The power of literature
Barbara Kingsolver | It’s a Long Story

Chapter 1: The adventurous introvert

Edwina Throsby: From Sydney Opera House, this is It’s a Long Story, a podcast exploring the stories behind the ideas. I’m Edwina Throsby.

Barbara Kingsolver: The curtain has dropped and we can see what kind of peril we're in in terms of democracy and humanity. And artists are rallying. All of the award ceremonies and the artist gatherings that I've attended in the last year have been just celebrations of the power of art and vocal, rallying commitments to using the power of art.

ET: How might literature change the world? American author Barbara Kingsolver has been asking this question through her best-selling novels and essays for years. After a self-described ‘curious childhood’ split between rural Appalachia and remote global locations where her doctor father was posted, she developed an independent spirit and an unshakeable love for the natural world. This passion manifested as activism during her biology degree, but despite becoming a scientist, it was literature than ultimately won out. Although she wrote several award-winning essays and novels through the late 90s and into the 2000s, it wasn’t until her novel The Poisonwood Bible was featured on Oprah Winfrey’s book club that Barbara skyrocketed to international fame. Barbara used her royalties to establish the Bellwether literary prize for socially engaged fiction, and she remains an activist at heart, with a body of work that is a testament to a belief in the power of the written word. Barbara Kingsolver, welcome to It's a Long Story at the Opera House.
BK: Thank you. I'm pretty thrilled to be in this fabulous building.
ET: Well, it's very good to have you here. In your very early life, do you remember your first memory?
BK: Yeah, I remember a few. I remember the day I realised I didn't have to suck my thumb. And because of where we lived, I had to have been three and I was faced with some steep stairs to go downstairs and I had a teddy bear in one arm and my thumb in the other. And I needed to hold the rail so I thought I'm going to have to give one of these up, it's going to be the thumb. It was a big choice. But I guess the beginning of a lifetime of understanding that you always have to give something up to get where you need to go.
ET: And to get independence as well.
BK: Exactly.
ET: What sort of family were you born into?
BK: Well, a really curious one. I guess everybody says that but I mean it. My father was -- is still living -- but he was a physician. He grew up in a rural, very poor family and he got to-- but he was sort of insanely brilliant. And he got to go to med school on this arrangement by which he would pay it back through service. And so he belonged to something like maybe what you call the Royal Flying Doctors or something like that. It was like Doctors Without Borders but it was before that existed. But anyway, as a consequence of that and of his great sense of adventure, we lived-- for my whole childhood, we lived in places where people where in desperate need. Now, he had grown up in rural Appalachia, the poorest part of the United States, the mountains. I don't know how much you know about the mountains--you know, Southern Appalachia but that's where hillbillies live, so the bogans. So we are

bogans. So that was home basically, this rural county where really probably about a third of my peers in school didn't have indoor plumbing at home. There are still places in the US that are that poor. But then every now and then, we would pack up a bag and go off to a place like the Congo where 100% of the villagers didn't have plumbing or electricity, where we were the only white kids. My brother and sister and I were the only white kids in the village so we had to be resourceful and figure out how to be friends with these kids who thought we were just bizarre. And then we would come back to Kentucky and then we would go off somewhere else. So, my mother was very much involved with kind of supporting my dad in his crazy adventures. I remember my childhood as basically a long adventure outdoors with no adult supervision. So we fended for ourselves. We learnt independence really early. There are good things about that and bad things about that but--

ET: What are they?

BK: Which? Well, you know, to feel unprotected is a strange thing to have just indelibly imprinted on your psyche, to feel like there's no one looking out for me but me. Maybe my brother but he's only two years older so that's an iffy prospect, you know, when you're seven. But the good thing about that is I did become quite self-reliant and a complete autodidact. We spent a lot of time not in school. When we were in Kentucky and did go to school, the school was not very good at all. I really didn't learn very much at all. So I learnt to be just a voracious reader, to read anything I could get my hands on whether that was encyclopaedia or our dad's old medical textbooks which were harrowing but, you know, educational. Some of those photographs are still seared on my retinas. I learnt to teach myself whatever I needed to know.

ET: And that was very well-served by a childhood where you really did have to fend for yourself in a whole variety of locations and develop that curiosity and develop that ability to kind of be small enough to be able to discover a place without imprinting yourself on it first.

