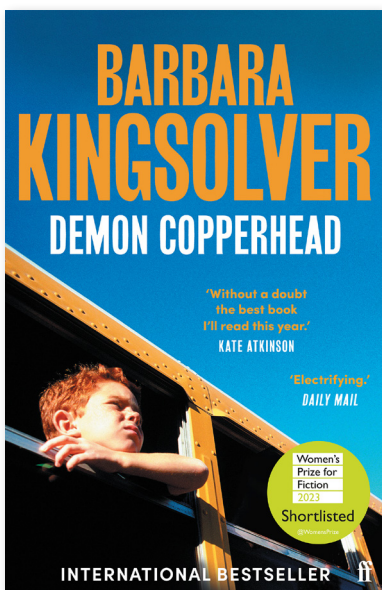


Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

DEMON COPPERHEAD BARBARA KINGSOLVER



PLOT SUMMARY

Demon's story begins with his traumatic birth to a single mother in a trailer, looking "like a little blue prizefighter". For the life ahead of him he will need all of that fighting spirit, along with buckets of charm, a quick wit and some unexpected talents.

In the southern Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, poverty isn't an idea, it's as natural as the grass grows. For a generation growing up in this world, at the heart of the modern opioid crisis, addiction isn't an abstraction, it's neighbours, parents and friends. "Family" could mean love – or reluctant foster care. For Demon, born on the wrong side of luck, the affection and safety he craves is as remote as the ocean he dreams of seeing one day. The wonder is in how far he's willing to travel to try and get there.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

A modern reimagining of Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* asks how well society cares for its most vulnerable.

Demon's experiences in the care system are shocking, but sadly not unusual, either in the USA or in other countries including the UK. Vulnerable children are often hungry, cold and uncared for, or worse, which is as heart-breaking today as it was in Dickens' time. This is not a universal experience, and many children in the care system thrive and succeed. However, for Demon, being a foster child means he is at the liberty of the feckless McCobbs, or hired help for Creaky on the farm. Kingsolver refuses to spare the reader descriptions of Demon with holes in his clothes, hunting for leftover food at school, and the awful stigma that comes with being a poor, neglected child.

This is a society that cares little for its other vulnerable members: women suffering domestic abuse such as Demon's mother or Mariah Peggott are not listened to or helped, even when, in the case of Demon's mother, she's also a drug addict.

And, when Demon himself becomes addicted to opioids, the story reflects the reality of modern-day America, where so many are readily prescribed opioid painkillers and become vulnerable as a result. June tells Demon that she knows drug companies specifically target Lee County and see it as a "gold mine" (p416) for the high numbers of pain patients who have no choice but to continue working in order to receive disability cover.

Ultimately, Demon's battle is to achieve sobriety and to transcend the limitations he was born under. Fortunately, he has some guiding lights along the way – Angus and June, his grandmother and Mr Dick and the Peggott family, who probably make the difference between life and death in his early years. But the fact that Demon succeeds by the end of the book is testament to his own hard work and strength of character, despite the many restrictions of an uncaring society.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Kingsolver is the prize-winning and bestselling author of ten novels including *Unsheltered*, *The Lacuna* and *The Poisonwood Bible*, as well as books of poetry, essays and creative non-fiction. Her work of narrative non-fiction is the bestseller *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. Kingsolver's work has been translated into more than twenty languages and she has both won and been shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. She lives with her family on a farm in southern Appalachia.

DISCUSSION POINTS

There are a number of mother figures in Demon's life – his own mother, Mrs Peggott, Aunt June (who Demon calls his "Wonder Nurse"), Mrs McCobb, Miss Barks the social worker, Demon's grandmother – all of whom represent different kinds of mothers, providing different levels of nurture to Demon and to others.

Like Peggotty, David's gentle and caring housekeeper in Dickens' original *David Copperfield*, Mrs Peggott is somewhat of an adoptive mother figure for Demon, often looking after him when his own mother can't, and letting Demon and his mother live in one of the Peggott family trailers. Demon's grandmother, an update to Dickens' Betsey Trotwood, is kind in her own way, but, though she is the blood relation he has been looking for, she isn't motherly in the traditional sense. Mrs McCobb is negligent though not overtly abusive, and Miss Barks is caring, but distant and largely unavailable to Demon.

We also see the challenges of motherhood in *Demon Copperhead*. Motherhood is difficult, almost impossible, when you are also the victim of domestic abuse, as in the horrifying story of Mariah Peggott, and of Demon's mother's relationship with Stoner.

Which character do you think is the best and worst mother-figure, and why? Or is it not that straightforward to identify a "good" mother and a "bad" one? Who do you have sympathy for and who do you not, and why? Do we blame mothers

more than (often absent) fathers for neglectful behaviour?

QUESTIONS

If you're familiar with *David Copperfield*, how does *Demon Copperhead* compare? How well do you think Kingsolver has rewritten Dickens' story for the modern age?

Was Demon destined to become an addict from birth? Why, or why not?

How do the characters of Angus and Emmy compare? What do you think saves Angus from following a similar fate to Emmy?

How well has Kingsolver created the voice of a poor boy living in the Appalachian Mountains? Is Demon's voice convincing? What helps it come across on the page?

NEXT STEPS

Demon becomes a successful comic artist. Investigate comics and graphic novels perhaps starting with classics such as Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and moving onto more recent female-centred hits like *Paper Girls* by Brian K Vaughan and Cliff Chiang (now a Netflix series) or *Monstress* by Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda. If you live near a bookshop with a graphic novel section, go in and have a browse. See which types of artwork and story attract your attention – and have a go at creating your own comic strip if inspired.

Alternatively, write a short story or a poem about a mother figure in your life, or about

an experience of motherhood. See if you can evoke some visceral emotions on the page: is the piece celebratory, critical, sad, bittersweet, warm or joyous? Include some sense detail: smells, tastes, sounds and textures will help bring your piece to life.



'The story of a young boy who is destined to live a life with nothing and who, despite all the odds, rises above it.'

Rachel Joyce, 2023 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver is told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. In ***My Name is Leon***, Kit de Waal presents a story of children in foster care in 1981 Britain, dealing with their own issues of race, family and belonging.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES PRISCILLA MORRIS

BARBARA KINGSOLVER DEMON COPPERHEAD ff

JACQUELINE CROOKS FIRE RUSH

LOA LALINE PAULL

MAGGIE O'FARRELL THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?