BARBARA KINGSOLVER and ILAN STAVANS in Conversation

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Hello, I'm Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. As many of you know, my mission is quite simple—to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution dance, to make it levitate, and to provide for you evenings of cognitive theater.

It is a pleasure to welcome you to another LIVE from the New York Public Library evening. It has been quite a lively time here. Consider this week alone. Last night we discussed the future of capitalism—that is, if it has a future—with Walter Isaacson, Niall Ferguson, Indra Nooyi, Eric Schmidt, and Nassim Taleb. Tonight, as you know, in case you didn't, we have Barbara Kingsolver and Ilan Stavans. They will, I think, discuss Mexico, the U.S., and perhaps also Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky. I'm not sure exactly what they're going to talk about. Tomorrow we will have an evening on the culinary history of New York with William Grimes, who used to write about food a lot and now writes the obituary pages for the *New York Times*, Ruth Reichl, and Dan Barber, followed on Monday by Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach, many, many others. We will end the season with a conversation I will have with the very great Spanish writer Javier Marías.

These are but a few of the evenings LIVE from the New York Public Library has to offer you, so please consider supporting the New York Public Library. Become a member of the New York Public Library, become what we call a Friend of the New York Public Library. Of course all of you are already friends, but I think you understand what I mean. When I say become a Friend of the New York Public Library, I'm talking about the future of capitalism. Just for forty dollars a year—yes, you do hear me correctly—for forty dollars a year, a mere forty dollars, you are a Friend of the New York Public Library and it gets you very many nice treats, such as discounted tickets to all LIVE from the New York Public Library events. I mean, forty dollars a year, that's, if you ask me, a pretty cheap date. I hope you are convinced to join now, or at least to join us for other evenings here in this wonderful library.

After the conversation between Ilan Stavans and Barbara Kingsolver, there will be a Q & A. I ask you to ask questions rather than make lengthy comments, such as those I have the pleasure of delivering to you right now. A question—I have calculated this, it's a scientific calculation—usually takes about fifty-three seconds to ask. Both Barbara Kingsolver and Ilan Stavans have agreed to sign books after their conversation, I think they have. Ilan Stavans is a native from Mexico. He's the author of *The Hispanic Condition*, *On Borrowed Words*, *Love and Language*, and many other works. He is a professor at Amherst College. Barbara Kingsolver is the author of numerous works of fiction, including *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Animal Dreams*. She is also the author of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. I wish, and I know she does, too, that she were here tomorrow to join the conversation with Ruth Reichl, Dan Barber, and William Grimes, about his newest book, which is *Appetite City*, which Bill Grimes wrote using the New York Public Library's extensive menu collection. I don't know if you know that the New York Public Library has one of the largest menu collections in the world.

But tonight Barbara Kingsolver will not talk about the menu collection of the New York Public Library. She is here to relish us with stories about Mexico, which are very important to my upbringing. My parents spent twenty years in Mexico after emigrating from Vienna, to Haiti, and then to Mexico, so I'm particularly interested in these stories, and she will also talk about the U.S. The protagonists tonight, as I've told you, include Leon Trotsky, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Harrison William Shepherd. Her newest

novel in nine years, just out today, is *The Lacuna*, so please warmly welcome to this very stage Barbara Kingsolver and Ilan Stavans.

(applause)

ILAN STAVANS: Well, delighted to be here with you, Barbara. I have a number of different questions and topics for you that I hope will lead us through a roadmap in which you will enlighten me and the audience about this book and about hopefully as well your other books and your vision as a writer. Now, shortly before we met today, you and I had a telephone conversation in which you were telling me about the tour that you're doing in thirty cities or something of the sort—maybe not that many.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Three weeks, a different city every day. Do the math yourself.

ILAN STAVANS: Now, this is a book, a wonderful book, your new one, about a novelist, about Mexico, about the United States, about the role that the government plays in shaping a citizen's life, and about the media, as well. So I want to begin with the media. I want to begin with you assessing the role that the media has in the United States today. Do we have a healthy media, is it too intrusive, are they asking you the right questions? Are they repeating themselves too much?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: (laughs) Well, it's very interesting. I consider this novel to be, among many other things, an indictment of lazy journalism, and so I have been interested to see who would step up to the plate to be offended.

ILAN STAVANS: And somebody has?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: (laughter) Well, yes. We won't name names. It takes place, of course, in the mostly in the 1940s, in the '30s and '40s, and I spent years reading newspapers from that era, being interested and horrified by what I saw to be the—well, not the beginning of the industry of gossip as news—I think that's probably been with us as long as humans could talk—but there was something that happened in the 1940s, and that was radio. It was the end of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the beginning of the instantaneous news cycle. The character Harrison Shepherd is describing this to his friend Diego Rivera, in fact, in Mexico, because it's during World War II, really, that for the first time the whole country was often getting important news at the same time and responding to it at the same time, so for the first time there was something like a national psyche that could be molded by the media, and what Harrison Shepherd notices is that suddenly dead air becomes the enemy. That it's—it's for the first time—with the newspaper, when something happens you have at worst a few hours or a day to think it over before you analyze it and discuss it, and, you know, maybe you have a week, depending on the kind of newspaper. With radio news, suddenly when something happened, people had to just say *anything* rather than say nothing, and so he says what—that the talkers are rising above the thinkers, and I think they've kept rising.

