

Garden Envy

BOOK REVIEW: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver

By Heather Isaacs Royce

Every once in awhile I encounter a book that makes me slightly covetous.

Gratefully, the envy I feel now after reading this book may be more easily satiated than the yen I have been left with after concluding some wild travelogue or great spiritual memoir. The solution (or should I say absolution) to my dipping into the second deadly sin may be as simple as planting my own garden.

Kingsolver's book begins with her family's departure from their home in Arizona to a farm in Virginia. There they begin the work of getting off the global industrial food grid—described as wasteful fossil fuel consumption, cruel factory farm practices, unsustainable environmental policies, and unfair labor practices—and becoming locavores, growing the bulk of their own food and buying the rest through local food producers.

But contrary to what I might have imagined a year of growing one's own food to be like—long, hard days of back-breaking work for a meager crop of turnips and potatoes—Kingsolver's monthly reports from the farm tell a story of beauty and abundance that, though not without labor, recovers the lost value of knowing the land on which our lives depend. Kingsolver is not a legalist; she makes allowances for purchases of items that cannot be obtained locally, such as coffee, chocolate, and spices, if they meet fair trade standards.

Reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* I was shocked by my ignorance about the food I eat. Though raised in the heavily irrigated San Joaquin Valley with orchards and vineyards on all sides of my small town, I internalized little of the agricultural realities and challenges of my environ-

ment. The simple idea of eating seasonally, for example, never crossed my mind when the grocery stores presented mangoes in February as though a gift to us fog-trodden Central Californians. And no one told me the true story of how turkeys are raised for our Thanksgiving table.

As one who has only dabbled in vegetarianism, I was encouraged by Kingsolver's reflections on meat consumption. She writes persuasively on this issue in her chapter "You Can't Run Away on Harvest Day." The word harvest, in this context, refers to the day when Kingsolver, her family, and a few friends butcher the chickens and turkeys they have so carefully raised. Though sympathetic to many of the concerns raised by vegetarians and vegans, she believes it is possible, and sometimes preferable, to be an ethical meat eater, defined here as a rejection of meats from CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and a promotion of organic, free-range meat production mindful of the need for restrained, humane, and conscientious eating habits.

Citing the wasteful use of fuel to haul produce halfway around the globe to stock American grocery stores with tropical fruit in mid-winter, Kingsolver writes:

Should I overlook the suffering of victims of hurricanes, famines, and wars brought on this world by profligate fuel consumption?

Bananas that cost a rain forest, refrigerator-trucked soymilk, and prewashed spinach shipped two thousand miles in plastic containers do not seem cruelty-free, in this context.

Giving up meat is one path; giving up bananas is another. The more we know about our food system, the more we are called into complex choices. It seems facile to declare one single forbidden fruit, when humans live under so many different kinds of trees.

We are being called into complex choices about our food. My husband once half-joked that many of the prob-

lems in American society might be traced back to Burger King's motto: Have it your way. Living with an awareness of the complex factors affecting our food system means that we cannot ethically support the immediate gratification of having it our way—including eating at Burger King.

Given the strong claims Kingsolver makes, I found myself wishing citations had been included in the text itself to better ground her arguments. Her husband, a professor of environmental studies, includes pithy "Did You Know?" type sidebars throughout the book that provide economic and scientific rationale for locavorism. And her college aged daughter provides her own perspective along with simple and popular family recipes. But I still wanted to know more and find out—as I now do with my food—where my information was coming from. Blessedly, a reference and resource guide included at the end of the book gives me a trail of articles and books on this subject. A pile of library books on the issue of food ethics sits by my bed now. And yes, the more I read the more complex my choices become.

But this is a good thing—to have to exercise my ethical and spiritual commitments in such a meaningful way every day—every meal—of my life. What would it mean if the most basic act of human existence—eating—became as fundamental to our ethical life as prayer is to our spiritual life and as voting is to our civic life?

For myself, I want to live in a world where our ethics and spirituality and civic responsibilities are not so far apart as they appear now. Before I even finished *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, I found myself pulling weeds from our little plot of rented land, inspired to plant my very first garden.

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