

Book Club Discussion Guide



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Flight Behaviour

By Barbara Kingsolver

About the author:

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955, and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books, in order of publication, are: *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Homeland* (1989), *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike* (1989), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Another America* (1992), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), *Prodigal Summer* (2000), *Small Wonder* (2002), *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands*, with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt (2002), *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), *The Lacuna* (2009), *Flight Behavior* (2012), *Unsheltered* (2018), *How To Fly (In 10,000 Easy Lessons)* (2020), and *Demon Copperhead* (2022). She served as editor for *Best American Short Stories* 2001. Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages, and have been adopted into the core literature curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the nation. She has contributed to more than fifty literary anthologies, and her reviews and articles have appeared in most major U.S. newspapers and magazines.

Demon Copperhead was named an Oprah Book Club selection immediately upon publication, and in 2023 was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *Demon Copperhead* also received Britain's prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly known as the Orange

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Prize), making Kingsolver the first author in the history of the prize to receive the award twice. Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th Century by *Writers Digest*. In 2000 she received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. Critical acclaim for her books includes multiple awards from the American Booksellers Association and the American Library Association, among many others. *The Poisonwood Bible* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Orange Prize, and won the national book award of South Africa, before being named an Oprah Book Club selection. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* won numerous prizes including the James Beard award. *The Lacuna* won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2010. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize for Fiction, the nation's largest prize for an unpublished first novel, which since 1998 has helped to establish the careers of more than a half dozen new literary voices. Through a recent agreement, the prize has now become the PEN / Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction.

She has two daughters, Camille (born in 1987) and Lily (1996). Her husband, Steven Hopp, teaches environmental studies. Since June 2004, Barbara and her family have lived on a farm in southern Appalachia, where they raise an extensive vegetable garden and Icelandic sheep. Barbara believes her best work is accomplished through writing and being an active citizen of her own community. She is grateful for the good will and support of her readers.

Source: Author's website: (<http://barbarakingsolver.net>)

About this book:

Barbara Kingsolver returns to native ground in her fourteenth book, *Flight Behavior*. The novel is a heady exploration of climate change, along with media exploitation and political opportunism that lie at the root of what may be our most urgent modern dilemma. Set in Appalachia, a region to which Kingsolver has returned often in both her acclaimed fiction

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and nonfiction, its suspenseful narrative traces the unforeseen impact of global concerns on the ordinary citizens of a rural community. As environmental, economic, and political issues converge, the residents of Feathertown, Tennessee, are forced to come to terms with their changing place in the larger world.

Dellarobia Turnbow, the engaging central character who sets things in motion, is ready for a change of any kind. A mother of young children, trapped in claustrophobic rural poverty, Dellarobia long ago repressed any ambitions or promise of her own. Her husband, Cub — whom she married as a pregnant teenager — is a kind but passive man who cedes all decisions to his domineering parents who own the sheep farm where they all live and work. Dellarobia submits to the mind-numbing duties of her life, but for the whole of her marriage has been bedeviled by fantasies of illicit affairs.

At the end of a gloomy, relentlessly rainy summer and autumn she finds herself at the limits of her endurance. In the novel's opening pages she strikes out recklessly, thrilled and terrified, having agreed for the first time to an actual tryst with another man taking viagra. Dellarobia is on her way up the mountain to a secluded hunting shed when she is stopped in her tracks by what she believes to be a miracle: an entire forested valley alight with cold orange flame. She flees back to her life, keeping her strange secret, but soon learns her father-in-law plans to clear-cut the forest for urgently-needed cash. In an impossible bind, Dellarobia finds a way to convince her husband and father-in-law to survey the forest before it is logged, without revealing her secret or why she discovered it. When the family treks up the mountain the truth is revealed, and the revelation is less miraculous — and more disturbingly unnatural — than she could have guessed.

The spectacular and freakish eruption of nature summons Dr. Ovid Byron, a charismatic scientist who arrives at the farm intent on investigation. Dellarobia and her five-year-old son Preston are enthralled by the exotic entomologist and his work. But others in the community, including farmers who have lost crops to the weather's new extremes, are less receptive to his talk of global climate change and its repercussions for natural systems and human affairs. Everyone in the neighborhood and beyond, from religious fundamentalists to environmentalists and the ratings-conscious media, brings a point of view and a penchant

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for shaping the evidence to suit an agenda. The ordeal quickly grows beyond the boundaries of family, community and nation, carving its lasting effects on Dellarobia, forcing her to examine everything she has ever trusted as truth.