BK: Exactly, to be small enough. You're right. That's really everything, isn't it? And I also think that introversion serves an author well too. Most fiction writers I know are introverts, most writers in fact. And in the most obvious ways, that's necessary because to be a writer, you have to be prepared to sit in a room by yourself for most of your waking hours.

ET: Most of your life.

BK: Yeah, most of your life. And I am absolutely happiest in a room by myself for hours at a time. I mean I like my family, I like my friends in, you know, moderate doses. But mostly, I like to be alone in a room. And I don't feel alone because I'm with all these characters which happened to be inventions of my brain, but, you know, it's a noisy-- it's a rowdy conversation in there that I'm having with them. But introverts I think are people who are happy to stand at the edge of the room and look into it and watch. And I can sort of-- I can always tell. You know, even at the-- like the-- at the five-year-old birthday parties, you can see there these quiet kids who are standing around watching and then there is the kid in the middle who, you know, puts the birthday cake on his head or whatever, you know, is dancing around and entertaining everybody. And I can look at him and say, "OK, you're not going to be the writer." To be the writer, you need to be content behind the camera. You're watching. You're trying to understand interactions rather than rule them, rather than influence them.

ET: Well, I'd like to get to your process in a little bit. But right now, let's just to back to your early life.

BK: OK.

ET: You described, you know, a kind of playground that you could sort of move around in really freely with a father working hard and teaching yourself how to do stuff. Where was your mother in all of that?

BK: She was being very unhappy which I have to say was-- it was formative for me. I just learnt from watching her that I didn't want to be the woman behind the man. She was a casualty of the post-war World War II propaganda machine. In the US, there was this cultural event in the 1950s all of the women who had had a taste of real life in the factories had to be induced to go back home so those men could have those jobs. And this whole invention of the nuclear family was imposed. I didn't really understand my mother fully until I went back and read those Life Magazines from the 1950s, you know, really before I was born or just after. That were just convincing women that pushing a vacuum around the house is ecstasy. That is where a woman finds her glory. And all of the fiction, interestingly, there would be these little short stories in the magazines where a woman would have this idea she was going to have a career and then she would just crash on the rocks and then have some horribly humiliating event. And a man would come and save her and she would marry him and then she'd be happy. It was just everywhere, it was ubiquitous, this sort of wall of propaganda pushing women, cornering them into housewifery.

ET: Creating a new set of aspirations for them.

BK: Creating a new set of aspirations, exactly, that weren't real, that were fake. If you would have asked her, she would-- what gives her happiness, she would have said, "Oh, being a homemaker, being a mother, that is the most-- and loving my husband and supporting my husband." Those were the things that brought her joy, but they weren't. But we just learnt to stay out of her way and make our own lives.

ET: Do you think that lack of enjoyment was just sincere because she wasn't the sort of woman that much like playing with kids or do you think that it might have been more emblematic of a resentment towards a lack of fulfilment that was prescribed for her?

BK: I think she was a really intelligent woman. I know that early in her life, she wanted to be an architect. Her father was an architect and a builder. And I think early in life, she was kind of a little tomboy. She was her father's favourite. She liked to go out on the farm and ride horses. And then suddenly, she got corralled into this never mind, you don't get to do anything for yourself. I think it was hard for her to see all of the glory and attention go to her husband. And as a compensation, she would do things like-- I mean, my poor mum, make her kitchen into rocket science. Like, there were all these difficult rules about the kitchen. This dish had to go there and these could no never go in the microwave. And that, like, we couldn't go in the kitchen or we would do something wrong. And I was terrified of the kitchen. And only when I was about 21 or something, coming home from university did I realise I can put any of these damn dishes in the microwave. This is something my mother invented so her job would be hard.

ET: And more interesting.

BK: And more interesting. And she would be the only person who could do it. She needed rocket science and so she imposed it on the kitchen. And I just feel so sad now for her. And I should have been kinder to her, you know. What I told her is, you know, that's stupid. You can-- It's not that hard to cook. I should have-- you know, now, I understand the whole sociological trap. And I have a great deal-- more sympathy for her. But I've also, you know, made the best of it. With my own life, I feel like I learnt. I learnt quickly that you don't listen to what people tell you, you should do because they're probably not right.

ET: And of course going to college for you was quite a turning point in your life, right?

BK: Huge, yeah. Huge and I was very lucky. Almost nobody I knew from my high school was going to college. That was just-- We lived in a place where prospects were really limited. All of my girlfriends either got pregnant before, you know, they were 18 or shortly after. They all got married. Nobody was going to college, boys or girls. You were going to be a farmer or

a farmer's wife. And I guess it was just sheer fury or something that made me say no. I just wanted to get out of there.

