

# NEWORLD REVIEW

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## ESSAY

### The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver

Harper | 216 pages | \$26.99

An essay by Sarah Vogelsong



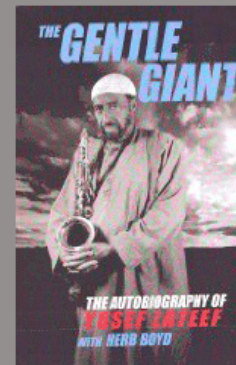
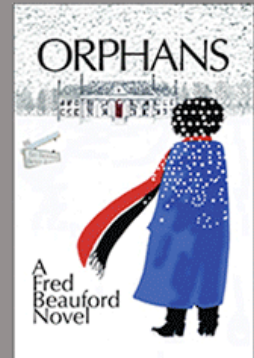
Barbara Kingsolver

In the last issue of *The Newworld Review*, Fred Beauford noted the widespread worry among the general population about such major political issues as war and the economy. Given such circumstances, it is impossible that these subjects would not creep into and color our literature, and particularly that narrow slice of literature that seeks to move beyond escapism and uncover the layers of meaning that are intertwined with our world today. *The Lacuna*, Barbara Kingsolver's first novel since *Prodigal Summer*, is one such book that grapples with the intersection of politics, daily life, and literature

Straddling the United States and Mexico, *The Lacuna* follows the life of Harrison Shepherd, the son of an American man and a Mexican woman, during the precipitous decades surrounding the Second World War. A multinational citizen, Shepherd moves between the two nations, passing most of his early life in Mexico City and his later years in Asheville, North Carolina. While in Mexico, he works as a cook for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and when Trotsky flees to their house after his expulsion from Russia, Shepherd becomes his secretary. After the Communist leader's assassination, Shepherd moves north and settles in Asheville, where he becomes a popular writer and, like many other artists of the era, is caught in the web of the Red Scare.

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Relying on journal entries, letters, court transcripts, and newspaper articles, *The Lacuna* departs from Kingsolver's traditional narrative structure to create a deliberately fragmentary atmosphere. The concept of the lacuna—a gap or, as an early character poetically defines it, “an opening, like a mouth, that swallows things”—underscores the repeated assertion that “the most important part of a story is the piece of it that you don't know.”

In a literal sense, the lacuna of Shepherd's life is his homosexuality, which is addressed only in brief sketches, but which never comes to the forefront of the narrative. Kingsolver alludes to an early journal that apparently recounts Shepherd's sexual awakening, but this piece of the puzzle remains tantalizingly out of reach: the journal is “lost,” burned in response to the McCarthy investigations.

Although Kingsolver paints a sensitive portrait of a man whose private inclinations are out of tune with public mores, she seems less interested in exploring her main character's personal lacuna, and more set on establishing the idea that lacunae exist in both every person's life and every national character. By recognizing that absences and silences are inevitable in the personal accounts that individuals present to the world, she urges a view of life that is more multi-faceted, less black and white. Beneath every Kahlo bluster and gaudy dress lies a woman trying to hide her crippled leg; behind every Trotsky's militant demeanor is a man who has lost his children.

It is a noble and thoughtful approach, but Kingsolver falters in actually applying it to her characters, and as a result, the novel veers towards polemicism. Her sympathies are clearly skewed south of the border, where she allows her characters to display the most tenderness and humanity. The Mexican environment is warm, creative, dynamic, and sprinkled with unexpected scenes: Trotsky feeding his beloved hens within the barricaded courtyard of the house; Frida Kahlo arranging blood-red carnations in pinwheels on a table.

In contrast, the United States of *The Lacuna* is both cold and narrow; besides the loyal stenographer Violet Brown and the Jewish lawyer Arthur Gold, few characters are portrayed in a favorable light. Today, the injustice and jingoistic hysteria of the McCarthy era are generally accepted, but it seems strange that Kingsolver makes so little effort to examine the complexity of the American reaction to the post-World War II world or to show anything but the deeply flawed side of her American characters.

