

Flight Behavior

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BOOK REVIEW

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FLIGHT BEHAVIOR. By Barbara Kingsolver. 437 pp. Hardbound. ISBN: 978-0-06-212426-5. Harper, New York. 2012. \$28.99.

The last best-selling novel in which butterflies played a significant role was *The Collector* by John Fowles (1963). The eponymous Lepidopterist, Frederick Clegg, is a socially-inept, confused man who, having “collected” —kidnapped—a young woman with whom he is obsessed, has no real idea what to do with her. It ends badly. *Flight Behavior* is a very different kind of novel. It is, very briefly, the story of one woman’s epiphany, triggered by *Danaus plexippus*. The local name of the Monarch in Dellarobbia Turnbow’s part of Appalachia is “King Billy” (after the colors of William of Orange), but it has never been a major factor in the local culture until the day Dellarobbia stumbles into a nearby valley with its own “internal flame” like the “inside of joy”: an overwintering roost of millions of Monarchs where no such thing ever existed before. Its presence is an epiphenomenon of climate change. Somehow the Monarch’s internal compass has been reset: yesterday Valle de Bravo, Mexico; today the mountains of Tennessee. Suddenly the point of intersection between Christian belief and science is right here in this valley. Suddenly the politics of global warming is at everyone’s doorstep. Suddenly all the givens of life in this remote place are up for grabs.

There is a Lincoln Brower-esque figure, Ovid Byron. And indeed Brower helped to tutor Kingsolver, who has always been an environmentally-attuned writer, in Monarch biology. However, she needed less tutoring than most novelists would, because she trained as a biologist in her youth.

Many readers of this Journal will be asking themselves whether Barbara Kingsolver, biologist-turned-novelist, is related to Joel Kingsolver, evolutionary insect physiological ecologist, who has published many seminal butterfly studies. After all, there aren’t that many Kingsolvers out there! If one does an on-line search, one will find yes, they are brother and sister. But one learns to be skeptical of what one reads on-line, so I asked Joel. And no, they are not, though they have met and, he says, “decided our most recent common ancestor was in the 1790s in western Virginia.” So now you know.

This is a novel of personal transformation and of the conflict and integration of ways of knowing—of faith and reason, feeling and studying, the head and the heart. It is a great “read” whether you are into Monarch biology or not. Unlike *The Collector*, it does not end badly, insofar as it ends on a note of hope.

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