

Title: *The Poisonwood Bible*

Author: Barbara Kingsolver

Agent: Fictitious Literary Agent

Reader: Lane Berger

Verdict: Represent (with some revisions)

Summary:

The Poisonwood Bible is a braided novel about the women of the Price family: Orleanna (mother) and her daughters Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. The novel's inciting incident is the Prices' move to the Congo on missionary, a decision enforced by the family patriarch, Rev. Nathan Price. The novel's palpable presence in history (decolonization, the Congo Crisis, etc.) and the introspection of the Price women allows for Kingsolver's liberalistic commentary on geopolitics, economics, religion, race, and historiography. However, *The Poisonwood Bible* is first and foremost a work of feminist literary fiction, which follows five women as they forge their own identities amidst hardship and in the wake of unspeakable tragedy.

Pros:

The Poisonwood Bible should be commended for its prose on several fronts. Stylistically, Kingsolver achieves a lyricism that preserves the experience of poetry without retarding narrative progression. For example, in one of Leah's chapters about a last-resort hunt, Kingsolver writes, "For every animal struck down, there rose an equal and opposite cry of human jubilation. Our hungry wishbone cracked and ran slick with marrow. Women knelt with their knives," (347).

The characterization and emotionality achieved through voice is masterful. Orleanna's chapters, in particular, contain some of the novel's most profound passages on love and loss: "You've played some trick on the dividing of my cells so my body can never be free of the small parts of Africa it consumed. Africa, where one of my children remains in the dank red earth. It's the scent of accusation. It seems I only know myself, anymore, by your attendance in my soul," (87).

Kingsolver, truly, never breaks character. At times, this makes for wrenching dramatic irony, such as Rachel's observation: "Quinine pills taste bad enough to give you a hair problem. I happen to know Ruth May doesn't even swallow hers all the time," (176). However, there are also moments when Kingsolver confounds voice with authorial intent (see 'Cons' below).

Cons:

On Page 441, Adah recalls, "I remember how it was at first: dazzling warehouses...where entire shelves boast nothing but hair spray, tooth-whitening cream and foot powders. It is as if our Rachel had been left suddenly in charge of everything." On their own, these lines function well as characterization, comic relief, and commentary. So why, a mere five lines later, does Kingsolver add the voice of young Pascal: "But Aunt Adah, how can there be so many *kinds* of things a person doesn't really need?" Although true to Pascal's character, his question is redundant, even condescending to the reader. Adah's recollection is sufficient for the reader to grasp Kingsolver's critique of western culture and materialism.

Other subjects for revision include pacing and the disproportionate attention given to Books 1-4. In Books 1-4, the time between strands constitutes days or months. Sometimes, the events of a single day are recounted by multiple Price women (ex. their arrival, the ant infestation, and Ruth May's death). However, in Books 5-7 there is a speeding-up: the time between strands increases to years, even decades. To look at page count, Books 1-4 are 100+ pages longer than Books 5-7. This pacing shift happens abruptly at the start of Book 5 and gives the reader the impression of falling out of Africa—rather than walking, as the Price women did—and falling out of the novel.

Comparative Titles:

The Poisonwood Bible could be compared to *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *Falling Leaves* by Adeline Yen Mah, or *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez. Orleanna's frank voice is similar to that of Grace in *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood; and Kingsolver's transportive description of setting and circumstance evokes passages by Steinbeck or David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

Recommendation:

Ultimately, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a powerhouse work of consummate intellect and emotional sensitivity and should be considered for representation. Barring several cuts—particularly moments of redundancy and authorial intent—as well as an elongation of Books 5-7, *The Poisonwood Bible* would be an advantageous add to Fictitious Literary Agency's portfolio.