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: So lazy journalism is the journalism that has to be done immediately, automatically, and without thinking? But there's also thoughtful radio.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Yes, of course, there is, and there are—and I would also say that lazy journalism doesn't have to be instantaneous. You can take a long time to be lazy, too. **(laughter)** Well, but, I mean, but lazy, that's a handy word for it, but I suppose I mean irresponsible, failure to carefully check sources, passing on a quote without going to original sources, just passing on a piece of information without checking whether or not it's true. And of course the Internet has made this explode, but there is also—it's a market, and there are consumers of this kind of news. I don't—I don't—I don't point—I don't blame any particular person, and I think that we all have a responsibility. Any of us who is interested in consuming gossip as news is playing a role in this cycle. I—and, okay, whether you asked it, do I think that the phenomenon that I wrote about in this book. Well, really, one of the—it's about a lot of things, but it's—one of the things that it really examines is the damage that can be done to a person by journalists who don't, who don't tell the truth, who basically just pass on gossip hearsay.

And, you know, you asked, "well, is this still a problem?" and, of course, I don't have to answer that, but it really strikes me that we have arrived at a new place when the top story on the news is about a boy who didn't fall out of a balloon because he wasn't in

there. **(laughter)** If you had to wait a couple hours. If you said, "call me when the balloon lands and tell me the story, you know, and I'll write the story if there's something to write—"

ILAN STAVANS: So do we have the media that we deserve? Is it our fault?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, we have—to some extent yes, we have the media we deserve. I think discerning. Absolutely I think that every one of us can be more particular about what we consume in the way of news, just in the same way that we can be more particular about what we consume in food, you know, in our food system and I believe that can change the system, we can do the same thing.

ILAN STAVANS: Let me linger there for just a second. What's the difference between the profile that the media gives of you and *you*?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, I'll tell you. I'll just—I'll give you an example. If you type in Barbara Kingsolver—

ILAN STAVANS: On Google?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: If you Google me, the first thing that comes up is—

ILAN STAVANS: Wikipedia?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: No, that's second, and heaven only knows what you'll find on Wikipedia. My assistant actually goes to Wikipedia once a month and removes references to my role in the assassination of President Ford or something like that.

ILAN STAVANS: Of President Ford?

(laughter)

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Yeah. Just for—

ILAN STAVANS: She should remove it.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I don't like to bring that one up. But no, number one is Kingsolver.com, which is owned by someone in China, who is using—it says "the official website of Barbara Kingsolver," and when you go on there it's selling merchandise. The last report, I don't look at it, it makes me ill, but my assistant checks it, and she says, "today, they're selling coloring books and romance novels."

ILAN STAVANS: You're kidding.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I'm not kidding and I would say go and check it out, but please don't. So no, I—it's really, it's bizarre that I wrote a novel about a person whose identity, who is just completely robbed of his identity—

ILAN STAVANS: Let's see—let me go to different parts of the novel. Obviously ,it is a novel that almost symmetrically divided between North, between South and North, between Mexico and the United States. I say almost symmetrically, because I think the part on Mexico ends right in the middle and the North American part begins at that point, and it is about having a dual identity and being divided and being a reverse immigrant. Let me start by asking you about your relationship with Mexico. Why set a novel in the forties in Mexico, how does Mexico speak to you and why that particular time?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, those are two different questions. The time came first, if that makes sense, in my process. I've wanted for a really long time to examine that era, well, specifically what we call the McCarthy Era, which really began before McCarthy was ever elected to office, it began in the late 1940s. And my point of origin was really a curiosity about why there's such an uneasy relationship in this country between art and politics, or really with art that is—that leads to self-evaluation. I quickly, when I began thinking about it, realized that it's not just art, anything that leads to self-examination in this country is sort of—risks being called unpatriotic. Being critical of—of—of the country is a little dangerous. You're likely to get called un-American. And that always seemed odd to me because this country has its roots in such, you know, sort of, this country was started by firebrands who really sort of believed in tearing down

institutions and remaking them, and somewhere that ended, and I always had a hunch that it was in this time, in the 1940s and ’50s, when there was a whole committee, a congressional committee, devoted to investigating what they called un-American activities. That seemed so peculiar to me. Let me ask you this. Do people get called un-Mexican?

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: They do get called un-Mexican very frequently, and, in fact, there’s a word in Spanish to describe somebody that is Mexican that is un-Mexican, and that is *malinchista*. That is the word that comes from the name of Hernán Cortés’s mistress who served as the translator also with the Aztec and Nahuatl people and went to bed with him, and so you’re a *malinchista* if you are a Mexican un-Mexican enough.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Yes, all right, now what sorts of behaviors would lead you to be called—

ILAN STAVANS: Well, nobody would take the government that seriously to begin with. **(laughter)** But you wouldn’t have a committee that would judge you in public. You would simply go to jail and disappear. Whereas here you would be in front of the committee, as you put your character, and have to respond for your communist tendencies or interests, as your character does.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Right. And then lose your job and possibly go to prison and so forth. But I guess what I'm—to ask again about the behaviors that would get you sort of panned as a Mexican. I'm thinking that it might be more associated with sort of an attachment to cultural matters—sort of an honesty.

ILAN STAVANS: It's far less about politics and much more about culture. You don't love the country enough, and thus you're betraying it, but it has—we're much more cynical about politics than us Americans. I'm here playing with the "us" on both sides.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: That was my thinking. I was thinking about how it seems to have happened here, that at some point it's as if the house got arranged just so and then we began to say, "don't touch anything. It's a perfect, finished product, you don't get to change it." In other countries, you get to rewrite the constitution every six years.

