

Butterflies and Mudslides

MARIANNE PETERS

It's pouring outside my window—that kind of rare, steady rain that has every sign of settling in for the duration. Rainy days like this one are wonderful for calling in sick, ignoring the housework, and hunkering down with a good book. This fall I've been enjoying Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behavior*.

Kingsolver has written one of my favorite books, a nonfiction account of her family's life on a small farm in Virginia. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* is one of the best arguments I've read for eating local food and growing your own. *Flight Behavior* came out last year and was tagged almost immediately as a novel about climate change. I'm not crazy about "message" books—I just like a good story, great characters, and a plot that keeps me turning pages, and this book has all three. But it also has an environmental edge that cannot be ignored, as well as a critique of self-satisfied Christian faith.

The story takes place in Tennessee, in the mountains of Appalachia, centering on the life of a young wife and mother named Dellarobia. When the book opens, the weather has been strangely mild for winter, and rain has been falling for months—so much, in fact, that eroding hillsides have dissolved into the hollows, uprooting trees and endangering lives.

When we meet her, Dellarobia is headed up the mountain on a fool's errand (a meeting with a man who is not her husband) when she is stopped by an amazing sight. Monarch butterflies cover the hillsides, coating the

trees by the hundreds of thousands. Kingsolver's luminous descriptions of these winged creatures are the best parts of the book. Word travels fast in the close-knit community. Dellarobia's in-laws and their fervent, non-denominational church body are convinced it's a miracle. The world begins to arrive on Dellarobia's doorstep, including curious onlookers, scientists, and the press. Her family's isolated existence begins to crack wide open, bringing new opportunities and discoveries as well as conflict between Dellarobia and her husband, Cub, who is content with his life the way it is.

In one interesting episode, Dellarobia is visited by a Mexican family who were forced to leave their home and emigrate north for work, ending up in Tennessee. The family had made a decent living in Mexico, guiding tourists to monarch butterfly nesting grounds on their own mountain until climate change and mudslides destroyed the butterflies' habitat. Though most of the novel is fiction, this part is based on fact: monarch nesting grounds in Mexico have been threatened by mudslides and changing temperatures, threatening the lives of the residents who depend on tourist dollars to make their living. Dellarobia forms a bond with this family, who seem to understand her fascination with the butterflies and her sense of alienation as a woman burdened by curiosity when those around her are only suspicious of outsiders, especially people with education.

The book leaves me full of ques-

tions. What about the strange and violent weather we've been experiencing lately? Is this a realistic projection of the future? Dellarobia and her husband are barely scraping by. They don't take airplane trips or cruises. They don't buy expensive gadgets or lots of new clothes. And they don't drive big cars or live in a big house. In other words, they don't have the luxury of making lifestyle choices that use up a lot of energy and resources. So what is their responsibility to the planet compared to those who can afford to have all those things?

The descriptions of Dellarobia's church made me chuckle but also squirm. It's one of those modern churches with a coffee shop, complete with a closed-captioned telecast of the service going on upstairs, in case you'd rather sip your espresso and just watch from a booth. The pastor is a young man with new ideas, but Dellarobia's family's faith is characterized by the ancient boundaries of family and clan that crisscross their mountain community.

There's more to the book than just those issues—the characters, especially Dellarobia, have stayed with me even after I finished the book. Getting to know fictional characters who are dealing with drastic situations brings a dry subject like weather and climate a bit closer to home. Enjoy the story, but spare a few moments to think about the consequences of our actions and the future of our planet. ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.