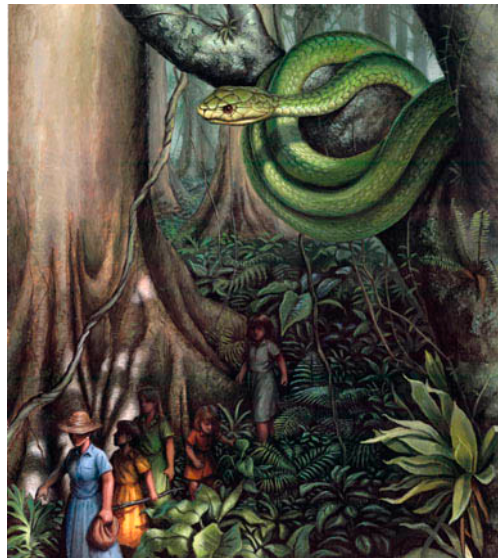


# Texas Christian University

2017 TCU APSI for English

The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel - The  
Voice of the Price Women and the  
Voice of the Congolese People



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***The Poisonwood Bible*** is told from five points of view: Orleanna Price, and her four daughters, Leah, Adah, Rachel, and Ruth May. Each of these women has a such a strong voice that as the novel progresses, you can usually determine who is speaking without any additional sight clues. Orleanna Price opens the novel with the following passage. Examine the diction, syntax, detail, and figurative language that reveal her distinct voice which will continue throughout the novel.

<p><i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> <i>Book One</i> GENESIS</p> <p><i>And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.</i> GENESIS 1:28 Orleanna Price SANDERLING ISLAND, GEORGIA</p> <p>IMAGINE A RUIN so strange it must never have happened.</p> <p>First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The breathing of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen. And, in reply, a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking life out of death. This forest eats itself and lives forever.</p> <p>Away down below now, single file on the path, comes a woman with four girls in tow, all of them in shirtwaist dresses. Seen from above this way they are pale, doomed blossoms, bound to appeal to your sympathies. Be careful. Later on you'll have to decide what sympathy they deserve. The mother especially—watch how she leads them on, pale-eyed, deliberate. Her dark hair is tied in a ragged lace handkerchief, and her curved jawbone is lit with</p>	<p>What is suggested by the subtitle "Genesis"?</p> <p>How is the biblical quotation reflected in the description of the forest in the opening?</p> <p>Why personify the jungle? How does that personification affect the reader? How does the use of "you" draw the reader into the story?</p> <p>Note the use of emotionally charged words, i.e. "ruin", "delicate", "poisonous", "war-painted", "strangling", "biting", "mammoth", "ravenous", "rotted", "sucking life", "death", "eats itself". All of them packed into the first full paragraph. How do they set the tone for the book?</p> <p>What "clues" does Orleanna continue to reveal about herself, her children, her situation, her feelings about the jungle itself? Note the various references to the "ants" which will play a prominent role in the novel.</p> <p>Note the various images that continue to appear in the text. Describe the feelings and associations that seem connected to the</p>
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large, false-pearl earrings, as if these headlamps from another world might show the way. The daughters march behind her, four girls compressed in bodies as tight as bowstrings, each one tensed to fire off a woman's heart on a different path to glory or damnation. Even now they resist affinity like cats in a bag: two blondes—the one short and fierce, the other tall and imperious—flanked by matched brunettes like bookends, the forward twin leading hungrily while the rear one sweeps the ground in a rhythmic limp. But gamely enough they climb together over logs of rank decay that have fallen across the path. The mother waves a graceful hand in front of her as she leads the way, parting curtain after curtain of spiders' webs. She appears to be conducting a symphony. Behind them the curtain closes. The spiders return to their killing ways.