ILAN STAVANS: Did you imagine at any point, while writing that particular section of the book where your character Harrison Shepherd goes in front of the House Committee for un-American Activities, did you visualize yourself at that time having to defend the ideas that you have to assume the role in order to be able to understand the emotions that he was going through?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, actually, backing up, I mean from the beginning, I find, when I write a novel, I develop a close identity with the character. It's not really that I'm putting my own life, the life of Barbara Kingsolver, into his place, it's really that I—

first I get to know him really well and get to know his mother and think about his childhood and everything that makes him who he is and then before I know it, I'm really so completely wrapped up in his identity that I've created that I feel things from his point of view. This is the tricky thing about a novelist is that you really have to identify so fully with all of your characters that you really, you can't—you can't hate anybody. You know, you really begin to understand that even the villains have their good points—you know, that their mothers loved them.

ILAN STAVANS: But in that series of emotions that you're describing—Your character is a very passive character, he mostly observes, digests, he's the cook, he helps Diego Rivera, he comes to the United States, he's quiet in his town in North Carolina and then he writes the books. And do you also get to the point on occasion where not only do you empathize with the character but you say, "Come on! Wake up, do something different, don't be that passive!"

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, no, because that would ruin my story. **(laughs)** Well, I begin with—I really, plot comes before character for me. First of all, the questions, first I, as I said, I was thinking about how we got to this point, where we considered—we needed to—in order to be patriotic we had to consider our country a perfect, finished product rather than a work in progress, and I thought it would be very interesting to look at this from two different points of view, from the point—from for example, from a Mexican point of view, versus a United States point of view, because it would be an interesting contrast and because I really—and because I used to live—for

twenty years I lived very near the Mexican border in Tucson, Arizona, and because I have spent a lot of time in Mexico and feel comfortable moving into that culture and that country, I thought that this would be sort of a natural. I mean, that was my starting point, to answer the question that you asked me two questions ago. I am keeping track.

So next came enough research to construct a kind of a plot, well, more than a kind of a plot, a good sturdy plot, and then I people it with characters who, you know, people often ask, "is this autobiographical?" or "do you base them on real people?" Of course not, real people would never do what I say. I don't have friends who do what I say, do you? They won't even take my advice about, you know, sort of boyfriend matters. So, my characters are complete inventions and they have to have the kind of mobility and flexibility I need to put them through their paces. They serve my own ends, but then, of course, they have to seem completely real. So—

ILAN STAVANS: And how do you make that happen? How do you make them completely real?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I invest them with real histories, with—I'm very interested in character, in human character, in national character, as I think most fiction writers are—I think all the time about what makes a person—

ILAN STAVANS: Tick.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Who he is—yeah, yeah, and I wonder that, you know, even like bank tellers—

ILAN STAVANS: And in order to understand that, you need to understand the childhood of the character?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: That's one thing, yeah, I mean, although after having two children of my own, now I understand that the mother has nothing to do with it.

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: They wouldn't say the same thing, I'm sure.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, I think a person's life, of course, forms psyche, and more so in novels than in real life, probably. But I do, I really—I spend a lot of time thinking about many more elements of a character's life than will ever go into the novel. I back all the way—I mean, this novel is unusual in that you do track this character from about age thirteen all the way to about thirty, his early thirties, so you really see his complete formation—a lot of his development as a person. Often, in a novel, you know, I'll give you a character, you know, you'll meet them as a fully-formed adult, but I've already written pages and pages of my own notes about, you know, the first, you know, the first time he got turned down, you know, at a school dance. You know, I think about all of the things that have happened to him, and I often write a lot of these things down

and then throw them away, because I don't need to bore you all with all that, but I need to know it. I need to know everything about this person so that he will behave in a predictable enough, or in an appropriate enough, fashion.

ILAN STAVANS: Now, in the case of this novel, dealing with Mexico, you needed to understand, it seems to me as a reader, the life of this character as it evolved in a culture that you know from this side of the border, but you needed to perceive, to really get into from the other side, and how did the research evolve for this novel? It seems to me there's—I commend you, because I generally get very unhappy as a Mexican reading American novelists dealing with Mexico and having done Wiki-research, very superficial, very "yes, this is located next to this other town," they put it in miles, not in kilometers, there's Gamio, there's Vasconcelos, there's obviously Frida Kahlo, the whole entourage. The range of tastes of food that went into this novel. You must have been in restaurants or cooking in Mexico for a long time.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I own Frida Kahlo's cookbook, *Frida's Fiestas*.

ILAN STAVANS: And do you go through the recipes?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, the truth is I've owned it for years. I mean, it's not her literal cookbook; that's probably upstairs in the Reading Room. But it's a cookbook called *Frida's Fiestas*, which was made by some of the family members that lists all of the foods that she prepared for each, for every fiesta, which in her case was just about

every other day, you know, it's the second Friday of September, so fiesta. So just as an example, I mean this is something I've done for years. I don't actually prepare Frida's fiestas, because to do all of those things you need servants, **(laughter)** which my house—

ILAN STAVANS: Even if you're a communist, right, like she was?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Right, even if you're a communist, even though you don't really talk about that.

ILAN STAVANS: Right.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I pulled this—when I began thinking about this book and researching it, I pulled this out, and I understood this was going to be a really important resource, and I began really consciously cooking these foods and thinking about what would be involved if I were one of the servants making Frida's fiestas.