[MUSIC]

Chapter 2: From science to fiction

ET: One of the things that you learnt in college was, and I'm quoting you here, you learnt that people could yell and make a difference.
BK: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah. It was timing. I arrived just at the end of the Vietnam War. And that was a huge cloud looming over all of us when I was in the high school. My first year in college was the year Nixon resigned and the troops began to withdraw. So, there was all this energy, all this campus sort of organised campus energy that had been protesting the war. And it was sort of they are saying, OK, now what? And I discovered feminism at that time, I mean sort of organised feminism. I read all the stuff and I started joining these organisations that were sort of the campus rowdies. You know, so what are we going to do next? We're going to go to the president's house and protest the firing of a professor for being gay. You know, we're going to protest things. And that was a revelation. I've never been any-- I've never been part of any sort of organised protest before. I'd been such a solitary kid. I had just been on my own. So, I learnt about kind of joining forces.
ET: One of the things that you said about your childhood and adolescence was that you were kind of saucy but also had a very strong idea of what it was to be a good girl.
BK: Mm-hmm.
ET: Was going to college and becoming politically active a way of challenging that?
BK: I was on scholarship. I had to keep my grades up. I had to do everything right, I thought, or-- I have no place to fall back. I couldn't go back home. I didn't have a home to go back to, you know. So, I was quite driven--
ET: What do you mean you didn't have a home to go back to?
BK: Oh, I only went back to visit a few times. It was very unhappy to go back there. And I felt the claustrophobia and the absence of support. You know, when you're growing it's all you know. But once I had gone away, I visited friends in their homes with very, you know, supportive loving mothers and seeing how other homes were, I realised mine wasn't one I could go back to and I could never live there again. It was just difficult. As I was a nascent feminist starting to challenge. I mean I remember these conversations I had with my mother saying, "Why do you put up with this? You know, tell me one good thing about being a woman." And she couldn't name one.
ET: So, you never tried to get her to read Betty Friedan?
BK: No. No, I think she would have just melted. I did try to get her to read Doris Lessing. That was as far as I got.

[Music]

ET: You've written so many books now and so many collections and poetry and lots and lots of stuff, but this wasn't somewhere you started. You said that at school you studied nearly everything except writing. What did you study, what did you do in that beginning phase of your life before you settled on writing?
BK: Well, first of all, I will say that I always wrote. And that probably is part of the solitary introverted life that I had. Because of kind of itinerant life, I didn't have a lot of girlfriends in a

normal way, so my diary was my girlfriend. I kept a journal starting at-- in second grade, and I wrote every day because I was that kind of a little dweeby girl. And that kind of morphed into stories and poems, terrible little poems. And when I got to university, I got some poems published in the, you know, in the college literary magazine and that was cool. But I didn't ever for one minute think I could be a writer when I grew up. I didn't think of that as a career choice and I had this powerful compunction to support myself financially. I mean it was not even a compunction, it was a necessity. I was on my own. I had to support myself and the poets I knew were pretty clear about not expecting to make a living as poets. So I needed to study something that would lead to a job that would support me. I began in music oddly enough because I got a music scholarship and that was almost a fluke. But it wasn't that I wanted to be a musician, it's just that got me in the door. And within a year, I knew I was not going to support myself as a pianist. So I switched over and got my degree in biology.

ET: Why did you choose biology?

BK: Well, because it's real. The natural world has always seemed much more real to me than anything constructed by humans. That's not to say that I don't love things constructed by humans. It's not to say I don't love humans, I do, I promise. But I also understand myself as a piece of a much larger ecosystem. And I really always felt like I need to-- there's so much more to know about the world than just this relatively small part of it that humans do. I mean probably to most people that makes no sense but that's just how I've always felt. And I think it's because I grew up, you know, in the woods, playing in the woods or in the field, in the forest.

ET: So, how did your study of biology and what is real inform then your writing and what is imaginary?

BK: I thought of my studies of science as kind of the important thing that was going to lead to the work I was going to do. And I thought of my writing as this maybe almost self-indulgent thing I was doing for myself. It was secret. I was really furtive about it. It was kind of awkward when I published those poems, those first poems in the college literary magazine and people, you know, read them. I felt exposed. I felt a little embarrassed. People said, "Oh, you're a poet." And I would say, "No, no, no, I'm not."