At the stream bank she sets out their drear picnic, which is only dense, crumbling bread daubed with crushed peanuts and slices of bitter plantain. After months of modest hunger the children now forget to complain about food. Silently they swallow, shake off the crumbs, and drift downstream for a swim in faster water. The mother is left alone in the cove of enormous trees at the edge of a pool. This place is as familiar to her now as a living room in the house of a life she never bargained for. She rests uneasily in the silence, watching ants boil darkly over the crumbs of what seemed, to begin with, an impossibly meager lunch. Always there is someone hungrier than her own children. She tucks her dress under her legs and inspects her poor, featherless feet in their grass nest at the water's edge—twin birds helpless to fly out of there, away from the disaster she knows is coming. She could lose everything: herself, or worse, her children. Worst of all: you, her only secret. Her favorite. How could a mother live with herself to blame?

She is inhumanly alone. And then, all at once, she isn't. A beautiful animal stands on the other side of the water. They look up from their lives, woman and animal, amazed to find themselves in the same place. He freezes, inspecting her with his black-tipped ears. His back is purplish-brown in the dim light, sloping downward from the gentle hump of his shoulders. The forest's shadows fall into lines across his white-

images.

striped flanks. His stiff forelegs splay out to the sides like stilts, for he's been caught in the act of reaching down for water. Without taking his eyes from her, he twitches a little at the knee, then the shoulder, where a fly devils him. Finally he surrenders his surprise, looks away, and drinks. She can feel the touch of his long, curled tongue on the water's skin, as if he were lapping from her hand. His head bobs gently, nodding small, velvet horns lit white from behind like new leaves.

It lasted just a moment, whatever that is. One held breath? An ant's afternoon? It was brief, I can promise that much, for although it's been many years now since my children ruled my life, a mother recalls the measure of the silences. I never had more than five minutes' peace unbroken. I was that woman on the stream bank, of course. Orleanna Price, Southern Baptist by marriage, mother of children living and dead. That one time and no other the okapi came to the stream, and I was the only one to see it.

Select a place you know and can describe. It could be a room in a neighbor's home, a virtual landscape in a video game you enjoy, or a place that impressed you on a family vacation. Use the opening paragraph of *The Poisonwood Bible* to take us to that place. The template below can be a starting point for you. To help you begin, some of Kingsolver's words have been removed from the opening sentences. You do not have follow her precise construction – just copy her syntax, variety of sentence length, use of diction, use of fragments, rhythm, etc. to bring the place alive for us.

First, picture the \_\_\_\_\_. I want you to be its \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_. The \_\_\_\_\_ are \_\_\_\_\_. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The breathing of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen. And, in reply, a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking life out of death. This forest eats itself and lives forever.

### Figurative Language and Literary Devices<sup>1</sup>

Read the quotations below carefully. Match them with the literary devices and types of figurative language listed. Underneath the quotations, write commentary explaining how these devices deepen the reader's understanding.

repetition	metaphor	antithesis
analogy	simile	assonance
personification	synecdoche	alliteration

"The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason. "

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Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight."

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"a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps"

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"they are pale, doomed blossoms, bound to appeal to your sympathies"

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"each one tensed to fire off a woman's heart on a different path to glory or damnation."

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"while the rear one sweeps the ground in a rhythmic limp"

---

"the one short and fierce, the other tall and imperious"

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"flanked by matched brunettes like bookends"

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"Her dark hair is tied in a ragged lace handkerchief, and her curved jawbone is lit with large, false-pearl earrings, as if these headlamps from another world might show the way."

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"parting curtain after curtain of spiders' webs"

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<sup>1</sup><https://staff.mckinneyisd.net/MNHS/nbridges/Shared%20Documents/Postmodernism%20Poisonwood%20Bible/Student%20copy%20Poisonwood%20Commentary%20Journal-local.doc>

In the following selection from *Poisonwood Bible*, each of the daughters' responses reveals a fragment of the story of the invasion of the "army" ants. In your groups, discuss how diction, syntax, detail, and figurative language reveal the differences in the young women.