ILAN STAVANS: But there's much more, because there's a moment in which, I think it's Frida, or is it Diego, I think it's Frida, who is walking through a market and then the main character, still young, follows her and is able to identify the different chilés and the different food that is all over there. Those Mexican markets are extraordinary.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I love those markets. Those are my favorite parts of every city in Mexico are the markets—

ILAN STAVANS: The colors and the smells.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I just gravitate toward them. I've tasted all of those things. Well, I used—when I lived in Tucson, Arizona, I went to Mexico for every reason I could think of. You know, if I could—as a writer, as a tourist, for any reason I would go to Mexico, it was very easy for me to go there. And so, when I—now, I no longer live in Tucson, I live in Virginia, but I did, of course, make a number of very well-organized research trips into Mexico City and to—and some people might think that the words "well-organized" and "Mexico" can't coexist in the same sentence, but they can indeed, and I did have—

ILAN STAVANS: Well, if you're an American they can.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Right, right. I had lists of places of course I needed to spend time in the Casa Azul, which wasn't blue in those days, by the way. That was very disorienting. I couldn't call it the Blue House, because when this takes place, it wasn't blue, they didn't think of that until later, painting it blue. Well, Frida had her way. At that time it was white. And then I had to go to that bizarre double house that Juan O'Gorman and Diego cooked up—where they had—Diego and Frida had—and this was entirely his idea—this double house, which was—his big house, like two blocks, one is his house and one is her house and then to get in between, there's this little bridge across the top—have you seen it?

ILAN STAVANS: Yeah.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: You've been there, of course. Little bridge across the top, and these steps up the side—she had to go out the window, climb up these steps, I mean, this poor woman who was crippled by polio—why bother? Which is actually what she says in the novel. I would kill myself. So, anyway, they had this idea of this modern marriage where they had two different houses. His was huge and hers is really small. **(laughter)** But and I had read about this for years, and I had actually tried to write these scenes as best I could, from, you know, studying pictures and, you know, reading about the house, and reading the philosophy of it and everything I could. I finally had to go—well, of course, that was one of my research trips, and when I went there I understood I had it all wrong. I had to completely rewrite those scenes.

It's like, he describes—and he's a servant in this house and he has to cook in this tiny kitchen, which is so small literally—this character, just by coincidence, is about the same height as I am, well he's a little taller, but I could stand in this kitchen, in the middle of the kitchen, and touch the walls in both directions. That's how tiny it was. He had to cook all these fiestas. He describes it as a kitchen "so small that if there are two ants in the sugar bowl it's already too crowded." **(laughter)** So I had to just walk through these rooms in order to imagine all the complicated things, and, of course, that's not the thematic material of the novel, but ultimately it does—it all helps, because it becomes—it becomes part of the thematic material of the novel.

So at any rate, yes, I did take a lot of very directed trips to Mexico City, to Trotsky's house, to the Trotsky Archives, a lot of—a lot of, you know, paper, you know, paper archives, that I needed to look, to read, a lot of photographs, but and also southern, the southern jungles, the area that is called Isla Pixol, although that doesn't really exist, but I also found, when I began well, when I got well into the book, I realized I had a lot of retroactive material. I could dig into my notes I'd taken from—'cause I always take notes—I mean, it's kind of ridiculous, I always keep a notebook wherever I am—and I found lots of notes I'd taken from a trip to the Yucatán, a couple of trips I'd taken to the Yucatán, when I was working as a journalist on something else, a lot of material that I realized could be useful, so I had sort of a larger body of research than I knew I had.

ILAN STAVANS: I want to ask you about Trotsky, but before I do, I wanted you to talk more about Frida Kahlo. It's—Frida Kahlo distorts Mexico. She has become so big that is, one could say as a Mexican she's bigger than Mexico, and she is also presenting the Mexican side in a way that can be attractive for foreigners, you know, the fancifulness, and I find it courageous to have chosen a character that lives in the entourage of Frida Kahlo that becomes a very close friend, confidant and eventual correspondent with her, in an approach that doesn't romanticize her. I wonder what draws you and probably through you I would understand what draws other people to Frida Kahlo in the way that people seem to be mesmerized by her and if there is something in her that you found as you were writing this book that repels you?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, I probably will disappoint you by saying that I can't really explain why other people are fascinated by Frida, because I did not, in the beginning, think she would be a part of this book.

ILAN STAVANS: She came later or she evolved into a major protagonist?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I was interested in Diego. I was interested in these men, the muralists, who were also—because they were so—well, I was interested, you know, in the—sort of the relationship of art and politics, and these men, these muralists who were also very active in party politics, you know, they had the typewriter on the dining room table doing the Communist Party newspaper, and they had these very active lives not only as artists, but as—sort of playing their role in the Mexican Revolution, and *they* interested me, and I felt that Frida was probably too self-absorbed a person, you know, too, sort of—I just didn't want to go there. I didn't think—I thought maybe, you know, she'll just fluff through the room in her nice dresses and that will be that.

Well, when I began going to these houses to look at where Diego lived, her fingerprints were on *everything*. I mean, *literally*. When you go through Diego's ledgers where they just kept track of the household expenses and the sales of his paintings, she has notes on everything, "This painting was not worth it." She just put her stamp on everything. She was such a potent person.