ET: No, I'm a scientist.

BK: Yeah. I'm not. And honestly, the culture, the academic culture really reinforced that division. Everybody was divided by university into the humanities people who just ran from chemistry and thought that that was just, you know, horrible stuff and couldn't quite even understand why I'd want to do it, and the scientists who thought that the historians and the poets were just kind of playing around. There was just not a lot of respect to cross that divide. When I applied to graduate school, I remember this clearly, there was a place where you put your publications, you know, in the applications. So I had listed some of these poems, and by then, I had published some short stories in literary magazines. And the head of my committee said, "I see there are some poems here on this list." I said, "Yes." And he said, "I assume you won't be doing anymore of that." And I said, "Oh no." [Laughter] No sir. But you know what, in graduate school, I felt more and more pulled towards writing was just pulling-- tugging on me. So I did it more and more, and in defiance of my committee, and eventually left graduate school just really shortly before I finished my PhD. I left on leave and I took a job as a scientific writer.

ET: Right.

BK: Which was wonderful because I'd never dreamed before that I could get paid for being a writer. So that was the-- For the first time I wrote in my diary that I'd been keeping for, I

don't know, 20 years, I am a writer. I still have that page. I am a writer. It just was a confession and a statement of self and I have been one ever since.
ET: And an exclamation as well.
BK: Yeah, exactly. Imagine my surprise. Yeah, so I came out. And after a few years, I was getting enough freelance contracts that I left the steady job and began just freelancing and writing about other things beside science. Writing a novel in my secretive nighttime hours.
ET: At some point in all of this time too, you got married the first time?
BK: Mm-hmm, I did.
ET: And you published your first novel the year after your older daughter was born.
BK: I wrote it while I was pregnant with my first daughter Camille. I had terrible insomnia. And I was working as a journalist in the-- freelance journalist in the daytime, and so I had my daytime work. But then in the nighttime hours, I was sleepless and working on this novel that had just been brewing a long time. It began as a collection of short stories and then it started coalescing into a novel. And I just wanted to get it out of me. Because I wrote at night, I put my desk in the closet, so I could close the door and turn the light on so that I wouldn't keep Joe awake. And so, I literally wrote The Bean Trees in the closet. And I wrote it in nine months because that was the allotted time. And--
ET: There was no negotiating on that one?
BK: Well, actually there was. My daughter very cooperatively was three weeks late! I can't believe it. I mean, by doing so, she changed history for me at least and I guess a lot of readers, because if I hadn't been able to finish that, I never would have. But I finished it and then in a fit of housecleaning, right, you know, that restlessness you get right before, you know, the baby is coming, I had this big pile of paper and I thought, what should I do with this? Should I just throw it away or should I just send it to somebody in New York? And I mean it really was a toss up because I had no confidence that it was anything worth reading. So I sent it to an agent with a note of apology. It started out, I'm really sorry. I don't know if this is a novel but here it is, it's something, sorry, again. And so, then I went off and had my baby and came back to the house with my baby. And the message light on the answering was blinking and I just didn't pay any attention because I was the queen of the universe, I had just had a child. And after a couple of days, I check the messages and it was from the agent who said, HarperCollins has purchased your novel, it's going to be published. So I became an author and a mother on the same day. And that changed everything, needless to say [laughs].

[MUSIC]

Chapter 3: Oprah’s Book Club and The Bellwether Literary Prize

ET: At the end of the '90s, you published a few books that had been successful. You had a name for yourself as a novelist. And then you published The Poisonwood Bible in 1998. And that kind of took that to the next level, didn't it?
BK: Well, Oprah took that to the next level [laughs]. There is no way to overestimate the power of Oprah or at least during that era when she had her book club, it was outstanding. The Poisonwood Bible had already been in print for nearly a year and it had done well. It had been on the New York Times bestseller list for weeks and weeks and I was really happy about that. And I thought, you know, by the following summer, pretty much everyone who's going to read that book had read the book. And then I got this call from Oprah.
ET: Herself?

