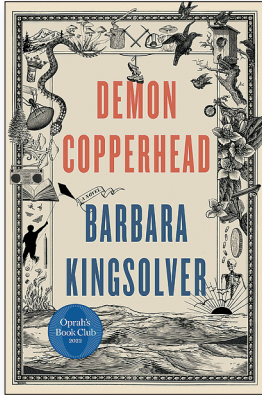


Editors' Picks



Demon Copperhead A Novel

By Barbara Kingsolver
(Harper, 560 pages)

Franz Kafka once wrote, “If what we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skulls, then why do we read it? Good

God, what we need . . . are books that hit us like an ax to break the frozen sea within us.” Barbara Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead* is such a book. Not for the fainthearted, it seethes with the raw energy of its foul-mouthed teen protagonist as it follows him through a childhood marked by domestic violence, addiction, and loss. The denouement contains glimmers of rehabilitation, but it’s the elusiveness of tidy resolutions that keeps the novel moving.

Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, which inspired this novel, follows the trials of a young Englishman whose grit helps him navigate life in nineteenth-century London’s underbelly; Kingsolver’s reimagining is set in the 1990s in a vastly different but equally bleak milieu: her native Appalachia.

Readers seeking the idealized beauty of rural Americana will not find it here. True, trilliums brighten the hollows in spring, and there are breathtaking mountaintop views. But forget Robert Frost: this landscape is scarred by defunct coal mines and failing farms, littered with dollar stores and pain clinics. Socially, too, there is wreckage – “trailer trash” and truck-stop whores,

unscrupulous doctors who demand sexual favors for prescriptions, burned-out social workers, and fraudulent strivers. Not a family seems immune to the ravages of the opioid epidemic; everyone knows someone in prison or foster care, or someone who has OD’d.

Kingsolver’s Appalachia is as much a state of mind as a region; like the hills that hem it in, the malaise has trapped generations. Even those who follow the lures of the world beyond never truly escape but often return, jaded by empty promises of advancement, or fleeing the jaws of big-city life.

If this were reality TV, you might switch channels. But it’s not. Nor is it poverty porn – there’s nothing gratuitous. Indeed, Kingsolver’s novel rings with the authenticity of autobiography. As she has noted, her parents seemed to be leaning over her as she wrote, speaking to her “in a language that my years outside Appalachia tried to shame from my tongue.” Perhaps that’s why, instead of appearing as stock figures, her characters leap from the page as vibrant individuals so real that you might be tempted to Google them.

And if, as at least one reviewer has charged, they seem to lack agency, that’s just the point the author appears to be making. Stuck in a whirlpool of institutional poverty, most of them (like the actual people who inspired them) have little hope of ever getting out. In bringing their travails to the page, Kingsolver confronts us with that reality. To quote the dedication embedded in her acknowledgements, “For the kids who wake up hungry in dark places every day, who’ve lost their families to poverty and pain pills . . . who feel invisible, or wish they were: this book is for you.”

—Chris Zimmerman,
a member of the Bruderhof