ILAN STAVANS: She became unavoidable to you?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: She started just telling me, "Chica, you're leaving me out." You know, she really *insisted*, in the strangest way, this has never happened to me before, she really pushed her way into this, and once she got in the door—

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: She's very pushy.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: She's very pushy. I mean, this was in danger of becoming the Frida book, I just had to slam the door on her, but I saw a couple of things right away. Because I really wanted to look at this strange way that becoming a celebrated person, a public person, disfigures a life, and media gossip, and oh, boy, did she suffer. She was just brutally treated by the media, and she had a very interesting way of handling it by becoming larger than life. The way she describes it is that when you have this glaring light put on you if you show them a mirror and sort of flash the light back in their eyes, they don't see, you know, the shriveled leg that's under the silk dress. She deflected attention by becoming showy and I—when I saw that I gained an enormous sympathy for her and so I—that's what I love about her, is the way she handled that.

I mean, she was just—she was basically a little girl when she married this big guy, I mean, *big*, you know, in every way, and who was enormous—you know, the much-discussed painter, and she just really had this thrown at her, and she did her best and she

did a very interesting—she developed a very interesting way of surviving, and she became a very good foil for my fictionary narrator, who was the opposite sort of person. He deals with attention by trying harder and harder to become invisible. And I thought that also would be an interesting contrast, and I thought it would be very natural for them to become friends, because they're dealing with a lot of the same things.

ILAN STAVANS: Now, she obviously, or famously, is bisexual, although you don't deal that much with that, but she has a relationship, a sexual liaison, with Trotsky. And Trotsky's another character that is right there at the heart of the heart of the first part. Let me tell you just very briefly a memory that my father passed on to me. When he was little—my father is a soap opera star, a telenovela star, in Mexico, and he's the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe—and one of the early memories that he remembers is of his father taking him to stand on line and to see Trotsky, and Trotsky's in a coffin having been killed two days before in Bellas Artes, in the big palace of fine arts, and of course you have it right at the heart, the moment where the assassination takes place, the relationship, and Trotsky is another man who is victimized, not only by Stalin but by the media, it's the media that deforms him.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: That's right. That's right. With a lot of help from Stalin, but still. You're right and this novel had to be called *The Lacuna* because—for, well, for a lot of reasons—because that's just the word that describes everything that I wanted to touch with this novel but one of the meanings of that word of course is the missing piece of the story, the missing part of the manuscript, and he's *really* a lacuna, he has been

erased from history. I have been—I've wanted to write about Trotsky since I was in my twenties, when I first began reading him and was astonished to learn how history could have gone otherwise, you know, how, what what interesting ideas he had for the development of the Soviet Union as a democratic socialist state and what was done to him and how he was really erased, and I can't believe that your father was at that funeral—that's *amazing*.

ILAN STAVANS: So do you—it seems to me that your role as a novelist in some ways is to set things right, that the people who have been erased by history, or have been silenced, at least in this novel will have the light of day?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, I—that's not quite how I look at it. I really like to ask questions, and all of these—these characters are vehicles for asking questions. What I want to do is take the reader for a ride, you know, through—through. There was something at the beginning of this you were saying that you wanted me to be—I was thinking what you said about me is I would be a GPS, something like that.

ILAN STAVANS: A map, a GPS.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Something like that. that's right. A map, and that's really—that's very apt, because I do feel that I like, I want to bring the reader on a trip. And take you into a place where maybe you've never been, exactly, at least not with these people, and show you points of view, and of course the wonderful thing a novel can

do is that you're actually inside these people and you feel everything that they feel, you suffer the things they suffer, and at the end of it, it's not that I really want you, you know, to be in a station wagon with Trotsky, that's not exactly the point. But I think that having him there and letting you have a long chat with him about what he wanted to do in the world and why that did get erased, will mean that when you get out of that station wagon and go on with your life, you'll have new ways of thinking about the things that you deal with in your own life.

ILAN STAVANS: One of the new ways or different ways of thinking, Barbara, that the book does, in a very subtle way, is address the sexuality of the protagonist, of Harrison Shepherd. Not only is he Mexican, American, but he is—he has a passive sexuality and at one point it is suggested that he might be gay or he is gay. I wonder, I have to ask you two questions: One is if at any point your character was female, your protagonist was female, and two, if that is something that you considered developing more, the gay identity of the character, and decided not to go there and just leave it in a very subtle way, or that it was something that you didn't feel you wanted to go into. It felt interestingly mute on purpose.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, first of all, no, Harrison Shepherd never was female. You might read otherwise on his Wikipedia site. **(laughter)** No, I knew from the beginning, that in order to do what this character would have to do, to have access to the—to the places that he went, and ultimately even he has an interesting relationship with the selective service in World War II, all of the things that he needed to do required

a masculine physique, a male identity. It was not—and it's interesting. I don't—I never want to give too much away, I don't want to talk too much about who he becomes or where he goes, because I really don't, I would rather—well, unless everyone has already read the book. But if not, yeah, I don't want to give too much away, but I felt that a man in his time being the person he is, and the questions he has about his own sexuality would probably be handled in the way that he handles them. I mean, it just all seemed appropriate. It wasn't—unlike Frida, I wasn't slamming the door on, you know, his lovers. I mean, there weren't other parts of his life that I had to push out. It seemed appropriate to his character and to the thematic material to handle it as it does. And it was, I mean, later on, again without giving out too much—he becomes he becomes criticized very publicly in very many embarrassing ways for all kinds of things that he never did or said, but, ironically, none of them is his sexuality because people didn't even *think* about that one.

