

Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

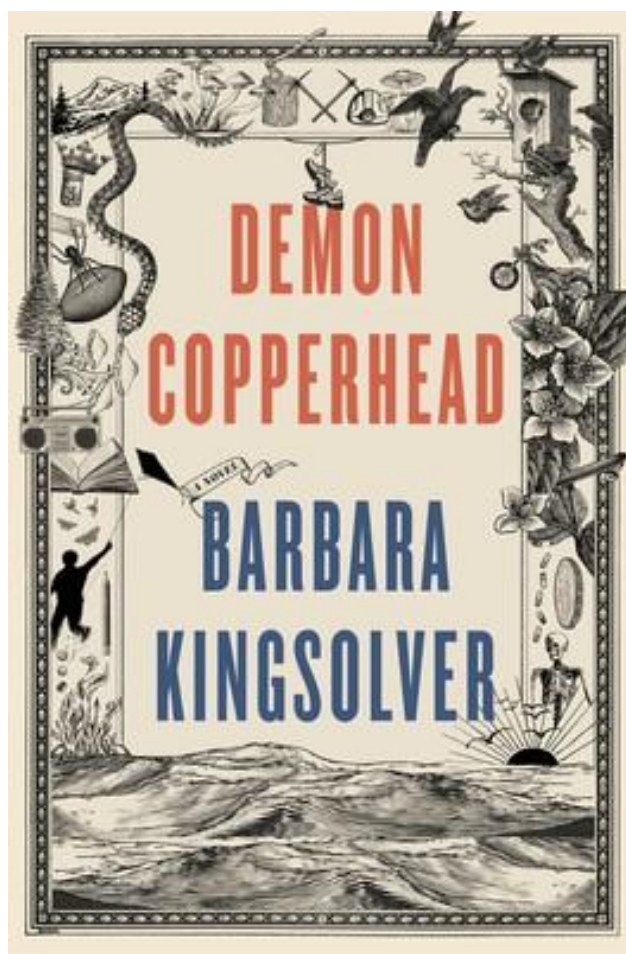
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Book Summary

“Anyone will tell you the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose.”

Demon Copperhead is set in the mountains of southern Appalachia. It’s the story of a boy born to a teenaged single mother in a single-wide trailer, with no assets beyond his dead father’s good looks and copper-colored hair, a caustic wit, and a fierce talent for survival. In a plot that never pauses for breath, relayed in his own unsparing voice, he braves the modern perils of foster care, child labor, derelict schools, athletic success, addiction, disastrous loves, and crushing losses. Through all of it, he reckons with his own invisibility in a popular culture where even the superheroes have abandoned rural people in favor of cities.



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Many generations ago, Charles Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* from his experience as a survivor of institutional poverty and its damages to children in his society. Those problems have yet to be solved in ours. Dickens is not a prerequisite for readers of this novel, but he provided its inspiration. In transposing a Victorian epic novel to her own place and time, Barbara Kingsolver enlists Dickens' anger and compassion, and above all, his faith in the transformative powers of a good story. *Demon Copperhead* speaks for a new generation of lost boys, and all those born into beautiful, cursed places they can't imagine leaving behind.

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



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Meet 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), and *How To Fly (In 10,000 Easy Lessons)* (2020). She served as editor for *Best American Short Stories 2001*. Her books have been translated into more than two dozen 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.

Kingsolver was named one the most important writers of the 20th Century by Writers Digest. In 2000 she received the National Humanities Medal, our



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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 Britain's prestigious 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/>)



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Discussion questions

1. Consider the epigraph from Charles Dickens' *DAVID COPPERFIELD* that begins the novel: "It's in vain to recall the past, unless it works some influence upon the present." What do you understand this to mean? How is this idea relevant to the novel?
2. What might Demon mean when he claims that "the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose"? To what extent is this true? What is a destiny? What's the relationship between social or economic privilege and destiny?
3. What might explain Demon's attraction to superheroes, and in particular the "superhero rescue"? In what ways can such a fantasy be helpful? How might such stories be limiting or even harmful to people who are suffering?
4. In what ways are Demon and his boyhood friend Maggot similar or different? What might explain their strong friendship? Why does it change over time? What powerful difficulties different from Demon will Maggot encounter as he gets older?
5. What is important about drawing for Demon? What does this skill afford him at different stages of his life? What does it mean to be creative? How might this be an important part of any life, even if one is not an artist?
6. In what ways is Demon's mother troubled? What might explain what Demon calls her "bad choices," and how does he navigate his love and anger with her? Does the reader's sympathy for her shift as we learn about her history in the foster care system?
7. Why is the city so shocking and difficult for Demon? What might it mean that "there was no outside anywhere"? Despite its problems and poverty, what did the rural environment of Lee County offer Demon and others that was valuable? What might it mean that spending time in the woods "can set you back on your haunches, in a good way"? What's the difference between "country poor" and "city poor"?



