

**Barbara Kingsolver**  
*Unsheltered*



*Anna*

I was introduced to this writer by one of my daughters, and read two others before this one, which I believe is her most recent. She trained and worked as a scientist before taking up writing, and she introduces this into her work, with the effects of climate change on the life of the planet - including humankind - foremost. She obviously cares deeply, but her work does not harangue the reader, nor does her writing become a polemic. Instead, the theme appears very much through the characters, the plotting and the action.

One could say that there are three ways of being unsheltered in this book: being literally without physical shelter, losing a strongly-held belief round which life has been built, and - though I do think this is a little tenuous - being without emotional shelter.

The book is set in an actual town in New Jersey, USA - Vineland, which was set up by Charles Landis as a sort of model community in the 1880's. Our modern family live in an inherited old house, which is discovered possibly to have been the home of a teacher and scientist back in the nineteenth century. The action and the characters of each period alternate in the book - a link is neatly provided by using the last phrase of the preceding chapter as the title of the next one. For myself, I usually dislike a book where the author plays with time, but in this case I think it works.

The characters in the contemporary part of the book are fuller and more life-like than the historic characters. I think the author wants us to empathise with the moderns because she has a serious message for us all, which may strike home more if we identify with them. Also perhaps easier to write about, as we know how contemporary people talk and behave! Kingsolver uses a different style for the nineteenth century sections both in description and in dialogue. In her notes at the end, she refers to George Eliot as her guide in this.

As to being unsheltered: firstly, the houses of both main characters and their families are falling down, and they cannot afford to repair them.

Secondly, the society in which they live is being shaken to its foundations by new knowledge, which can sweep aside all they were secure in believing: in the 1880's it is the discoveries about evolution and the origin of species by Charles Darwin and other scientists, in the modern day it is the belief in the continuing expansion of the economy and the standard of living which goes along with that which is threatened by climate change. The modern family is already suffering from the stresses in that system, as the husband has had to take a poorly-paid job, and they cannot afford proper health care for his father - incidentally, a brilliant, rip-roaring character - but would be a nightmare in real life!

Thirdly, some characters are emotionally vulnerable - the teacher, Thatcher, is distained by his wife and her mother, and is shattered when his new friend is murdered. He is made to justify his belief in Darwin and is humiliated in public debate with his headmaster. Happily, a different kind of support is at hand in his relationship with scientist neighbour Mary Treat and he leaves the story with no house, but with what looks to be a secure and happy future.

The son of the modern family is in agony because his wife has killed herself, leaving him with a broken heart and a tiny baby. One of the puzzles in the book for me is why this son has been so very

unkind all his life to his little sister - he has been the golden child, so why would he behave like that? Happily for the family, they are held together by strong bonds of love, which fills their part of the book with warmth and humour.

The sister, Tig, fights back in her own way, and is the character who tries to make her parents see that the way they and their contemporaries lead their lives cannot be sustained in the world of today, and people will have to change before the world is damaged beyond repair. Her brother will take a different route, but he too will do his part in trying to change.

There is so much to enjoy in this book - perhaps I have made it sound rather grim and earnest - but it is not like that at all - the message is there, but interwoven with wonderful humour and the feeling that the author just loves human beings and has a superb gift for bringing them to life.

### *Ann*

This novel is written in two time dimensions, jumping between 1871 and 2016, which I found very confusing at first. It concerns the history of people living in the same road at different times. I found myself disliking everyone in the story of the earlier history, except Uri Carruth, a newspaper editor, who was murdered. Thatcher, I felt was a weak character, who was physically attracted to his snobbish wife and her younger sister and intellectually attracted to the older lady who lived next door, Mary Treat. Mary Treat I found decidedly creepy, living in close proximity to nests of tarantulas and encouraging a Venus Fly Trap to feed off her finger. I was quite convinced she had murdered her husband.