ILAN STAVANS: Interestingly, when he is attacked for things that he didn't do, and for, you know, when the media starts putting him right there in the frying pan, it is because he has written a couple of novels, and then his relationship—we won't say too much but his relationship with Rivera and Kahlo become known and problematic, and he has written two novels by this point. You quote authentic pieces from the *New York Times* and from other printed media, and I found it provocative that you never quote from his work. Am I wrong here? You never quote from the novels that he actually writes.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Only when they are quoted in book reviews, which I also wrote. So it got really complicated.

ILAN STAVANS: And I wanted to ask you—in order to invent—you invent the life of a novelist, and you invent the novels of the novelist. Did you also envision the plots of those novels?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I did. I did. In fact, I mean—

ILAN STAVANS: You didn't write them, though. Maybe.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: There were a couple of times—well, I understood them very well. I think that I knew them so well in my mind that there's a—at my writing desk, in my office where I write, the bookshelf is behind me. It's a big bookshelf. Mostly it has all the greatest novels I've ever read, but directly behind me, right here, is a row of the handy access reference books, whatever I'm working on, you know, is right there, so I can turn around and grab, you know, whatever—it's a different set of references for each book, but the things that you're using a lot. And this book one of them, for example, was a dictionary of slang from the forties, from the '30s and '40s. One of them was a bound set of catalogs of women's clothing. They were like Sears, Roebuck catalogs so that I could go through and look at—just because everybody in your scene has to be fully dressed, well, unless they're not, but that's another story. Anyhow, so all these sort of

things that I grab all the time are there, and one time I turned around to grab *Pilgrims of Chapultepec*, one of his novels and I was like, "Nope, it's not there."

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: It was so real that you thought you could open it.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I just sort of thought I needed to check the flap copy.

ILAN STAVANS: Had you found that book and had you read it would you have enjoyed it? Is he a good novelist, a novelist like you, or is he a bad novelist?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I think that he is a popular novelist—

ILAN STAVANS: But you too.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Pardon me?

ILAN STAVANS: But you are as well.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: All, well, thank you. Good point. I was thinking, where would his books be if hey were you know in the bookstore He was a novelist of an ilk that was very common in his time. I mean, Dashiell Hammett. I sort of—he was—he

lived—well, he didn't really, but if he had been alive, he would have been alive in the last part of, the last days of American history when everybody read just for relaxation and pleasure, before they could, you know, turn on the TV, or rather, before television. I mean, radio was beginning, but most people sat down and read a book to just amuse themselves, they read for story and spectacle and color.

ILAN STAVANS: So this is entertaining but undemanding literature that he writes.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Kind of, I think so. I didn't really, I didn't ever really have to completely decide whether I would like his novels.

ILAN STAVANS: I want to thank for many things in the book, but for one in particular. There is a moment after he publishes I think it's the second book with the title Chapultepec—what's the title, *The Victims of Chapultepec*?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: *The Pilgrims of Chapultepec*. It's about the pilgrimage.

ILAN STAVANS: Which an editor decides—Every time there is a review, editors don't pay attention to how the word Chapultepec is spelled, it gets shortened, there are accents that disappear—

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: The pilgrims of Chawpick, is how it ends up.

ILAN STAVANS: As a Mexican who's in love with the Spanish language and lives in the United States, it happens so often that I see this in the media, and that is a form of oppression, believe me.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I know. I understand. I understand. You should see what my copy editor did with that.

ILAN STAVANS: I don't want to see that.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: No, she wanted to put the letters back in. You know, intentional mistakes, you have to—

ILAN STAVANS: No, that's so good that it's there, so subtle. Now, I had the impression that this book was about the Bush years.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, it was written under the Bush administration entirely. I began it in February of '02 and finished in February of this year, so the whole time I was writing, I was really thinking about the forces of culture and media and society that—

ILAN STAVANS: And the pervasiveness of governments?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Right, that bring us to this fear of criticism, this sense that we can't evaluate ourselves honestly, I mean, as a nation, that we really can't speak against government, and the culture of fear. I was really writing about the culture of fear, how it gets created, who makes that, and how it happens and why we go along with it, so that seemed quite relevant to me during the Bush years and then just as I was finishing up the last draft, boom! you know, we had a new administration and a new government that was all about change, and I thought—

ILAN STAVANS: "My book is messed up."

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: No, my book was fine.

ILAN STAVANS: It won't be read in the same way.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I thought, "will it still be relevant?" Well, now, the word "communist" and "socialist," you know, the word "socialist" is being lobbed around like a Molotov cocktail. I think we're still as a society trained to be terrified of these words, of the concepts that we imagine they represent. I mean, I think that every question that I asked in this book is still a valid question in my opinion.

ILAN STAVANS: We were talking a couple of days ago on the phone about being a novelist in the age of this media that gets all over and inside us and you said to me that you were going to navigate this thirty—thirty days?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Twenty-one days.

ILAN STAVANS: As a-What did you say, "an evangelist."

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I am an evangelist for literature.

(applause)

ILAN STAVANS: And the novel. Should the novel be defended at this point in time from being turned in—and yours is being part of this money situation of reducing prices and incrementing prices, should it—how—what kind of evangelical work can you do for the novel and for literature in a time like this?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, I tell you, I get plenty of opportunities. Because time after time after time I get asked. I mean, this evening is a spectacular exception, but in interviews most often I get asked, "What is your book about?" and they don't want to hear me say, "It's about five hundred pages long," they want a sound-bite. Or people ask, "What do you want people to get out of this?" They want a fortune cookie. So it gives me a wonderful opportunity to talk about the differences between a fortune cookie and a novel. You know, what a novel really can do.

