*The Poisonwood Bible*

Barbara Kingsolver, [*The Poisonwood Bible*](http://www.amazon.com/Poisonwood-Bible-Barbara-Kingsolver-ebook/dp/B000QTE9WU/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1427292038&sr=1-1&keywords=the+poisonwood+Bible) (New York: HarperCollins, 1998)

Summary:

The five members of the Price family—Nathan, Orleanna, and their four daughters—move to the Belgian Congo in 1959, leaving behind their home and belongings in Georgia, to act as Baptist missionaries to an isolated African tribe. “We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle,” says fourteen-year-old Leah. The Prices are unprepared for Africa and what it offers: assassination, revolution, lions, snakes, and hunting—but also a community of people who love each other and love their land. Nathan Price is one of the only static characters, refusing to change his methods of evangelism to adapt to the Congolese culture. The author Barbara Kingsolver writes *The Poisonwood Bible* from the perspective of five first-person narrators: Orleanna the wife and mother and her four daughters. These family members suffer and survive together for half the novel until a death scatters them in a story that intimately follows its characters for over three decades.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Color. Leah says, “I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt, loam, dust, and clay…and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether.”
* Title. The novel’s title refers to Nathan’s misunderstanding of a Congolese word. He says, “Jesus is *bangala*.” His vocal inflection translates into “poisonwood” rather than “beloved,” one of his many miscommunications.
* Pantheism. Orleanna, Adah, and Leah each embrace a form of pantheism, and Ruth May’s death is specifically connected to *muntu*, the unity of all nature, even in death.
* Methuselah. The parrot Methuselah is a symbol for the nation of Congo, its dependence on, independence from, and exploitation by the West.
* Guilt. The characters experience crushing guilt over Ruth May as well as the plight of the Congo. Leah responds with politics and Adah with science, while Orleanna runs and Rachel blame shifts.
* Religion. Religion is a means of both ruin and redemption. Kingsolver also uses it as a motif for the entire story: the novel’s title, the section titles and epigraphs, Nathan’s profession, references to Eden, and the prevalence of pantheism.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the effect of having five different narrators?
2. What does the relationship that each Price family member has to language reveal about his or her personality and priorities?
3. How is Nathan’s dramatic death symbolic? Is it fitting?
4. In what ways is this novel an outspoken political allegory? Consider Nathan’s attitude and the Price family’s assumptions.
5. With which narrator did you most identify, and why?
6. How does each of the Prices feel about God over the course of the novel?
7. Was Orleanna powerless to change her situation?
8. “There are Christians, and there are Christians,” says Brother Fowles. What does he mean? Which characters fit in each category?
9. Analyze the last sentence of the novel. Who is the narrator? What is the narrator asking Orleanna to do?