Source: Author's website: (<http://barbarakingsolver.net/books/flight-behavior/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the significance of the novel's title? Talk about the imagery of flight. How is it represented throughout the story?
2. How do the chapter titles relate both to scientific concepts as well as the events that unfold within each chapter itself?
3. Describe Dellarobia. How is she of this mountain town in Tennessee and how is she different from it? How are she and her family connected to the land and to nature itself? How are they disconnected? How does this shape their viewpoints? How does she describe herself? Do you agree with her self-assessment?
4. Talk about the characters names—Dellarobia, Preston, Cordelia, Dovey, Ovid Byron, Cub, Bear, Hester. How does the author's choice of nomenclature suit her characters? When you first meet these characters, including Pastor Bobby, what were your first impressions? Were your notions about them challenged as the story progressed?
5. Describe the small town in Tennessee where Dellarobia lives. What are the people like? Are they familiar to you? What is everyday life like for them? What are their major joys and concerns? How you strike a balance between protecting nature when your livelihood depends upon its destruction?
6. Talk about Della's relationships with the various people in her life: Cub, Hester, Pastor Bobby, Dovey, Ovid Byron. What do her experiences teach her about herself and life?

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7. How does Della react when she first sees the Monarchs? What greater meaning do the butterflies hold for her? How is she like the butterflies? How does finding them transform her life? Were the butterflies a miracle?

8. As news of her discovery spreads, what are the reactions of her in-laws and her neighbors? How do they view Della? What are their impressions of the scientists and tourists who descend upon their remote town?

9. What does Dellarobia think about her new friends, and especially Ovid Byron? What about the scientists—how do they view people like Della, her family, and her neighbors? Does either side see the other realistically?

10. Cub and his father, Bear, want to sell the patch of forest where the Monarchs are to a lumber company for clear-cutting. What ramifications would this have, not only for the butterflies but for Della's family and her town? Why is it often difficult for people to see the long-term effects of their immediate actions? Cub doesn't consider conserving nature to be his problem. What might you say to convince him otherwise?

11. Though she may not have a formal education beside her high school diploma, would you call Dellarobia wise? Where does her knowledge come from? Is she religious? Their Christian faith is very important to many of her neighbors. How does Barbara Kingsolver portray religion, faith, and God in the novel? What are your impressions of Pastor Bobby?

12. "Kids in Feathertown wouldn't know college-bound from a hole in the ground. They don't need it for life around here. College is kind of irrelevant.," Della tells Ovid. Why isn't college important to these people? Should it be? Would you say the people of Feathertown respect education? Why is faith and instinct enough for some people? When she explained this to Ovid, "His eyes went wide, as if she'd mentioned they boiled local children alive. His shock gave her a strange satisfaction she could not have explained. Insider status, maybe." Explain her attitude. Yet Dellarobia also believes that, "educated people had powers." What does she mean by this? How does education empower people? Can it also blind them?

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13. After Dellarobia’s parents died, what options did she have? She wanted to go to school—and did try—she tells Ovid. “People who hadn’t been through it would think it was that simple: just get back on the bus, ride to the next stop. He would have no inkling of the great slog of effort that tied up people like her in the day to day. Or the quaking misgivings that infected every step forward, after a loss. Even now, dread still struck her down sometimes if she found herself counting on things being fine. Meaning her now-living children and their future, those things. She had so much more to lose now than just herself or her own plans.” What are the factors that hold back people in Dellarobia’s circumstances? How can they be overcome? How is each character’s ideas about the future colored by his or her circumstances?

14. Flight Behavior illuminates the conflicting attitudes of different classes towards nature and the idea of climate change. How does each side see this issue? Where do they find common ground? Do you believe in global warming or climate change? Explain the basis of your beliefs. How much do you know about both the proponents and opponents in this debate?

15. Why do so many Americans fear or dislike science? Why do so many others fear or dislike religion? What impact do these attitudes have on the nation now and what do they portend for our future?

16. For Dellarobia, “Nobody truly decided for themselves, there was too much information. What they actually did was scope around, decide who was looking out for their clan, and sign on for the memos on a wide array of topics.” Do you agree that this is a fair assessment of a divided America? How can we get beyond our judgments and stereotypes?

17. How is media both a help and a hindrance in our understanding of social issues? How does it offer clarity and how does it add confusion? How is the media portrayed in Flight Behavior? What impact does it have on Dellarobia and the fate of the butterflies? People

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are envious that the media pays attention to Dellarobia, yet she says being interviewed was like, “having her skin peeled off.” Why are so many people consumed by a desire for fame?

18. Ovid has doubts about his work. “What was the use of saving a world that had no soul left in it. Continents without butterflies, seas without coral reefs, he meant. What if all human effort amounted basically to saving a place for ourselves to park?” he asks Dellarobia? How would you answer him?

19. Flight Behavior interweaves important themes: religion and science, poverty and wealth, education and instinct or faith, intolerance and acceptance, How are these themes used to complement each other and how do they conflict? Choose one theme and trace it throughout the novel, explaining how it illuminates a particular character’s life.

20. At the end of the novel, Dellarobia recalls when Ovid Byron first met Preston and declared the boy a scientist. “A moment, Dellarobia now believed, that changed Preston’s life. You never knew which split second might be the zigzag bolt dividing all that went before from everything that comes next.” Have you ever had such a defining moment in your life? Was there a special person who influenced you and helped guide or shift the course of your life?

21. What do you think will happen to Dellarobia, Preston, and Cordelia?

22. What did you take away from reading Flight Behavior?

Source: Reading Group Guides:

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/flight-behavior/guide>