ILAN STAVANS: You don't eat it.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: For starters, you don't eat it. **(laughter)** It takes longer to digest. It's just what I realize is that it really is worth talking to people about what a novel does, how it really takes us to a new place, how it generates empathy, how it—how you read it for the experience of being there, of being in it, how you can read it more than once. The novel has existed in its just about—you know, in its current form for hundreds of years, and, if you think about it, very few other art forms have persisted in this way, so unchanged. I mean this is not—This novel is not very different in its sort of fundamental form from, you know, from what Cervantes did, I mean in terms of its delivery, its package, and what it asks of us, and the fact that literature is symbolic is something that I find myself talking about again and again and again.

When you—heaven forbid you create. I mean, every novel has to have good and bad people in it, and if the bad one happens to be, oh, let's say a Baptist minister, then you hear again and again, "well, you must hate Baptist ministers." So that's an opportunity to say well—"Do you think that Dr. Jekyll—you know, do you think that Robert Louis Stevenson hated doctors, you know, is that why he did that?" You know, you get to explain that literature is symbolic, that characters are not about the people you know, they're about ideas.

ILAN STAVANS: But Cervantes, Barbara, didn't have to defend the novel, and here we are with this commodity that brings millions of dollars into publishers and makes writers—

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Ojalá!

ILAN STAVANS: Having to defend the novel that something that is out there and used by everybody, is this is a sign that the novel is on its last leg?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Oh, I don't think of myself as defending it so much as explaining it. People just need to be reminded. I think modern readers have many distractions, and they are trained to the short attention span, so it's an opportunity to just evangelize for the long attention span.

ILAN STAVANS: You were talking about—I was asking you about the evangelical work that you are doing now for this religion that is literature and yet you also—there's an evangelical aspect in the way that you go into your subjects. You know, Africa and Mexico, and some of the characters might be evil as you were presenting in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Is the pattern of your career to use a novel to bring yourself closer to other geographical and historical moments? Is this what your readers will expect in the next five or six or however many years it will take you to write the next book? Another continent or another country or a totally different aspect? Is that how you envision—is that how your career goes?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: The reader may expect—it makes me think of a handbill for a Mark Twain reading. He said, "The public may expect fireworks. The public may

expect whatever they want, but they'll get a reading." **(laughs)** I—all I can promise is that I will do something absolutely new every time. I never want to write the same book twice. That doesn't keep me awake. Of course people ask for this—they say, "oh, please, please write a sequel to *Prodigal Summer*," or what have you. I always tell them, "you write the sequel." Not—please don't put it on the Internet. But "you have this world now, what I hope is that I have given you a movie in your head and set of ideas and a place and a time and an experience and if you want to keep going back there and figure out, you know, and think about what those people do next, fine by me, but I need to move on."

I begin with a question that seems really big, really important, an appropriate—an appropriate question, because I'm going to spend a lot of time on it. I want it to be—to hold my attention, and then I write my way to an answer. Not necessarily *one* answer, but a point of satisfaction, so that I feel that when I finish I can give this to the reader and turn to them and say, "What do you think?" Once I've done that, I'm done.

ILAN STAVANS: How many versions does a book like this go through? If we can talk about versions using—

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Because of the blessed delete button, then there, you know, we don't have to talk about the mountains of paper in the recycling bin, thank heavens. I always think, though, about those words. When I hit delete, I think of those words sort of hanging over my head like thunderheads, shooing them out the door. But revision—revision is my favorite part of writing. I *love* revision.

ILAN STAVANS: Why?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Why? Because that's where the art really happens.

ILAN STAVANS: I agree with you.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I love that word "fabrication." Because it makes me think of threads pulling, pulling threads back and forth. Once you know the ending, then you can work backwards, so that every—

ILAN STAVANS: You can go deeper.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Yeah, so that every paragraph is somehow linked with every other paragraph. You start pulling out the colors and the shades of meaning and internal references so that everything refers to everything else, so that the end of this novel is literally contained in its beginning. It feels like omniscience. It's thrilling. And it's really nice to have a computer to do this. I don't print out—the daily work, you know, it's sort of—one paragraph is likely to get written, you know, fifty times, especially, if it's the first paragraph, then a hundred times. Some paragraphs may only get rewritten three or four times. But complete drafts that I print out, maybe seven to ten. But, you know, as I said, the early parts maybe you know more like twenty or thirty, and I would—I would—I would just keep revising.

ILAN STAVANS: Go on.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: It's hard to stop. But you do reach a point of diminishing returns, you know. When I noticed that I've changed a word and then changed it back and changed it back, okay done.

ILAN STAVANS: I'm going to invite the audience to ask you questions just in a minute or two. Before I do that, I'd like to ask you a final one to wrap up this part of the evening. And that is if your dreams are different while you're writing the book and if the characters have an intrusive way of getting into those dreams or the dreams into the characters.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: They do. I—I—I—it's a very strange dance with lunacy **(laughter)** when you're spending at least eight hours a day visiting with people in your head. You know, you say, "Good-bye, family, I'm going to talk to people that I made up."

