



Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

By Barbara Kingsolver
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Introduction

Kingsolver takes readers through the seasons, chronicling the joys and challenges of eating only foods that she, her husband, and two daughters grew in their backyard or purchased from neighboring farms. Part memoir, part cookbook, and part exposé of the American food industry, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is one family's inspiring story of discovering the truth behind the adage "you are what you eat" and a valuable resource for anyone looking to do the same.

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your perception of America's food industry prior to reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? What did you learn from this book? How has it altered your views on the way food is acquired and consumed?
2. In what ways, if any, have you changed your eating habits since reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? Depending on where you live—in an urban, suburban, or rural environment—what other steps would you like to take to modify your lifestyle with regard to eating local?
3. "It had felt arbitrary when we sat around the table with our shopping list, making our rules. It felt almost silly to us in fact, as it may now seem to you. Why impose restrictions on ourselves? Who cares?" asks Kingsolver in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Did you, in fact, care about Kingsolver's story and find it to be compelling? Why or why not? What was the family's aim for their year-long initiative, and did they accomplish that goal?
4. The writing of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* was a family affair, with Kingsolver's husband, Steven L. Hopp, contributing factual sidebars and her daughter, Camille Kingsolver, serving up commentary and recipes. Did you find that these additional elements enhanced the book? How so? What facts or statistics in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* surprised you the most?
5. How does each member of the Kingsolver-Hopp family contribute during their year-long eating adventure? Were you surprised that the author's children not only participated in the endeavor but that they did so with such enthusiasm? Why or why not?
6. "A majority of North Americans do understand, at some level, that our food choices are politically charged," says Kingsolver, "affecting arenas from rural culture to international oil cartels and global climate change." How do politics affect America's food production and consumption? What global ramifications are there for the food choices we make?
7. Kingsolver advocates the pleasures of seasonal eating, but she acknowledges that many people would view this as deprivation "because we've grown accustomed to the botanically outrageous condition of having everything always." Do you believe that American society can—or will—overcome the need for instant gratification in order to be able to eat seasonally? How does Kingsolver present this aspect in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*? Did you get the sense that she and her family ever felt deprived in their eating options?
8. Kingsolver points out that eating what we want, when we want comes "at a price." The cost, she says, "is not measured in money, but in untold debts that will be paid by our children in the currency of extinctions, economic unravelings, and global climate change." What responsibility do we bear for keeping the environment safe for future generations? How does eating locally factor in to this?
9. Kingsolver asserts that "we have dealt to today's kids the statistical hand of a shorter life expectancy than their parents, which would be *us*, the ones taking care of them." How is our "thrown-away food culture" a detriment to children's health? She also says, "We're raising our children on the definition of promiscuity if we feed them a casual, indiscriminate mingling of foods from every season plucked from the supermarket." What responsibility do parents have to teach their children about the value and necessity of a local food culture?
10. In what ways do Kingsolver's descriptions of the places she visited on her travels—Italy, New England, Montreal, and Ohio—enhance her portrayal of local and seasonal eating?
11. "Marketing jingles from every angle lure patrons to turn our backs on our locally owned stores, restaurants, and farms," says Kingsolver. "And nobody considers that unpatriotic." How much of a role do the media play in determining what Americans eat? Discuss the decline of America's diversified family farms, and what it means for the country as a whole.

Action Items—On Your Own

Try eating at least one meal per week made from locally and organically produced meats and produce. As Steven L. Hopp points out in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, this "would reduce our country's oil consumption by more than 1.1 million barrels of oil every week."

To find farmers' markets and local producers in your area, visit the USDA website at www.ams.usda.gov, or check out www.LocalHarvest.org and www.csacenter.org.

When shopping at a grocery store or food co-op, ask about food origins and request that locally produced items be stocked.

Share your opinion with local and regional policymakers at town and city hall meetings, school board meetings, and state commissioner meetings. Also, speak up at venues you or your family frequent where food is served such as a church, social club, school, or day care center and encourage them to use local ingredients.

If you have the space, start your own garden and begin by growing a few items. If you live in an urban area, consider taking part in a community garden (www.CommunityGarden.org). More information about urban gardening can be found at www.CityFarmer.org and www.UrbanGardeningHelp.com.

Share stories about your local food adventures at www.animalvegetablemiracle.com.

Action Items—With Your Book Club

Take a tour of a local farm, visit a farmers' market, or try your hand at a u-pick operation (strawberries in the summer, for example, or apples in the fall).

If you're inclined to take your book club international, follow in Barbara Kingsolver's footsteps and experience Italy's *agriturismo*, a guest accommodation on a working family farm.

For your club's discussion of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, devise your own menu or use the recipes in the book to prepare a feast with locally produced ingredients that are in season.

Alternately, hold your book club discussion at a farmer's diner or a restaurant that uses local ingredients.

In the spirit of Barbara Kingsolver's 50th birthday festivities, which she describes in the book, have a plant exchange. (Just don't thank each other for the blooms!)

Take a class or meet up at a member's home for a session of cheese-, yogurt-, or bread-making.

Donate to a hunger-relief organization that teaches sustainable farming practices. Visit www.WN.org (World Neighbors), www.JourneyToForever.org, or www.Heifer.org (Heifer International) for information.

Additional Resources

www.AnimalVegetableMiracle.com—recipes, web resources, and more

www.Kingsolver.com—listen to an audio interview with Barbara Kingsolver about *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*

About the Author

Barbara Kingsolver's twelve books of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction include the novels *The Bean Trees* and *The Poisonwood Bible*. Translated into nineteen languages, her work has won a devoted worldwide readership and many awards, including the National Humanities Medal. Her most recent book is the highly praised, *New York Times* bestselling *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, published in May 2007. She lives with her family on a farm in southwestern Virginia.

Camille Kingsolver attends Duke University, where she studies biology, anatomy, and dance, and teaches yoga.

Steven L. Hopp teaches environmental studies at Emory and Henry College and conducts research in bioacoustics and the natural history of vireos.