Half way through the book I became interested in the characters in the second time period. Willa, her daughter Tig, her husband the gorgeous Iano and his Greek father, not forgetting the dog. I enjoyed Willa's doomed battle to try and save the dilapidated old house in which they lived, by trying to tie it to the history of the pioneering scientist Mary Treat, Darwin and Thatcher.

The book had shades, I felt, of Dickens. Mary Treat seemed similar to the unlikely character of Miss Havensham; perhaps it was the cobwebs and the general desolation. I found the crumbling house unreal, but loved the realistic portrait of Willa's grandchild, his actions and behaviour. Brought back memories of my own babies.

I think one of the most difficult things for an author to do, is to put themselves absolutely in the context of the history of the times; not sure this author did that successfully. The author's modern prejudices and time zone must mess with the prejudices, social situation and ideas of past times. I have found Hilary Mantel is able to do this, but I suppose, in the end, it is just everyone's personal perception.

### *Alix*

I found both stories very interesting. I do not usually like books that jump from one to the other character but it did not seem to spoil the stories at all.

I felt sorry for Thatcher and his selfish wife who only was interested in bettering herself and mixing with upwardly mobile people. They had problems with the state of the house and his wife was upset that she could not entertain! I was glad he had Mary Treat as a kindred spirit. He was a Science teacher who had a lot of pressure put on him by his school not to talk about Evolution and Darwin. Mary was a very interesting woman who was very well thought of as a Botanist and wrote many articles and corresponded with Darwin. I was glad that in the end Thatcher was able to pursue his life how he wanted and also to keep in touch with Mary.

Willa had a very different life. She was happily married to a Greek school teacher and had two grown up children. Sadly her son Zeke had arrived home with a young baby as his wife had committed suicide. Zeke went off to work in another part of America leaving Willa and her husband and the daughter Tig to care for the baby. Tig luckily proved to be a good mum and wanted to look after the baby herself. The house was in a terrible state of disrepair and leaked everywhere and they ended up living in one room. Willa had hoped that the house might have belonged to Mary Treat as she was a famous Botanist and the house could have fetched a great deal of money but sadly her house had been demolished except for a small outhouse which still was

standing and taken over by Tig and her boyfriend who were going to make it habitable. I am not going into too much detail as I know many other readers will have a lot to say about the book and I look forward to hearing their opinions.

### ***Jean***

This wasn't an easy novel to read, and, at times, it came over as too preachy. Kingsolver wrote this novel with an agenda. However, she writes with great skill and is, obviously, an extremely clever author. It can be difficult for a British person to identify with American writers: same language, but quite different in the way that ideas are expressed. Also, American spellings sometimes jar a little! Americans, too, will relate more to the social problems; failing health systems and middle class poverty in modern America. Nevertheless, it's also a novel filled with interest. The sections on Charles Darwin were of particular interest to me as I used to live near his home, Down House in the village of Downe, in Kent, and often visited. Mary Treat's experiments with the Venus flytrap and the tower-building spiders made for fascinating reading. Her friendship with Thatcher is a compelling section of the novel, and her comments that many people find it difficult to accept that they are simply part of the animal world rather than being set apart from it, resonate. The book is intriguing in the way that the action passes smoothly between 1871 and 2016, and the fact that the two families in Vineland, New Jersey, are equally affected by the great arguments of the day, namely Darwin's theory of evolution in the 19th century and the economic and ecological disruptions of the 21st century. Thatcher's proposed expedition to the Western territories was of special interest. The reference to the giant redwoods in California brought back memories of my own trip to the living forests in Marin County, Northern California. Muir Woods made a great impression on me.

To conclude : humans are adaptable in many ways, and are able to deal with profound changes over the centuries.

### ***William***

Not the most enjoyable 'read' in our programme. Sometimes learning of people's struggles to overcome adversity can be inspiring

- but this chronicle doesn't succeed in my estimation. I had difficulty distinguishing between the various factions in the family and the competing timeframes.