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8. In what ways are various social workers helpful or not for Demon? What is Miss Barks able to offer him? What are the limitations of even well-intentioned case workers? In what ways are the flaws systemic? What disturbing social values about children are revealed by a debilitated and dangerous foster care system?
9. Why is Tommy Waddles important to Demon when they meet at Mr. Crickson's farm? What does he demonstrate and provide later when he works at the newspaper?
10. What makes Fast Forward such a powerful charmer of people? What might explain why the people he mistreats so badly stay loyal to him? In what ways is he "a monster"?
11. At one point Demon realizes that "being mad was the one thing holding [him] together." What is he angry about? In what ways might anger be important? What determines when it becomes harmful or destructive to oneself or others? How can anger best be eased?
12. In what various ways is Betsy Woodall, Demon's grandmother, different from the other adults in Demon's life? What does she value in life? Why might she have chosen to only help raise and educate girls?
13. In what ways does Demon's life change once he moves in with Angus and her father and begins middle school? Why is teacher and guidance counselor Mr. Armstrong particularly valuable?
14. Coach claims that most of the boys of Lee County "just go looking for trouble because it's what they know." What does this mean? Why can it be so difficult to avoid self-destructiveness and make changes for the better?
15. What arguments does Mr. Armstrong make about stereotypes of various kinds, based on class, race and culture? Why have he and his wife chosen to stay in southern Appalachia?
16. What powers have influenced the economic and industrial history of Lee County and surrounding areas? How have they shaped these characters' ideas about work, education, and self-worth? What does the novel reveal



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about limited opportunities and structural poverty in Appalachia, and how they are typically interpreted by outsiders to the region?

17. What is the “wanting disease” that Demon suffers? What does he mean when he says, “I had everything and still went hungry”? Why does Demon feel unseen? What role might this play in the way he falls for Dori, and his claim that there’s a fine line between love and addiction?
18. Discussing the prescription painkiller epidemic in Lee County and across the country, June says, “They did this to us.” Who is she saying is responsible? What are the various mechanisms and powers that created such widespread pharmaceutical harm and abuse? In what ways were many of the people of Lee County particularly vulnerable to such addictions?
19. What is trauma? What are the many forms of it experienced by the characters of the novel? What are the various effects and symptoms of trauma? What are powerful and effective ways to begin healing from it?
20. Beyond addiction recovery, what will be involved in Demon’s efforts to build and sustain a healthy life? What does emotional rehabilitation look like? How does a person develop self-worth if they were rarely made to feel worthy?

Source: Reading Group Guides (<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/>)

Recipes

Brunswick Stew

- 2 large onions, diced
- 4 bay leaves
- 4 teaspoons celery seeds
- 1/4-1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 3 pounds plum tomatoes, diced
- 3 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 1 pound Yukon gold potatoes, 2-inch dice
- 1 quart chicken stock
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, each cut in half
- 2 cups fresh or frozen corn
- 2 cups fresh or frozen lima beans



In a large Dutch oven, heat olive oil to coat bottom of the pot. Add onion, season with salt and pepper and sauce until soft and translucent, 12-15 minutes. Stir in bay leaves, celery seeds and cayenne, cook until fragrant, just a few seconds. Add the tomatoes, Worcestershire sauce and sugar. Cook, stirring occasionally until the tomatoes are softened, 7-9 minutes.

Stir in the potatoes and chicken stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer, cover and continue simmering, stirring occasionally, about one hour.

Add the chicken, corn, and lima beans. Continue simmering, uncovered, until the chicken is soft and easily shreddable, about 1 hours. Remove the chicken from the pot, shred with two forks and return to the pot.

Source: Cooking the books

(<https://www.cookingthebooksblog.com/readingandeating/by1spvu2qmel6cy4zszny8zy4grodj>)

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Sourdough Blueberry Muffins

Muffin:

- 1 cup all purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp baking soda
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
- 1 cup blueberries
- 1 cup 100% hydration sourdough starter * see notes
- 1 egg
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter melted and slightly cooled
- 1 tsp vanilla extract



Crumb topping:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter very soft
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cinnamon

Preheat your oven to 350 F and liberally grease a muffin pan with either baking spray or with using the butter and flour method. In a small bowl, combine the flour, baking soda, and salt. In a large bowl, whisk together the sourdough starter with the sugar, egg, melted butter and vanilla. Really whisk it and make sure the starter is well mixed in, or you will get streaks in your muffins. Place the blueberries in a bowl with a few spoonfuls of the flour mixture and toss to coat. This will help them not all sink to the bottom of the muffins. Using a spatula or wooden spoon, add the flour mixture to the starter mixture and mix to combine. Carefully fold in the blueberries coated in flour, as well as any excess flour that is in the bowl the blueberries were in. Evenly spoon the batter into the prepared muffin tin. You will barely have enough batter to fill all 12 muffins about $\frac{3}{4}$ full. In



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a separate medium bowl, mix together the ingredients for the sugar coating, using a fork or your fingers to really mix the butter in. Evenly sprinkle the sugar coating over the muffin, being really careful to not get any of the coating on the muffin pan itself. Bake for 20 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean. Allow to rest for 5-10 min in the pan before removing to a wire rack to cool the rest of the way. Use a knife to run along the edges of each muffin and carefully pull them out of the pan.

*Notes: You can use frozen blueberries in place of fresh here, or even another kind of fruit. This recipe can be used with unfed, inactive sourdough discard or fed and active discard. If you are using discard straight from the fridge, make sure you bring it to room temperature before hand. Using fed and active starter will make your muffins a little fluffier.

Source: The Gingered Whisk
(<https://thegingeredwhisk.com/sourdough-blueberry-muffins/>)

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