Leah	MY NOTES
<p>THIS AWFUL NIGHT is the worst we've ever known: the nsongonya. They came on us like a nightmare. Nelson bang-bang-banging on the back door got tangled up with my sleep, so that, even after I was awake, the next hours had the unsteady presence of a dream. Before I even knew where I was, I found myself pulled along by somebody's hand in the dark and a horrible fiery sting sloshing up my calves. We were wading through very hot water, I thought, but it couldn't be water, so I tried to ask the name of the burning liquid that had flooded our house—no, for we were already outside—that had flooded the whole world?</p> <p>"Nsongonya," they kept shouting, "Les fourmis! Un corps d'armée!"</p> <p>Ants. We were walking on, surrounded, enclosed, enveloped, being eaten by ants. Every surface was covered and boiling, and the path like black flowing lava in the moonlight. Dark, bulbous tree trunks seethed and bulged. The grass had become a field of dark daggers standing upright, churning and crumpling in on themselves. We walked on ants and ran on them, releasing their vinegary smell to the weird, quiet night. Hardly anyone spoke. We just ran as fast as we could alongside our neighbors. Adults carried babies and goats; children carried pots of food and dogs and younger brothers and sisters, the whole village of Kilanga. I thought of Mama Mwanza: would her sluggish sons carry her? Crowded together we moved down the road like a rushing stream, ran till we reached the river, and there we stopped. All of us shifting from foot to foot, slapping, some people moaning in pain but only the babies shrieking and wailing out loud. Strong men sloshed in slow motion through waist-deep water, dragging their boats, while the rest of us waited our turn to get in someone's canoe.</p>	

“Béene, where is your family?”

I jumped. The person beside me was Anatole.

“I don’t know. I don’t really know where anybody is, I just ran.” I was still waking up and it struck me now with force that I should have been looking out for my family. I’d thought to worry about Mama Mwanza but not my own crippled twin. A moan rose out of me: “Oh, God!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know where they are. Oh, dear God. Adah will get eaten alive. Adah and Ruth May.”

His hand touched mine in the dark. “I’ll find them. Stay here until I come back for you.”

He spoke softly to someone next to me, then disappeared. It seemed impossible to stand still where the ground was black with ants, but there was nowhere else to go. How could I leave Adah behind again? Once in the womb, once to the lion, and now like Simon Peter I had denied her for the third time. I looked for her, or Mother or anyone, but only saw other mothers running into the water with small, sobbing children, trying to splash and rub their arms and legs and faces clean of ants. A few old people had waded out neck-deep. Far out in the river I could see the half-white, half-black head of balding old Mama Lalaba, who must have decided crocodiles were preferable to death by nsongonya. The rest of us waited in the shallows, where the water’s slick shine was veiled with a dark lace of floating ants. Father forgive me according unto the multitude of thy mercies. I have done everything so wrong, and now there will be no escape for any of us. An enormous moon trembled on the dark face of the Kwilu River. I stared hard at the ballooning pink reflection, believing this might be the last thing I would look upon before my eyes were chewed out of my skull. Though I didn’t deserve it, I wanted to rise to heaven remembering something of beauty from the Congo.



## Rachel

THOUGHT I HAD DIED and gone to hell. But it's worse than that—I'm alive in hell.

While everybody was running from the house, I cast around in a frenzy trying to think what to save. It was so dark I could hardly see, but I had a very clear presence of mind. I only had time to save one precious thing. Something from home. Not my clothes, there wasn't time, and not the Bible—it didn't seem worth saving at that moment, so help me God. It had to be my mirror. Mother was screaming us out the door with the very force of her lungs, but I turned around and shoved straight past her and went back, knowing what I had to do. I grabbed my mirror. Simply broke the frame Nelson had made for it and tore it right down from the wall. Then I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

Out in the road it was a melee of shoving, strangers touching and shoving at me. The night of ten thousand smells. The bugs were all over me, eating my skin, starting at my ankles and crawling up under my pajamas till they would end up only God knows where. Father was somewhere nearby, because I could hear him yelling about Moses and the Egyptians and the river running with blood and what not. I clasped my mirror to my chest so it wouldn't get lost or broken.