The only chapter that I enjoyed reading was the section chronicling the 'God versus Darwin' debate on the subject of the competing claims of creationism and evolution.

My reading progress was slow, so five hundred-plus pages was a big ask. Not a book to settle down with if you are seeking escapism.

Perhaps it was too deep and meaningful for me.

I found 'Unsheltered' structurally difficult to absorb in terms of both its relationships and timelines.

Periods of social upheaval set in a decaying house feeding

the characters anxiety with comments on social issues seen as an opportunity to rail against the perceived shortcomings of the USA's healthcare system contributing to the family's plight.

The truth that emerges underscores the powerlessness of the poor.

Somewhat long and meandering, trying to explore both the personal and political dimensions in two separate timelines was not achieved to my satisfaction.

However, some of the broader social issues in the narrative were explored successfully.

What I do like is sentence formulation and the author's form of words was exceptionally good and rescued my opinion of the book. For example:

*'The long wait for supper had brought her near to self-declared extinction'*

*'She looked at him .... and cocked her head as if listening to his words again in her mind'*

*'Through a patina of dust and filtered light her gaze jumped from one display case to another'*

*I appreciate your praise, but you overestimate'* could be said to be an accurate comment on the printed eulogies on the cover book.

I read somewhere that 'Kingsolver is so anxious to demonstrate and teach that neither character nor story can breathe for themselves'. A comment I endorse.

### *Angela*

This book was very skilfully written I thought, although I experienced some confusion at the start until I realised that the chapters were alternating between the centuries. This structure was interesting, taking us between two families living in the same house, one in modern times and one in the nineteenth century. I thought the characters were well drawn and their lives quite believable, but I found the very American socio-political messages coming across in the handling of the modern family quite heavy going. The handling of the nineteenth century I found much more sympathetic and I really warmed to the relationship between Mary and Thatcher, with their shared interest in nature. I'm glad I read through to the end, but I did find the political messages rather heavy handed.

### *Stephanie*

This is an interesting story based on two separate families living in the same house in New Jersey but 100 years apart. In each century the families were facing houses in need of much repair (or demolition), dominance of the population by very bigoted leaders and strife within each family. The characters were vividly portrayed as were the family dynamics in each period however I found that the alternating between centuries, families and current political issues made it hard to follow at times. Some of the political dialogues were rather tedious, for example the public debate in the earlier period between the science teacher who firmly believed in Darwin's theory of evolution and his headmaster who was a fundamentalist believing only in God's creation.

Overall an interesting book but maybe not idea for bedtime reading when one's brain is not necessarily at its sharpest.

### *Gill*

I really enjoyed parts of this book, mainly the 19thC. story. As a whole, I thought it was slow to get into and rather long and wordy at times. The plot itself was really good, and seemed to be one that would work well, but I'm not sure that it did for me. I found myself looking forward to getting back to the earlier time and characters. The Darwinian debate was well integrated and the botanical and zoological practice and theory well described and not lectured at. I thought there was humour and wit especially with respect to the earlier characters; for example, Carruth, (editor of the Independent, son of Russian immigrant(s)). I loved him saying that he'd failed his children because they hadn't turned into anarchists!

I did find the recent story more difficult, not sure why. Obviously, the juxtaposition of cultural crises, family and house/shelter is the whole point of the novel, but I wonder if Mary's and Thatcher's lives would make a fine novel on their own.

### *Margaret*

The novel gave an interesting insight into Willa's dilapidated house in the present time as well as in Thatcher's time in the nineteenth century. Kingsolver's descriptions were so well described that you could almost sense that you knew the characters and the place where they were living. However, there was just too much detail to plough through before getting back to the history of the house. The end of the book was rather a let-down as there had been the expectation that the house could be saved because a famous person had lived there. Willa mistakenly thought that it had been Mary Treat's house. but towards the end of the book we found that this was not the case. The character that I liked best was Tig because of her down to earth approach to life and her practical common sense. She didn't believe that material things were important. However, the family were

struggling financially due to Iano's job being underpaid, the house falling down and needing repairs and the cost of Nick's medical treatment and yet they all went to a good deal of trouble to look after this grumpy old man (I was relieved when he died). In the end Tig brought the rest of her family down to her way of thinking and the house was demolished, the contents sold and 'surplus stuff' discarded so that Willa and Iano could move somewhere smaller.

