing?

The list is so long, I always feel miserable for those I'm about to leave out. All my life I've read like a drowning person, gulping at the prayer that I will be influenced. Dickens, George Eliot, Garcia Marquez and a hundred more for the genius of plot construction. Alice Munro and Marilynne Robinson for the poetry of their prose, Flannery O'Connor for humor, Wendell Berry and Doris Lessing for heart. Virginia Woolf for everything. John Steinbeck for

the sheer brilliance of the chapter in CANNERY ROW told from the point of view of a groundhog.

How powerful do you find dystopic fiction, whether literature or cinema?

Depends, of course, on whether it is powerful or terrible. Margaret Atwood's THE HANDMAID'S TALE comes to mind as an example of powerful, because it was utterly convincing and about something real to me. And I'll confess I cheered for Charlize Theron's ferocious one-armed super-avenger goddess in "Mad Max, Fury Road." But so often this genre, like so much science fiction, is just a long, ruddy wallow in testosterone and preciously old-fashioned gender roles. At the end of the world, or five centuries from now, we're to believe, men will still be piloting the ship while women run around shrieking in ripped-up prom gowns.

Would you agree with saying that all nature writers are mystics?

Good grief, no. Look at E.O. Wilson. Look at the immense body of work left by Steven Jay Gould. We scientists are writing about the non-human world all the time, sometimes with an eye to the soul and spirit, often not at all.

If there is such a thing as what Mark Tredinnick calls "the land's wild music," how do you think one can learn to hear it, and, and how might this wild music ripple into and give shape to one's writing?

Live in it, would be my advice, if wild is what you're after. Get yourself to some place where you can see and hear things that were not made by humans. The world is so full of music. Most mornings a Carolina wren or a Cardinal or a White-throated sparrow wakes me up, depending on the season, and if it's not the dead of winter, crickets will sing me to sleep. Everything I write, in between, is bound to be influenced.

Would you say that there is a direct link between the language of the earth and the creative language in your work?

Yes. Surely.

How much of your writing would you say is about re-enchanting the world?

I couldn't possibly say. For me it was never un-enchanted.

Do you think humans have lost their capacity for wonder about the natural world?

Millions of people live on this earth in so many habitats, in vastly different relationships with the land. Some see it, correctly, as a place that's liable to kill them, via snakes or lions or harsh elements or poisoned water or bone-grinding work. Other see it as entertainment or a nice place to visit. I couldn't possibly generalize.

How much ecocritical theory or environmentalist literature do you read?

Theory, not very much. Environmentalist literature, very much.

Do you believe that literature can change the way humans think about our relationship to the natural world around and bring about not only awareness, but also political changes?

Yes, of course. Literature can change readers' thinking about all kinds of things, by cultivating empathy.

Can you think of a case that you know of where policies may have followed from awareness raised by a great novel, or any other work of art?

To quote two very famous examples, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* is credited with sparking the movement to abolish slavery in the United States, and Rachel Carson's *SILENT SPRING* is credited with bringing an end to the perilously destructive pesticide DDT. Less famous examples abound. But the process is fraught, to say the least: Stowe claimed that her novel was "written by God," probably to avoid getting hate-mail; Carson was ridiculed as a hysteric, and died before she saw the results of her lifetime of work. I think it's wisest for artists to invest ourselves in the process, rather than the outcome.

Do you think that most people reading your work are already cognizant of environmental issues, or do you feel like your writing might bring some of your readers to a different kind of understanding and consciousness?

I can't know the answer to this. Again, it's unsafe to generalize - my readers are many, and all different.

What changes do you hope might be brought about from reading your books, on an individual level?

See above. I invest myself in the process, making the very best art I can create about the things that move me most deeply. The outcome is something that happens inside each reader's brain, one reading at a time, far beyond my control. Maybe it's not even quite my business.

How does your knowledge and care about environmental issues and non-human life affect your own life style and choices?

It's hard to say, as I've lived no life but this one. Non-human lives are part of just about every choice I make - where I live, what I eat, the walks I take, the sweaters I knit, the money I donate, the help I give to others. The answers I gave my children when they asked me what happens when we die. Our elements become the soil, we become grass and trees and countless other lives. I can't remove myself from the rest of the world, and never could, not since I was a toddler lying belly down in the grass, tasting dirt in order to know it. That's just the kind of animal I am.

If you could recommend a few ways to improve one's lifestyle in a way that could also reduce the negative impact of humans' activities on the planet, which would you suggest?

I'm very uncomfortable telling anyone else what to do. Maybe just this: try to be a good animal.