We were running for the river. At first I didn't know why or where, but it didn't matter. You couldn't go anywhere else because the crowd just forced you along. It caused me to recall something I'd read once: if ever you're in a crowded theater and there's a fire, you should stick out your elbows and raise up your feet. How to Survive 101 Calamities was the name of the book, which covered what to do in any dire situation—falling elevators, train wrecks, theater fires exetera. And thank goodness I'd read it because now I was in a jam and knew just what to do! I stuck my elbows very hard into the ribs of the people who were crushing in around me, and kind of wedged myself in. Then I just more or less

picked up my feet and it worked like a charm. Instead of getting trampled I simply floated like a stick in a river, carried along on everyone else's power.

But as soon as we reached the river my world came crashing down. The rush came to a standstill, yet the ants were still swarming everywhere. The minute I stood up on the riverbank I got covered with them again, positively crawling. I couldn't bear it another second and wished I would die. They were in my hair. Never in my innocent childhood did I prepare for being in the Congo one dark night with ants tearing at my scalp. I might as well be cooked in a cannibal pot. My life has come to this.

It took me a moment to realize people were climbing into boats and escaping! I screamed to be put in a boat, but they all ignored me. No matter how hard I screamed. Father was over yonder trying to get people to pray for salvation, and no one listening to him either. Then I spotted Mama Mwanza being carried on her husband's back toward the boats. They went right past me! She did deserve help, poor thing, but I personally have a delicate constitution.

I waded out after her and tried to get into their family's boat. All the Mwanza children were still clambering in, and since I am their neighbor I thought surely they would want me with them, but I was suddenly thrown back by someone's arm across my face. Slam bang, thank you very much! I was thrown right into the mud. Before I even realized what had happened, my precious mirror had slipped from my hand and cracked against the side of the boat. I scooped it up quickly from the river's edge, but as I stood up the pieces slid apart and fell like knives into the mud. I stood watching in shock as the boat sloshed away from the shore. They left me. And my mirror, strewn all around, reflecting moonlight in crazy shapes. Just left me flat, in the middle of all that bad luck and broken sky.

## Ruth May

EVERYBODY WAS WHOOPING and hollowing and I kicked my legs to get down but I couldn't because Mama had a hold of me so tight it was hurting my arm. Hush, little baby! Hush! She was running along, so it kind of bounced when she said it. She used to sing me: Hush, little baby! Mama's going to buy you a looking glass!

She was going to buy me every single thing, even if it all got broke or turned out wrong.

When we got down there where everybody was she put me over her shoulder and stepped in the boat sideways with somebody's hands holding me up and the boat was wobbly. We sat down. She made me get down. It hurt, the little ants were biting us all over bad and it burned. That time Leah fed one to the ant lion, Jesus saw that. Now his friends are all coming back to eat us up.

Then we saw Adah. Mama reached out to her and started to cry and talk loud, like crying-talking, and then somebody else had a hold of me. It was somebody Congolese and not even Mama anymore, so I cried too. Who will buy me a looking glass that gets broke and a mockingbird that won't sing? I kicked and kicked but he wouldn't put me down. I heard babies crying and women crying and I couldn't turn my head around to see. I was going away from Mama is all I knew.

Nelson says to think of a good place to go, so when it comes time to die I won't, I'll disappear and go to that place. He said think of that place every day and night so my spirit will know the way. But I hadn't been. I knew where was safe, but after I got better I forgot to think about it anymore. But when Mama ran down the road with me I saw everybody was going to die. The whole world a-crying and yelling bad. So much noise. I put my fingers in my ears and tried to think of the safest place.

I know what it is: it's a green mamba snake away up in the tree. You don't have to be afraid of

them anymore because you are one. They lie so still on the tree branch; they are the same everything as the tree. You could be right next to one and not even know. It's so quiet there. That's just exactly what I want to go and be, when I have to disappear. Your eyes will be little and round but you are so far up there you can look down and see the whole world, Mama and everybody. The tribes of Ham, Shem, and Japheth all together. Finally you are the highest one of all.

### **Adah**

LIVE WAS I ere I saw evil.

Now I am on the other side of that night and can tell the story, so perhaps I am still alive, though I feel no sign of it. And perhaps it was not evil I saw but merely the way of all hearts when fear has stripped off the husk of kind pretensions. Is it evil to look at your child, then heft something else in your arms and turn away?

Nod, nab, abandon.

Mother, I can read you backward and forward.

