

# *The Bean Trees*

## *by Barbara Kingsolver*

**Week:** 1 of 3

**Chapters/Pages:** Chapter 1, pp. 1 - 32

### **Themes:**

- New journeys
- Family relationships
- Rural life

**Recommended Opening:** “We must be willing to get rid of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.” –Joseph Campbell

- What do you think of this quote? In your own words, what is it trying to say?
- How do you know when the life you planned is not the life that is waiting for you? What does it take to let go of your plans for your reality? What is an example of a time you had to do this? What was it like?
- What does it mean for old skin to be shed? What does that look like? In what ways do you feel like you have shed your old skin for a new one? What does that process feel like?
- What does it take to grow a new skin? What can help you in this process?
- How do you all anticipate shedding your “old skin” for a new one in terms of becoming a tradeswoman? How has this process been for you thus far? How do you think it will be moving forward?

### **Before Reading:**

- Barbara Kingsolver, born in 1955, is an American novelist, essayist and poet. She was raised in rural Kentucky and lived briefly in the Congo in her early childhood.
- Kingsolver has received numerous awards and has been nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2000, Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize to support "literature of social change".

### **Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:**

Read pages 1 – 9 (until “who needed their platelets counted on any given day”):

- What do we know so far about Missy? What sorts of things are important to her? What do you think of her?
- How would you describe Pittman County, where she grew up? What kinds of people live there? What sorts of things are important to them?
- Why do you think Missy tells us, “If you were to look at the two of us, myself and Newt side by side in the sixth grade, you could have pegged us for brother and sister” (2)?
- How would you describe Missy’s relationship with her mother?
- What do you think her mother means when she says: “The way I see it, a person isn’t nothing more than a scarecrow. [...] The only difference between one that stands up good and one that blows over is what kind of stick they’re stuck up on” (7)? Do you agree? Why/why not?

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- What do we know about Missy's first job? Does it seem like a good job? Why/why not?

Read pages 9 (from "I hadn't even been there...") – 15 (page break)

- What is the story about Newt Hardbine she tells us?
- What do we find out about Jolene Shanks? How would you describe her? What seems to be important to her?
- How do you feel about Missy's interaction with Jolene?
- Why do you think she tells the story of Newt and Jolene? Why might that be significant to her? How do you think this experience might affect her moving forward?
- Why does Missy stay at her job at the hospital as long as she does? Why have you stayed at certain jobs? (Enjoyed the work? Needed the money? Had a good community at work?)
- Why do you think Missy wants to leave Pittman County? What kind of place do you think she might want to go to? Why?
- What are some exciting things about moving/going in a new direction? What are some challenging things about moving/going in a new direction?
- Have any of you made a big move – either physically or emotionally/mentally? If yes, why did you move? How was the transition for you?

Read pages 15 – 26 (page break):

- How did you react to the woman giving Taylor the baby?
- Why do you think this woman is giving the baby up? Why do you think she gives it to Taylor?
- Why do you think Taylor decides to keep the baby for now? Any predictions as to what might happen, whether she'll keep the baby longer?
- Why does Missy want to change her name to Taylor? Do you think people should have the right to pick their own names? Why/why not?
- Have you ever wanted to change your name? If yes, to what and why? If not, why not?
- What is the significance of Taylor having "Indian blood"? How much do you know about your heritage and where your ancestors came from? How important or unimportant is that to you?
- How does Taylor seem to feel about the Cherokee Nation when she arrives there? Why might this be significant?

Read pages 26-32:

- How would you describe Taylor's relationship with and attitude toward the baby so far?
- How did you feel finding out that the baby had "bruises and worse"? What do you think might have happened to her?
- Why do you think when Taylor realizes the baby is a girl she says, "A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine" (31). Why might someone see being born female as a "burden"? Why might someone not see it that way?
- What do you think Taylor is feeling at this point? What do you think she'll do next? Why?
- What do you think is the significance of Taylor's postcard to her mother: "I found my head rights, Mama. They're coming with me" (32)? Do you remember what she means by "head rights" (refer back to page 18: she and her mother are one eighth Cherokee, meaning they have enough Cherokee blood that they are permitted to live in the Cherokee Nation if they

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choose)? When Taylor refers to her “head rights” here, what do you think she’s referring to? Why?

**Recommended Poetry:** n/a

**Recommended Poetry Prompt:** “My Journey”

Describe a journey you have made or need to make – you might want to write about your journey to become a tradeswoman, though you can write about something else too. Write about it like a physical trip or as a journey from one state of mind to another. Where are you going? What are you taking with you? What do you need to leave behind? How will you get there? Who helps you along the way? How will you create the life you want?

**Recommended Closing:** “Some of us think that holding on makes us strong but sometimes it is letting go.” – Herman Hesse

*Notes:*