

Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*
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Emma Reisinger
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"Kids who can explain how supernovas are formed may not be allowed to get dirty in play group, and many teenagers who could construct and manage a Web site would starve if left alone on a working food farm." (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, 324)

I'm currently pinning this book open under the weight of a ceramic dog bowl which will later serve as sturdy (and cheap!) trough for the baby rabbits I'm (or I should probably say "we're") expecting. On Sunday, I bred Anna and Sebastian. On Monday, I updated the website of the barn where I ride.

I loved *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Practically everyone I talked to about my project at one point or another said I had to read this book—so I figured it would be good, but I didn't realize *how* good. For the first few chapters I found myself wondering why I would even bother—what could I have to add to this account?

Gradually, I started to find a way in—and this quote helped push me, near the end of the book, to wanting to jump up and start my own right about now. (Instead, I'm writing this reflection. In time...) Kingsolver is now my idol, in some ways—much more than Thoreau. She combines a deeply reflective style of living with sociality and a hectic schedule. This must take incredible inner balance—and that's something that may be harder to prescribe than "eat locally." She is *not* going off and philosophizing from a shack in the woods: she is in the thick of the world, jetting off in the literal sense to at least three countries over the course of the book by my estimation, taking a road trip, and inviting city friends in at a frequency I envision as a whirlwind. She is also not saying we can go back, *per se*; she is realistic in a way I haven't seen in other writers so far. She is also deeply mindful of the economics in play here and, perhaps more importantly, the way society regards "the rural."

I'm brought back to phrases from English 282, about the idyllic pastoral poem and lyrical ballads—poems with deep meaning drawn from the landscape, even as these landscapes were shrinking and being morphed. Now, our culture is more likely to view the farmer as a tractor-mounted redneck, or a sundress-bedecked hippy. Kingsolver's aware of this, she's writing this more or less "now" (2007), and she grew up on the scoffed-at rural side of the rural/townie divide. She is sensitive to cultural perceptions and doesn't set herself apart from them, so this account of her local food year is really approachable. Not every chapter has me jumping out of my seat thinking I can just go do exactly what she did, but she provides enough flexibility in her approach that I do feel I could do something *similar*.

And, meanwhile, I am—sort of. Yesterday I made soup for the first time, and by all accounts it was a success. Not liking soup much myself, I was about as picky an audience as any kitchen experimenter needs—then I gave some away, and we all thought it was delicious. But it was also a success because I was using up produce that was about to expire in our fridge. Celery can only be bought in one quantity at the grocery store where I do most of my shopping—and that is a quantity I hadn't consumed in nearly a month at school. I had about half the plant left, and no solid plans about what to do with it. Then I found a recipe for celery soup—bingo!

While I was getting ready in the "kitchen" (actually just a table in our common room), I also had my laptop out, editing a website I built and now maintain. When I happened across Kingsolver's

quote about teenagers who could make a website but would be hard-pressed to be so useful on a farm, I laughed. This is who I am, and this is who we all need to be—in many variations. The society we live in is one deeply enamored with technology. But the flipside of that is that we are losing skills and connections that once were an assumed part of life. Yet I don't believe that there is some kind of magical maximum potential for each individual life. Ordinary people do incredible things, lead incredible lives. We're in a ripe time for this.

As rural work is becoming in some sense more looked-down-upon, it is also paradoxically becoming glamorized. Recent fashion trends include equestrian-style tall boots, rubber wellies, and hiking gear. What Kingsolver's book points to is the value of eating locally and some of the rich rewards that such a seemingly drastic lifestyle choice can bring. And she addresses how this *shouldn't* be such a drastic thing, how *that* is really the unnatural part of our existence.

In my reading list, there is an emphasis on food that in a way may come off as unbalanced. Yet food is our most constant daily question and task. As animals, we must eat, drink, sleep, and be sheltered. Shelter is not always easy to come by, but once acquired it does not tend to intrude on our daily existence unless you live in a portable dwelling. Water is essentially a given in most of the US. Sleep comes whether or not we want it to, whether or not we drink coffee—and there aren't too many options. Once you surrender to your unconscious, you're getting a generic brand of sleep and that's that. But food: what a world!

Perhaps it wasn't foolish to start with Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*. We can't avoid eating, but we don't know what to eat. We can't enjoy eating, but we choose to eat the foods we know we enjoy—to the exclusion of foods we might like if cooked differently, or have simply never tried. Practically every other aspect of life gets touched on by food issues. Cooking and eating with other people is one of the best ordinary communal experiences out there—yet it can be time-consuming and deeply frustrating on many levels. As MFK Fisher famously said, "First we eat. Then we do everything else."

But my point here, I guess, is that "everything else" doesn't have to be boring and doesn't have to be cowpie dumb either. With modern equipment, we don't have to do everything the slowest way possible—time saving devices are not evil. Kingsolver uses an electric food dryer to help preserve some of her bountiful tomatoes: this is an excellent use of modern technology. Sure it's not as exciting as a space shuttle, but tomatoes in January just might be.

It's totally possible to know "old things" like how to make a rug, or practice canning, and also know modern things like how to build websites. It's also totally enjoyable. There is pleasure in creating and there is pleasure in tending for things. The moments I spend talking to my rabbits, feeding them, checking their water, are some of the most relaxing of my day and not because I'm doing "nothing" but because I've chosen to take an active role in my own survival and because the investment I make in them is ultimately an investment in myself. In my food source, in my skills list. But we desperately need to reduce the stigma against manual labor and "menial" jobs. We're one of the richest countries in the world, yet we spend little of our income on food, or 'that which sustains life.'

Friends often picture my mother as a consummate homemaker, since she bakes practically everything from scratch, cans produce at the end of summer, insists on nightly family dinners, does all the laundry, and keeps the house clean in the meantime. Yet she also holds three or four teaching jobs at any given time and gets freelance editing work in addition to her regular commitments. You can add to this list of duties of "mother" or (interchangeably) "chauffeur" since she was also the one driving me to school, and then piano lessons, riding lessons, ice skating, choir practice, etc., almost until the time I went to college.

Despite her career, she is not the stereotypical “career woman” many people of my generation have known through their own mothers. She prioritizes meals and wholesomeness. This is only possible with her teaching and writing because she is juggling all the time: her life is a balancing act between doing the right thing and the quickest thing and figuring out whenever possible how to make the right thing the quickest thing. We save “butter paper”—the wrapper of a stick of butter—in the freezer, for use greasing pans or cookie sheets. I didn’t know what Pam was for until I was at least ten. We had some in the pantry, but never used it. It takes just as long to throw a wrapper out as to stick it in a little box in the freezer, and it takes longer to get out a paper towel and rub oil around on a pan (or do whatever you do when you don’t use butter papers... I’m still fuzzy on the typical procedure). So in the end: saving time, saving money. Yet when I’ve done that at school, I’ve been laughed at for how much time I obviously waste. “This is too far”—one of my friends laid down the line. It took a fifteen minute conversation to convince him that sometimes pans needed to be greased and that this wasn’t actually a hassle.

I think Kingsolver addresses the dilemmas of sustainably very well, with her focus being food. I think this is either the most or almost the most current book I’m reading, so that makes sense. She is very much responding to this time. I want to continue in this vein, but additionally address non-food issues and how to learn some of the skills she talks about. Canning is not an intuitive process.