Live was I ere I saw evil.

I should have been devoured in my bed, for all I seem to be worth. In one moment alive, and in the next left behind. Tugged from our beds by something or someone, the ruckus, banging and shouting outside, my sisters leaped up screaming and were gone. I could not make a sound for the ants at my throat. I dragged myself out to moonlight and found a nightmare vision of dark red, boiling ground. Nothing stood still, no man or beast, not even the grass that writhed beneath the shadow, dark and ravenous. Not even the startled grass.

Only my mother stood still. There she was, planted before me in the path, rising on thin legs out of the rootless devouring earth. In her arms, crosswise like a load of kindling, Ruth May.

I spoke out loud, the only time: help me.

“Your father...” she said. “I think he must have gone on ahead with Rachel. I wish he’d waited, honey, he’d carry you but Rachel was...I don’t know how she’ll get through this. Leah will, Leah can take care of herself.”

She can you can’t you can’t!

I spoke again: Please.

She studied me for a moment, weighing my life. Then nodded, shifted the load in her arms, turned away.

“Come on!” she commanded over her shoulder. I tried to stay close behind her, but even under the weight of Ruth May she was sinuous and quick in the crowd. My heels were nipped from behind by other feet. Stepped on, though I felt it vaguely, already numb from the burning ants. I knew when I went down. Someone’s bare foot was on my calf and then my back, and I was being trampled. A crush of feet on my chest. I rolled over again and again, covering my head with my arms. I found my way to my elbows and raised myself up, grabbing with my strong left hand at legs that dragged me forward. Ants on my earlobes, my tongue, my eyelids. I heard myself crying out loud—such a strange noise, as if it came from my hair and fingernails, and again and again I came up. Once I looked for my mother and saw her, far ahead. I followed, bent on my own rhythm. Curved into the permanent song of my body: left...behind.

I did not know who it was that lifted me over the crowd and set me down into the canoe with my mother. I had to turn quickly to see him as he retreated. It was Anatole. We crossed the river together, mother and daughter, facing each other, low in the boat’s quiet center. She tried to hold my hands but could not. For the breadth of a river we stared without speaking.

That night I could still wonder why she did not help me. Live was I ere I saw evil. Now I do not wonder at all. That night marks my life’s dark

center, the moment when growing up ended and the long downward slope toward death began. The wonder to me now is that I thought myself worth saving. But I did. I did, oho, did I! I reached out and clung for life with my good left hand like a claw, grasping at moving legs to raise myself from the dirt. Desperate to save myself in a river of people saving themselves. And if they chanced to look down and see me struggling underneath them, they saw that even the crooked girl believed her own life was precious. That is what it means to be a beast in the kingdom.

**Could you comment on the research and life experience that helped you to accurately recreate the world of missionaries and Congolese villagers in your latest novel? Your depiction is enthralling!**

Answer: Historical fiction is a frightening labor-intensive proposition. It took me many years to write *The Poisonwood Bible*, most of them spent on research which fell into several categories.

Most obviously, I read a lot of books about the political, social, and natural history of Africa and the Congo. Some of these are listed in a bibliography at the end of the novel; dozens more are not. Sometimes, reading a whole, densely written book on, say, the formation and dissolution of indigenous political parties during the Congolese independence, or an account of the life histories of Central African venomous snakes, would move me only a sentence or two forward in my understanding of my subject. But every sentence mattered. I knew it would take years, and tried to be patient. Some of my sources were famous and well-written, but most were obscurities, like the quirky self-published memoirs written by missionaries to the Congo in the 50s and 60s, which I'd sometimes find in used book stores. These were gems, rendering clear details of missionary life and attitudes from the era.

I read, and re-read daily, from the King James Bible. It gave me the rhythm of the Price family's speech, the frame of reference for their beliefs, and countless plot ideas.

Likewise, I began nearly every writing day by perusing a huge old two volume Kikongo-French dictionary, compiled early in the century (by a missionary, of course). Slowly I began to grasp the music and subtlety of this amazing African language, with its infinite capacity for being misunderstood and mistranslated.