Politics has long been a stumbling block for Kingsolver, and her polemics on issues such as ecology and immigration are frustrating even to those of us who agree with her convictions. In several of her books, most notably *Prodigal Summer*, the insertion of politics into the narrative feels forced, as if she were taking advantage of her audience's investment in her story. But *The Lacuna* is a novel that is preoccupied with and cannot be

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separated from politics, and this raises several questions, the most important being: how can our literature address our politics in a way that diminishes neither?

Kingsolver's emphasis on the gaps, the things that are not known but may still drive action, is one thoughtful method of wrestling with our political figures, but it is an awkward tool to use in trying to fully comprehend the whys and hows of a political movement involving thousands, if not millions, of people. Human beings may have a tendency to be swept up in mob movements—history offers a myriad of examples not for the faint of heart, but at the foundation of every such event, there are reasons why people are attracted to an ideological platform or follow a demagogue.

Rage following years of oppression often lies at the root of the mob mentality, or, equally as often, fear of change or the unknown. A profound political literature should be able to dig into and sift through these reasons, to "light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been," in the words of Virginia Woolf, without assigning honors or black marks to each group in advance. Politics is, by its nature, consumed with questions of which choice is better—a utilitarian and often dry task of counting costs and benefits.

But literature should be more than an accounting or a lecture. Our best literature is a dialogue that moves into and beneath our political prejudices and seeks to look honestly at the persistent faults and stubborn goodness of the human race -- to grapple with why we do the foolish or marvelous things that we do. Sometimes the conclusion may be that we don't know. But one of the most remarkable characteristics of our literature is its resilience in struggling with these questions.

It is for all of these reasons that *The Lacuna* is never able to move beyond the level of a compelling narrative with a political agenda. Kingsolver is not interested in why many of her characters behave the way that they do, or believe in the things that they do. She never investigates the origins of the Red Scare; instead, she chalks that dark era up to the insularity and intolerance of Americans. In a particularly disingenuous passage, Shepherd asks his lawyer, "I keep wondering, what have people got against Communists?" It is an important question, but one that is diminished by Kingsolver's oversimplified assertion that Communism is simply "a bunch of working people owning the means of their own production." In theory, she is correct, but her dismissal of this philosophy's complexity and the tragedy of how it has played out in reality (even as early as the 1940s) does no justice to the history, her characters, or her reader.

The most glaring example of this oversimplification is her fictionalized Trotsky. A fascinating and often overlooked figure of the Communist movement in its early days before Stalin had secured his power, Trotsky would seem a prime candidate for a book about omissions from the record. But the Trotsky that

Kingsolver presents is a man essentially without faults, a gentle giant who propounds a kind of toothless Communism. One cannot help but wonder how much research Kingsolver did in creating her Trotsky, because the gulf between her character and the fierce voice that emerges from his writing is vast.

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A look at Trotsky's 1924 work on "Literature and Revolution" is particularly illustrative of this disjunction. This is a volume that advocates the necessity of "a watchful revolutionary censorship," and establishes a formal "Communist Policy Toward Art," claiming that it is the right of the party to "repel the clearly poisonous disintegrating tendencies of art" by "guiding itself by its political standards." Nor does Trotsky shy away from the thought of political interference in art, asserting that "if the revolution has the right to destroy bridges...whenever necessary, it will stop still less from laying its hand on any tendency in art which, no matter how great its achievement in form, threatens to disintegrate the revolutionary environment." Such convictions are clearly incompatible with Kingsolver's own staunch belief in the critical significance of both free speech and outspoken literature. They are, in fact, exactly the evil voiced during the McCarthy era, resulting from the elevation of politics above individuals and every other consideration.

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The great problem of *The Lacuna*, then, lies in its author's obvious omissions and her selective arrangements of history and philosophy to suit her agenda. I by no means wish to oppose her efforts to encourage a more clear-eyed look at our ingrained prejudices. But the way to combat prejudice and narrow ideology is not by simply reversing its object. That kind of backlash only deepens the polarization that is already present on the political scene, and that so characterizes our nation at this moment.

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If we are to create a true and meaningful political literature today, we need to do more than acknowledge the gaps in our own narrative: we must look honestly and objectively at these omissions, reject the easy path of promoting an agenda, and remember that politics is more than a power play or an abstract system of morality, but is, fundamentally, a human endeavor.

*Sarah Vogelsong is a freelance writer living in McLean, Virginia*

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