



Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* recommended by Amanda Cockrell

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Amanda Cockrell—author of several novels including *Pomegranate Seed* and managing editor of *The Hollins Critic*—recommends *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver.

Barbara Kingsolver's latest novel, *Prodigal Summer*, is set in western Virginia. In three intertwined stories, it's about how we people our landscape, not only with humans but with everything else that hops and crawls and flies, wanted and unwanted. *Prodigal Summer* is about sex: people sex, bug sex, coyote sex; about pheromones and full moons, and the drive to pass on your genes. Lacewings, newly hatched, are "everywhere suddenly, dancing on sunbeams in the upper story, trembling with the brief, grave duty of their adulthood: to live for a day on sunlight and coitus."

Sex is urgent and dangerous, to the human heart as well as the lacewing. Deanna Wolfe is a late-forties, divorced biologist, come home to Virginia to work for the Forest Service, when she meets a man in the woods who has nothing to recommend him but the tide of her own hormones. Lusa Landowski is an entomologist with a bone-deep yen for the farms her Jewish grandfather and Palestinian mother lost in wars. She marries a farm boy and is left with the farm but not the boy when he is killed in a highway wreck. Garnett Walker is an elderly widower trying to bring back the American chestnut, guarding his seedlings against marauding insects with gallons of malathion. Nannie Rawley is his neighbor trying to raise organic apples, and lecture him into ecological harmony. All are linked in ways not apparent at first, by old connections of blood and marriage that in the end will not be ignored. They are like the

giant saturniid moths that live in the hollows of the mountain where "Most people never knew what wings beat at their darkened windows while they slept."

Luna moths and coyotes are both creatures of magic and some mystery, and in *Prodigal Summer* they are the embodiment of Kingsolver's vision of the world. Deanna has found a den of coyotes, and she explains their necessity to Eddie Bondo, a coyote hunter and her summer lover, in the same terms that Nannie Rawley uses to Garnett Walker: Prey species, mammal or insect, reproduce faster and are more prolific than predator species. When we kill a predator we let loose on the world all the creatures that predator would have eaten. When we kill the prey, the plant-eaters, which is Garnett Walker's aim, we wipe out the predators with them. Then the plant-eaters rebound with frightful speed, with no one left to eat them.

The notion of that interconnection runs like a green thread through *Prodigal Summer*, linking the children lost and found who are the focus of the plot. Deanna carefully scoops a moth from her curtains and releases it, only to have a phoebe swoop down and snatch it from the air. This troubles Deanna only briefly — predation is the way the world works, and nestlings must eat. But when the phoebe's babies are in turn eaten by a blacksnake, her reaction is different, and she mourns the loss of them with her own failing fertility.

At the end, we hear the coyotes begin to howl from the ridge top. “With voices that rose and broke and trembled with clean, astonished joy, they raised up a long blue harmony against the dark sky.” And in the long run Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie Rawley all find that it doesn’t

matter how we reproduce ourselves, as long as we do, and this is what Kingsolver wants to tell us: We are all part of the same pattern. It interlaces, interlocks, and binds us to it. In return we get it all, luna moths, coyotes, children, black-snakes.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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