

Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

2010 WINNER

THE LACUNA BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Kingsolver's fifteen books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction include the novels *The Bean Trees* and the international bestseller *The Poisonwood Bible* which, amongst other accolades, won the 2005 Penguin/Orange Reading Group Book of the Year award. She won the Women's Prize for Fiction with *The Lacuna* in 2010. Her most recent book is *Unsheltered*.

Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th century by *Writers Digest*. In 2000, she received the National Humanities Medal, the US's highest honour for service through the arts.

PLOT SUMMARY

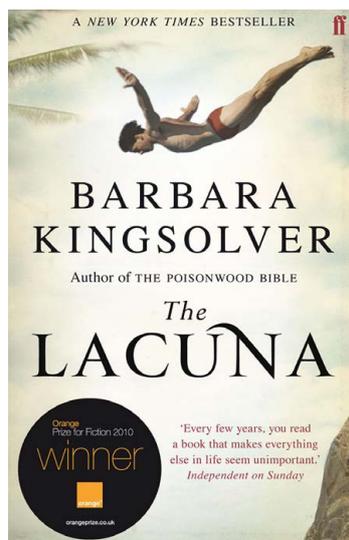
Born in the United States, reared in a series of provisional households in Mexico from a coastal island jungle to 1930s Mexico City, Harrison Shepherd finds precarious shelter but no sense of home on his thrilling odyssey. Life is whatever he learns from housekeepers who put him to work in the kitchen, errands he runs in the streets, and one fateful day, by mixing plaster for famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. He discovers a passion for Aztec history and meets the exotic, imperious artist Frida Kahlo, who will become his lifelong friend. When he goes to work for Lev Trotsky, an exiled political leader fighting for his life, Shepherd inadvertently casts his lot with art and revolution, newspaper headlines and howling gossip, and a risk of terrible violence.

Meanwhile, to the north, the United States will soon be caught up in the internationalist goodwill of World War Two. There in the land of his birth, Shepherd believes he might remake himself in America's hopeful image and claim a voice of his own. He finds support from an unlikely kindred soul, his stenographer, Mrs. Brown. Through darkening years, political winds continue to toss him between north and south in a plot that turns many times on the unspeakable breach – the lacuna – between truth and public presumption.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The story covers three decades and includes many different epistolary elements: congressional transcripts, newspaper articles, book reviews, letters, diary entries and memoir and archival notes. The subjects of these 'documents' are some of the most famous historical figures of the twentieth century, from two countries that have frequently been in ideological and political conflict: Mexico and America. The presence of a raft of documentation within the novel lends it an air of realism and historicity, suiting a novel which is set at a time of great political importance.

Kingsolver takes on the difficult task of representing famous people from the past with Kahlo, Rivera, Hoover and Trotsky. In creating Harrison Shepherd as the fictional point of view character who chronicles his time with them, Kingsolver is able to speculate on the human detail of real events, such as Trotsky being in hiding at Rivera and Kahlo's home.



Shepherd's role is very much one of chronicler, enabling Kingsolver to tell the story through his receptive eyes, his ears and his 'collecting' of other documentation.

The Lacuna also charts the rise of communism in the 1930s, and, later, chronicles the American reaction to it, in the years before World War Two. Rivera and Kahlo act as symbols of the communist art community, which rubs shoulders with leftist ideologues such as Lev Trotsky.

DISCUSSION POINTS

It's often argued that romantic fiction has a lesser status than 'literary' fiction – primarily because it is, stereotypically, produced for a largely female audience and therefore tends to be automatically underrated by book critics, prize judges and other tastemakers. Can you define what makes something literary fiction? What makes *The Lacuna* 'literary' – a historical or particular cultural setting? The amount of research required? The style of writing? The type of characterisation?

If romance novels aren't considered 'great art', then why do you think Kingsolver makes Shepherd a romantic novelist? What do you think she's trying to say about him? How does Kingsolver compare Shepherd's work to her own? Who are your favourite authors of what might stereotypically be called romance novels? And is there a kind of correlation in the status of romance and literary fiction to the status of Frida Kahlo's art in the 1930s, and the comparison at that time between the 'great art' – murals inspired by the Mexican Revolution, for example – of Diego Rivera?

QUESTIONS

What did you think of the way that Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's relationship was portrayed?

What is a lacuna, and what is its symbolism in the book?

What impression of 1930s Mexico do you get from Kingsolver's description through Shepherd's eyes?

Is Harrison Shepherd a reliable chronicler of events?



NEXT STEPS

Frida Kahlo is famous for her self-portraits. Draw or paint yourself with no judgement. Kahlo famously disliked most of her body (she didn't mind her eyebrows, but there wasn't much else she liked about her face, and she thought her head was too small), so in these days of body positivity, be kind to yourself and your image.

If you'd prefer not to paint or draw, you could take a selfie of yourself and label it using the mark-up tools on your phone or computer. Remember: be kind, as if you were labelling your dearest

friend's photo. Notes could include your happy smile, laughter lines and sparkling eyes.

Alternatively, write a poem inspired by one of Frida's paintings. Most of them have a magic realist element to them so they're perfect for creating unusual juxtapositions and strong imagery. See if you can convey the mood of the painting.

Alternatively, write a poem inspired by one of Frida's paintings, such as *Self Portrait* (1940) or *Tree of Hope* (1946). Most of them have a magic realist element to them so they're perfect for creating unusual juxtapositions and strong imagery. See if you can convey the mood of the painting. Describe the fantastical elements interwoven with what you know of Kahlo's lived experience using rich metaphors.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE POISONWOOD BIBLE BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER
LOST CHILDREN ARCHIVE BY VALERIA LUISELLI