BK: Herself. I thought it was some friend of mine pulling a prank but nobody sounds like Oprah. It was Oprah. And she asked me, she didn't tell me, she asked me, "Would you be agreeable to having your book The Poisonwood Bible as the next book in my book club?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am."
She said, "On Thursday or Friday, I'm going to announce this, so you might want to watch." And I said, "Well, can you tell me which day because I'm going to have to hike over to a friend's house to watch? Oh, whoops, I guess I shouldn't be telling you I don't have a TV." And she said, "Oh, honey, it's just a bunch of junk on TV." That was Oprah, love her heart. So, yes, on Friday, I went over to a neighbour's house and saw her hold up my book and say, "This is the book that we're going to read next for book club." And in the next five days, the book sold 800,000 copies. My publisher had to go to Canada to get enough paper to print these books. And that was just the next five days. And then, you know the book club programme was two months away. So, yeah, it was another level of readership. And, I mean, obviously for personal reasons, I love Oprah. But for cultural reasons, I love the Oprah Book Club because the people who watched her programme were all kinds of people, not just the literati. Not a rarefied sector of the population, and it wasn't the New York based sort of gatekeepers of literature. These are women who are watching this woman because, you know, they feel like she's her-- their friend and she has something that-- I mean they might have been women like my mother in a day. All kinds of people watched the show. And,who knows, the day after me, it might have been an interview with a woman who, you know, canoed across Atlantic or whatever. It's just like all kinds of things including books. And so she brought in another very large new sector of the population to read this book. And then the whole experience was great. She was so considerate. She said, "Now, I know by now you're writing another book and I don't want to intrude on your writing schedule, so why don't we work out a time when you can come and do the show and, you know." So, she was so deferential and she really respects writers.
ET: With millions of people around the United States and the world actually reading your novel, did you feel that shift in your readership and your relationship with the readers?
BK: Well, not-- it's very-- it's completely abstract, you know? Fame doesn't bring intimacy into your life.
ET: Right.
BK: It doesn't really change, you know, your relationships, I mean, ideally. I mean I didn't want it to and it didn't for me. It didn't change anything about my life except-- well, two things, one is that that royalty check, that massive royalty check. And the other is that when I went away from home, in other cities, people would recognise me and that was, you know, a bit of a surprise. But in my hometown, nothing changed. So-- But the big change was that great big fat royalty check. I thought what in the heck am I going to do with this? I don't need it. I have a happy life. I'm well-taken care of. I live a very low overhead life. What could I buy with this that would make a difference in the world? What I bought was a prize. I used the money to establish the Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction which has been going on now for 20 years.
ET: You established that in 2000. And you say that it seeks to support the imagination of humane possibilities.
BK: That's right.
ET: What does that mean?
BK: What that means is that we give this prize to a first novelist who wants to write, who believes in socially engaged fiction. So this is unlike any other prize at least in the United States. We don't give a prize to a book that's already in print. We read manuscripts that are

written by people who have yet to break out. And specifically, we're looking for a novel, a first novel, an unpublished first novel that is expertly crafted, a beautiful example of good literature, and it also is about issues of importance in the world. The kind of fiction that, you know, can really change the world, introduce new possibilities, humane possibilities. And the winner gets a $25,000 prize, that's US, so it's even more, and guaranteed publication. So the point of this prize is to establish a career and every one of these writers has gone on to do really wonderful things. What I hoped with this prize is to give some cache to this kind of literature that people called political. There's this kind of nervousness about art that takes on socially relevant themes. That's not the case in Latin America. It's not the case really most other-- I mean, if you look at Nobel Prizes in literature, they go to, you know, Nadine Gordimer and, you know, Chinua Achebe, people like that. So, I wanted the United States to catch up with the rest of the world.

ET: What do you think it is culturally about the United States that separates the series from the political and the non-fiction with the imaginative and the fiction. Why is it that there is that separation when you're thinking about expressions of politics?

BK: I've been so curious about that, that I finally decided to write a novel about it to get to the answer once and for all and that was The Lacuna in which I examined that moment in American history where are-- in politics we're forced to divide by the McCarthy era. That artists who engaged in any kind of political investigation or suggestion lost their jobs, even went to prison. So I followed the career of this fictional artist who was persecuted in that era. And I answered the question to my own satisfaction. I think that's what happened. I think art and politics got a divorce in the 1950s and we're still in the process of a slow reconciliation.

ET: And that divorce came around because almost the power of art and writing was recognised.

BK: Exactly, exactly, exactly. It was very frightening to the powers, to the government. It's strange that it has taken so long to recover but I think it has. You know, it's just a cultural taboo that we all have absorbed by growing up in a culture that has been cleansed in that way, you know, that art that has any hint of politics in it is sort of identified as bad, you know, as a pamphlet-esque. I will say that in this moment in the US when every-- when the shit really has hit the fan, if I'm allowed to say that on your podcast--

ET: Go right ahead.