One of the novel's challenges was the matter of capturing the language of teenage females from the Southeastern U.S. in the late 1950s. Since I was barely alive then, this was also foreign territory. Teenage speech is stereotyped and notoriously ephemeral; if I'd just guessed, it would have sounded inauthentic. This stumped me, until I hit paydirt in a used book store in Boston: 35 pounds (I had to mail them home) of *Life*, *Look*, and *Saturday Evening Post* magazines from 1958-1961. I spent hours immersed in the news, attitudes, and advertisements of these years. Slowly the voices of my novel began to emerge, and Rachel Price (like Athena) was born fully formed, with every hair in place:

"Aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?"

Another kind of research I did, as your question suggests, was in the domain of life experience. I happen to have spent a brief portion of my childhood (1963) in a small village in central Congo, and this undoubtedly gave that place permanent importance in my mind. I have strong sensory memories of playing with village children and exploring the jungle. When I began the novel my parents shared photographs and journals from that time, which helped stir my own memories. My parents were not missionaries, but we met several missionary families in Africa (though none quite like the Prices, I'm happy to report), so I knew a little of that life. But the bottom line is this: I was a child, in 1963, and understood only about a thimbleful of what was happening around me in the Congo. The thematic material of *The Poisonwood Bible* is serious, adult stuff. I wrote the book, not because of a brief adventure I had in place of second grade, but because as an adult I'm interested in cultural imperialism and post-colonial history. I had to approach the subject in an adult way.

As a research resource, other people's [*sic*] books provide only verbally rendered information. I also needed to know things about Africa that must be learned first-hand. I made research trips into Western and Central Africa (as near as I could get to Mobutu's Zaire), and kept detailed journals on sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and the sort of domestic trivia that seldom shows up in important books. Whenever possible I stayed with residents of the area I was visiting, and I always volunteered to cook dinner so I could walk to a village market with coins in hand and face the daunting, educational experience of bargaining and bringing home the ingredients of a decent meal. I asked a lot of questions that many Africans surely found amusing and too personal, but once in awhile I struck up a friendship. I'm especially grateful for these: the Senegalese mother, the University student in Cotonou who suffered my curiosity for days on end, frankly giving me views on religion, history, and family life that would permanently alter my universe.

I spent time in museums, here and abroad, studying exhibits of African religion and material culture. I lost myself in the amazing Okapi diorama in the American Museum of Natural History. And I spent one unforgettable afternoon in the Reptile House of the San Diego Zoo, watching a green mamba.

If this laundry list of disparate observations seems excessive or odd, I can only say that this is what it means to be a novelist. You have to be madly in love with the details.

**The evangelist Nathan Price never speaks for himself in this tale, we only see him through the eyes of his wife and daughters. Why did you not give Nathan a voice?**

Answer: Because of what the story is about. Some people seem to think this is a male/female issue, but that never even crossed my mind. Nathan obviously doesn't represent maleness! He represents an historical attitude. This book is a political allegory, in which the small incidents of characters' lives shed light on larger events in our world. The Prices carry into Africa a whole collection of beliefs about religion, technology, health, politics, and agriculture, just as industrialized nations have often carried these beliefs into the developing world in an extremely arrogant way, very certain of being right (even to the point of destroying local ideas, religion and leadership), even when it turns out as it does in this novel—that those attitudes are useless, offensive or inapplicable. I knew most of my readers would feel unsympathetic to that arrogance. We didn't make the awful decisions our government imposed on Africa. We didn't call for the assassination of Lumumba; we hardly even knew about it. We just inherited these decisions, and now have to reconcile them with our sense of who we are. We're the captive witnesses, just like the wife and daughters of Nathan Price. Male or female, we are not like him. That is

what I wanted to write about. We got pulled into this mess but we don't identify with that arrogant voice. It's not his story. It's ours.

“Author interview: Barbara Kingsolver.” Author interview: Barbara Kingsolver | Poisonwood Bible: Fall 2008 Reading Group | LibraryThing, [www.librarything.com/topic/45781](http://www.librarything.com/topic/45781). Accessed 28 Mar. 2017.