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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver

Summary

Marietta Greer spent her childhood in rural Kentucky determined to do two things: avoid getting pregnant and escape rural Kentucky. At the start of the novel, she has headed west in a beat-up '55 Volkswagon, changing her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. By the time two tires give way in Tucson she has with her a stunned, silent three-year-old Cherokee girl who was, literally, dropped into her arms one night. She has named the child Turtle, for her strong, snapping-turtle-like grip.

In Tucson Taylor finds friendship and support in Lou Ann Ruiz, a fellow Kentuckian and single mother, with whom she and Turtle share a house. Her newfound community also includes Mattie, who runs a safe house for political refugees in the upstairs rooms above her auto repair shop.

The novel's theme of fear, flight, homelessness, and finding sanctuary within a community are present in Taylor's struggle to find a place where she belongs, and the more urgent plight of two Central American refugees, Estevan and Esperanza. These fellow travelers help one another create new lives and redefine the meanings of home and family.

Discussion Questions

Kingsolver on The Bean Trees

I always think of a first novel as something like this big old purse you've been carrying around your whole life, throwing in ideas, characters, and all the things that have ever struck you as terribly important. One day, for whatever reason, you just have to dump that big purse out and there lies this pile of junk. You start picking through it, and assembling it into what you hope will be a statement of your life's great themes. That's how it was for me. It probably wasn't until midway through the writing that I had a grasp of the central question: What are the many ways, sometimes hidden and under-ground ways, that people help themselves and each other survive hard times?

1. The Bean Trees deals with the theme of being an outsider. In what ways are various characters outsiders? What does this suggest about what it takes to be an insider? How does feeling like an outsider affect one's life?
2. How and why do the characters change, especially Lou Ann, Taylor, and Turtle?
3. In many ways, the novel is "the education of Taylor Greer." What does she learn about human suffering? about love?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.