BK: -- things are suddenly so bad where, you know, kind of the curtain has dropped and we can see what kind of peril we're in in terms of democracy and humanity. And artists are rallying. And all of the award ceremonies and the artist gatherings that I've attended in the last year have been just celebrations of the power of art and kind of vocal sort of rallying commitments to using the power of art for the imagining of humane possibility. So it's coming around.

[MUSIC]

Chapter 4: Literature as activism

ET: I want to talk a little bit more about the power of fiction and art in a second. But before we do that, not long after you established the Bellwether Prize for this sort of explicit purpose, of course 9/11 happened. And you got a big firsthand taste of how potentially dangerous writing could be in that context. You published an essay called, "And Our Flag was Still There" which critiqued this unthinking patriotism that emerged after 9/11 where

anybody that wanted to talk about bigger political context was shut down pretty quickly. And then you were shut down pretty quickly.
BK: Yeah, I was. I had my own taste of McCarthyism. And this was of course before I had written The Lacuna. That was the impetus ultimately. I'll get to that. But, yeah, right after 9/11, right after the terrorist attacks, when our country just kind of froze up we've never-- we had not been attacked like that before. I mean you have here. And I guess technically, we were during World War II as well. But it was just such a new and terrifying feeling to Americans to be attacked on our home ground in such a threatening way that it just was overnight this cultural seizure and everybody wanted to do what they could and what I could do was write. So I published this whole-- It wasn't just that one. It was a series of about, I don't know, six or seven editorial pieces in newspapers all over the country basically saying, "Let us use this terrifying moment to evaluate what we really believe in. Let us look at what fundamentalism is and make sure we don't go there ourselves." That was kind of the gist of it all. And let's keep our-- let's keep clear heads basically while we grieve. Well, that was not what anyone wanted to hear in the moment. It was timing because this all happened immediately. This is within, you know, the first few weeks after the attacks I wrote these pieces because I felt this-- you know, I was like giving blood. It was my way to give blood. Well, many people were saying the very same things a year later and, you know, to applause, to general agreement. But in that moment, people just wanted to hate. They wanted somebody to hate and they didn't want some woman telling them that they couldn't hate. I think being female was a big part of it. So I was crucified. Time Magazine crucified me. I got death threats. We had to institute extraordinary procedures on opening mail. Anything that didn't have a clear and recognisable return address, we couldn't open.
ET: Wow.
BK: It was scary. I was terrified for my children, you know, who were young. And I just-- I was astonished. I thought, "What have I done?" And as I said, female moral authority is very threatening to a lot of men because it was men. It was all men who were hating on me. How dare she was the gist of it. So, I saved all the hate mail and I put it in a special red box. I didn't throw it away. I just knew I was going to use it for something. So after that, I started thinking, "Why are Americans like this? Why are we as a nation, so certain that our country is not a work in progress? It is a finished product, and you're not allowed to criticise it in any way. When did that happen?" Because we started out as a work in progress. You know, Thomas Jefferson said-- In the Constitution, they said, you know, anytime this isn't working, we need to revise it. And that's how it was. And then at some point it became really, really, really taboo to criticise it in any way. When did that happen? So I started reading and I dug into this and I got to The Lacuna. And my fictional hero, the writer Harrison Shepherd, did-- wrote something that was-- he thought was fairly innocuous but he got punished for it and he got hate mail for it, I got those letters out of the red box and I put them in the novel, word for word.
ET: You just reproduced them.
BK: Yes. So those people helped me write my novel.
ET: I suppose you owe them gratitude of some sort. What did that whole process, The Lacuna or-- and that whole time, what did that do for your patriotism? What do you think about patriotism now?
BK: [Laughs] It's such a loaded word. There are things I love about my country. I've left it so many times and I always come back. And part of that is I feel that the things I don't love about my country can only be changed from the inside. But I think it's important for me also to be an ambassador here abroad and tell you that what you're hearing about us is not really

us. OK, Trump did not really win the majority of our vote. And I am ashamed to say that he won plenty of vote. He shouldn't have won that much. But there are a lot of really unhappy, frustrated people who are just ready to say, "What the heck, we'll try something completely new." And now of course they're sorry. But we are a much kinder and less self-absorbed people than we appear to be from abroad because, you know, the loudest mouths get the most airplay and that's always how it's been. But I live in what is known as Trump country. I live in Southern Appalachia and many, many, many of my neighbours, you know, are Republicans and voted for Trump, and they are also really kind, really good people who would do anything for their neighbours, you know. And when I need help, they are right there. So it's complicated. This weird thing happened in the 1950s where we got it in our sort of national psyche that we're a finished product, you're not allowed to criticise.

