

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle – A Year of Food Life

Barbara Kingsolver, Stephen Hopp and Camille Kingsolver, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007 (370pp). The ethics of eating. Barbara Kingsolver takes us on her personal and family journey to realign “our lives with our food chain.” Seeing this year-long journey through the eyes of Ms. Kingsolver, who has achieved well-deserved celebrity status as an author, is somewhat jarring at first. Is this a story about an observer of an experience, a peek at the author’s diary motivated by a book deal, or is it an account of a committed, socially conscious, deeply concerned person who is driven to effect societal change by sharing her values and experiences? Steven Hopp, Ms. Kingsolver’s husband, a biologist and contributor to thought provoking analysis sprinkled throughout the book, expresses a touch a cynicism with which one might approach this book when he writes, “Oh sure, Barbara Kingsolver has forty acres and a mule (a donkey, actually). But how can someone like me participate in the spirit of growing things. . .” And, that is exactly what the book is about –how we all can contribute to preserving the planet and the species that inhabit it through our food choices. Of course, the folksy writing does not undermine the serious nature of this account, the advanced degrees in ecology and biology, and background in science writing, not to mention growing up in a Kentucky farming community, that Ms. Kingsolver brought to this project and informs her life.

Eating Local

The focus of the story is eating local and, as importantly, eating locally grown food (locavore) that is organically grown. On the family trip readers get to take with the Kingsolver-Hopp family, we meet an owner, Tod Murphy, of Farmers Diner in central Vermont that serves locally grown food who sort of captures the message, “If there’s less green on the plate that means it’s white outside.” As we go on this journey we learn that, “Eating locally in winter is easy. But the time to think about that is in August.” So prepare to spend some time in the Kingsolver kitchen canning and freezing vegetables after the bountiful crop comes in from the family’s quarter acre farm nestled in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. Interspersed among the narrative are reflections from Ms. Kingsolver’s 18-year old daughter who provides a teenager’s insight into the family’s journey, which obviously did not begin with this book, and family recipes. Camille Kingsolver feels deeply about the values that she has learned from her family and community and will no doubt, with her science education at college, advance and sharpen her activism. The journey would not be complete without Camille and younger sister Lily, who with entrepreneurial spirit saw the opportunity to cash in by selling eggs.

One thing we learn early in the book is that there are some very few favorite things, clearly not locally grown, that family members are not forced to give up. Camille’s recipes are no stranger to olive oil. And, coffee is a staple. The value of fair trade or humanely raised is a must.

I should note that while this book is serious (“We love our gardens so much it hurts. For their sake we’ll bend over till our backs ache. . . We lead our favorite hoe like a dance partner down one long row and up the next, in a dance marathon that leaves us exhausted.”), the authors have a good sense of humor. After the bumper crop of zucchini, which every gardener has at one time experienced, Ms. Kingsolver writes, “Garrison Kellor says July is the only time of year when country people lock our cars in the church parking lot, so people won’t put squash on the front seat.”

The family journey is committed to organic practices, which are good for the earth, people and natural predators and stemming the tide of global warming by rejecting petroleum-based products. On the family trip, we meet organic farmers Elsie and David in Ohio. “They spare the swallows and sparrows from death by pesticide for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that these creatures are their pesticides.” And then Mr. Hopp’s sidebar reminds us that, “[I]n 1948, when pesticides were first introduced, farmers used roughly 50 million pounds of them and suffered about a 7 percent loss of all their field crops. By comparison, in 2000 they used nearly a billion pounds of pesticides. Crop losses? Thirteen percent.”

The price of food

A book like this could not be written without some discussion of the price of good food, healthy for the earth in its production and healthy for consumers in its consumption. That’s because we have been raised in a culture of cheap food. Ms. Kingsolver concludes that “raising food without polluting will always cost more than the conventional mode that externalizes costs to taxpayers and the future. . .”

According to the author, the fastest growing segment of U.S. agriculture is “diversified food producing farms on the outskirts of cities.” This suggests that people are beginning to get it. “Eaters must understand that how we eat determines how the world is used.” And back at the Vermont Farmers Diner, where virtually all the ingredients are purchased within an hour’s drive, Mr. Murphy says, “We have the illusion of consumer freedom, but we’ve sacrificed our community life for the pleasure of purchasing cheap stuff.” This book and others like it are contributing to a cultural and paradigm shift back to community-based, humane, and sustainable values that nourish us and the planet.