ILAN STAVANS: That were dead.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: "Imaginary people now," and then at the end of the day you have to stop and go downstairs and make dinner, you know, without medication, **(laughter)** so it's a very odd thing, but it's also a very seductive part of fiction. It's one of

the main differences. I mean, Many things about writing narrative nonfiction and writing fiction feel very similar to me. A lot of the elements of craft are nearly identical, but this, this alternate reality, this sort of pull of going to be with my imaginary friends, especially toward the end, gets really strong. It gets harder and harder to say good-bye to them. And they *do* filter through my dreams. I dreamt a lot of dreams of cooking, and one morning very early in the morning I woke up and I told my husband, "I was cooking for Trotsky!" **(laughter)** So yes, they do. They inhabit—you inhabit their world and they inhabit—you know, they live in your world and it is very sad to say good-bye to them at the end. It sounds almost silly to say, but I miss Harrison Shepherd. I spent years with him, you know, he means a lot to me. But now I'm sending him off to you. Take care of him.

(applause)

ILAN STAVANS: Thank you, Barbara.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We're not about to let you go yet. Please come up to the mic and ask whatever question you might have.

Q: All right. Barbara, it's great to meet you. I'm a lazy journalist.

(laughter)

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: He identifies himself. I bet you're not.

Q: I am, and I'm also a big fan, and what makes your novels amazing is something that Ilan already touched on, which is that your characters are real—they breathe, they, you know, they have flesh, and I wondered if you have any advice for me, in my nonfiction magazine articles, about how to make my characters breathe and be real and be, you know, fully three-dimensionally formed.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Well, advice is something I almost never give, except, actually, when I used to teach—when I used to teach MFA creative writing students who were all in their you know, early twenties and all smoked cigarettes, **(laughter)** I would tell them "write—people go to books for wisdom. The only real advice I can give you is quit smoking to improve your odds of getting old enough to know something that people will want to read." **(laughter/applause)** So, other than that, I don't give advice, so I don't know if that's useful to you or not.

But I don't think you're lazy if you care that much about making your characters vivid. I think—I think good writing is in the details. This is why research, good research means, you know, turning off your computer and going somewhere where you can actually wear out shoe leather, because you need to know much more about any setting than you could ever learn secondhand. You need to know what it smells like. You need to know what the food tastes like. In terms of characters, the most vivid details often are not visual. We're a visual species, and you often see a sort of physical description, but it's very interesting that when you notice family resemblances, just for example, it may not be physical. It

may be in a gesture, you know, that a mother and daughter will make this—I think of this because people often say that my daughter and I have an identical way of sort of wrinkling our nose when we smile. And I can't see it, but it's something people notice, and it's these little details that are not necessarily, you know, sort of—the police ID, that really make a character have life. Did that dance dangerously near advice? I hope not.

ILAN STAVANS: I want to go back to something you said before, Barbara, about how you dealt with the Spanish language. Again, my questions often come in twos, like scorpions. There's a part in the book—well, there's a generous part in the book that takes place in Mexico. Did you imagine the interchange, the exchange of dialogue between the characters in the language that supposedly they are speaking, Spanish? And also, you and I were talking back about how difficult this is going to be to become a book translated into Spanish, because there's so much that is on the surface, so much that is—how would you envision working with a translator that will do this in Spanish, and would you get involved in the process more so than in previous books?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: It think that the better a work of literature is, the harder it is to translate, because literature at its best really uses the insides of words, it uses the nuance of language that is specific to language. It uses connotation. And so I thank you for the compliment that you've just given me that you believe this will be difficult to translate. I believe it probably will. And I—sometimes I am able to work with translators, which is great. I enjoy that if I can do it. Sometimes I just, you know, I'll get, you know,

the Finnish. I think of Finnish, because that's the funniest—sometimes I'll get a translated copy of my book and I open it up, I don't even know what book it is, really.

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: Because the language is so foreign.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: And they've changed the title. Did you ever see the Finnish language? It looks like your typewriter got stuck. You know, K-K-K, L-L-L.

ILAN STAVANS: I'm sure they wouldn't like that description, but—

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: A very, in a very good way. **(laughter)** But I don't think. I just—at some point have to say it's not my problem. I'm not doing this for the translators. In fact, several books, five books ago, five or six books ago I wrote a novel called *The Poisonwood Bible* and there's a character, in—one of the narrators has a peculiar—a peculiar kind of brain damage and she thinks, she thinks in this sort of backwards—

ILAN STAVANS: One of the daughters.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Ada. Ada Price. And she has very unusual way of expressing herself and she often writes in palindromes, you know, sentences that read the

same forward and backward, which were really hard to write. That's another whole story, but there are a lot of them, and they're really important to the plot—you can't just skip over them. So the day I went to Paris and met my French editor and this and that. And I had a lunch meeting with my French translator and the first thing she said to me was, "You have ruined my life."

(laughter)

ILAN STAVANS: That's a compliment.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Sor-rry. So I learned a while ago I'm just ruining lives and I'm sorry, but I hope for the best. I'm working now with my—the French translator of this and we're thinking about the title, because "la lacune" is a French word; it has some of the multiple meanings but not all of them. I kept thinking it should be the same, because it comes from the Latin, and after all, what is French but degenerate Latin? **(laughter)** I didn't really say that. But it's interesting and I have asked to be certain that the translator of this book is Mexican, not Castilian. We do our best, but ultimately—ultimately it's impossible to translate literature perfectly. Really what we all should do is learn to read other languages.

ILAN STAVANS: Well, I hope you continue ruining our lives through these novels. Thank you very much.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Thank you.

(applause)