ET: You brought your own propaganda.

BK: Yeah, yeah. But, you know, now, everything is kind of up for grabs again because--

ET: So the other big political movement in the United States at the moment is #MeToo which of course is completely global now. Do you think that it’s is related to the new administration? Do you think it could have happened without Trump?

BK: It is absolutely the product of the Trump election. No question about it. As undoubtedly you know, the day after the inauguration, Washington D.C. was filled with furious women wearing pink hats. It was such an amazing moment to behold. It just felt like-- And all these young women who have I think believed for, you know, their full, you know, two decades of life that they were living in a post-feminist era had come to see that they weren't. That sort of galvanised anger has led to so much change, just really an earthquake. And I'm so excited about that. I spent a lot of time frustrated that so many things that were suffocating and frustrating and difficult for me when I was 18 are exactly as suffocating and difficult for my daughters at the same age. So little has changed in my entire pretty long life now. So, yeah, I'm really excited to see social media being used in such a powerful and helpful and useful way. It's a way of creating community among women who have felt isolated and stifled and ignored.

ET: You talk about the intergenerational-ness of the #MeToo Movement as well. What do you think that generations of women have to learn from each other? Where do you see the shifts over your mother's generation, your own and your two daughters?

BK: Well, there's so many, so many things. It's interesting that, you know, I was a sort of the second wave feminist and that was such an important part of my identity. And I watched women my daughter's age, not my daughters, but women of that generation sort of throwing off the term feminism and saying that, you know, we don't hate men, you know, not really understanding. And it's interesting to see that suddenly change and to see that word regain its power. But something that I appreciate very much about the feminist of my daughters' age is that they are so inclusive. That we really have to look at the system, sort of the ecosystem of oppression rather than individual parts of it. I love how younger people are working together on the real problem, instead of identifying-- trying to identify their problem as the only one or the worst one.

ET: You've said once that, and this is a quote, "Everything I do from writing to raising my kids is preparing for the future." And what future do you hope for?

BK: [Laughs] Wow. Well, there are so many answers to that question that are sort of anti-negatives, you know. I hope we can stop climate change before all of the coral is bleached and the forests are dead, you know. Obviously, I hope we can turn around the damage to the planet before we've done ourselves in. I hope that 50 years from now, there are still people around who read books. But that's all negative. In the longer run, well, I hope for a

peaceful settlement of whatever deal it is that humans have made with our planet. We might not persist but the planet will. About 10 days ago, I was up north of here in the-- what are known as the Gondwana Forests to the west of Brisbane. These are some of the oldest living systems on the planet. There are these trees called Antarctic beech tree which were remnants of the time-- This was the dominant tree of Antarctica in the time when Antarctica was covered with forest.

ET: Wow.

BK: And when Australia was still connected to it. So these forests are that old, that many millions of years old. And some of these trees are thousands of years old. And one of the things I really wanted to do when I came to Australia was walk in those forests and I did. You have to hike all day to get out to these mountains where these trees are. These beech trees are massive. One of them would more than fill this studio, I mean like 12 people holding hands probably couldn't reach around one. And they're so old that their root-- the earth has eroded away from their roots. So they're kind of up on stilts. Can you picture this?

ET: Yeah.

BK: So you can kind of walk under them. And they're covered with moss. They're just furred with this old green moss and they feel like grandmother trees. And I spent a day just walking and sitting among those trees, listening to their conversation because they're talking. Trees communicated through the soil, through sort of nuanced chemical language. This is fact. It's now new age. It's really truth. So I just sat there eavesdropping on their conversations, their very old conversations, and what I think they were saying is, "Here's one of those. They are able but they're interesting. They'll be gone eventually." And I think that's OK. I just want the world to persist in the way that it can.

ET: Barbara Kingsolver, such a delight to talk to you.

BK: You too.

ET: Thank you very much for coming in. And I hope that your walks among the trees continue to be filled with voices.

BK: Thank you.