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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

by

Barbara Kingsolver

(New York: Harper Perennial, 2007)

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. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

Author Barbara Kingsolver and her family abandoned the industrial-food pipeline to live a rural life-vowing that, for one year, they'd only buy food raised in their own neighborhood, grow it themselves, or learn to live without it. Part memoir, part journalistic investigation, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is an enthralling narrative that will open your eyes in a hundred new ways to an old truth: You are what you eat. [From the book jacket]

Questions:

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 untallied 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? "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.

[Questions from the Publisher]

Further Reading:

The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals. Michael Pollan. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto. Michael Pollan. New York: Penguin Press, 2008.

Gorgeously Green: Eight Simple Steps to an Earth-Friendly Life. Sophie Uliano. New York: Collins, 2008

Farewell My Subaru: An Epic Adventure in Local Living. Doug Fine. New York, Villiard, 2008.

Green Guide: The Complete Reference for Consuming Wisely. By the editors of the Green Guide Magazine. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2008.