Initially it took me a while to realise that we were alternating between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the present day -Thatcher and Rose versus Willa and Iano.

The experiments with plants and spiders and the feeding of her flesh to the spider by Mary Treat, a scientist and botanist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was eye-opening.

Although I found the American language and way of life in the book confusing at times we learnt more about their medical system such as when Willa took her seriously disabled father-in-law, Nick, to visit to a medical practice who wouldn't see him because "they didn't have the correct insurance".

Thatcher's employer, Cutler, causes him a problem as he doesn't believe in Thatcher's science teaching because of his religious views and his aversion to Charles Darwin.

I liked the fact that the novel was based on some real characters such as Mary Treat. Landis, a property developer in New Jersey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was also mentioned briefly.

### ***Sharon***

I very much enjoyed *Unsheltered* and realised as I read that the term *unsheltered* had many different meanings in the narrative. I enjoyed the parallel stories of two families, one in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the other living in the modern world, linked by two houses in a model village developed by the landowner Landis. This was conceived as a sort of Eden, where religion played a big part and the temperance movement was strong. We discover that it had its faults.

The science versus religion debate of the 1900s and the Darwinian references interested me a great deal and the character Mary Treat, a self taught botanist, was fascinating though I did not realise until talking to the rest of the Realm of Books members that she was not a fictional character, so I must now look her up and find out more.

Of just as much interest was the opposing political views of Tig and her grandfather in the modern story. A lot of the conflicts in American life were depicted here and climate change, health care, inequalities in society and racism were all explored. I identified strongly with Willa, a middle aged woman with elderly and young relatives and trying to do her best by them all. It is a difficult time of life for many people and women still take on most of the caring responsibilities and this was well depicted.

I had not heard of Barbara Kingsolver before but have now explored her other writings and *The Poisonwood Bible* is my next read. Thank you Anna for suggesting this book.

### ***Chris***

This is a story of two families living in the same New Jersey street in different centuries, but it is mainly about change and resistance to change, maintaining a living, losing your job and your place in society, standing up for or changing your beliefs and your expectations, losing your home - your real and perhaps metaphorical shelter.

Thatcher Greenwood lives with his wife and her family in a house which is badly in need of repair, tries to teach Darwinian theory in his local school in the 1870s which could lose him his job, and his family. His new wife and family are only interested in their home and their place in society. He befriends real-life naturalist Mary Treat who lives in the nextdoor house who is so different to other women of the time but enlightened and self contained, self educated and self supporting, who encourages his interest in Charles Darwin. Thatcher is fighting a paternalistic, closed minded society, a bullying headmaster and the town founder, who shoots his friend the newspaper editor when he can't control the news he writes about him. Thatcher is the only person who pursues his

prosecution and scandal ensues.

The modern day family centres around Willa Knox whose husband is a teacher also, and has a similar crumbling house near to the site of Thatcher's house, contends with desperate times, modern day themes such as health care, mental health and money or lack of it; racism and environmental and political issues feature prominently, with different viewpoints from each generation living in the house. This last is tiresome I found, with many conversations about how the world has been run and should be run.

This story switches between centuries from chapter to chapter and I was at first a little confused as to which character belonged in which story. I enjoyed the older story more, how difficult it was then to be accepted if you came from a poor background, how education was not valued, and how religious beliefs held sway, and new ideas were shunned. The modern story highlights how hard it still can be for new generations to promote new ideas, to live a different way, to be able to find food or health care or a home, despite an education, but I found the expression of their sentiments rather tedious.