



Reading Nature *Tom Murphy*

Food for Thought

Review of Barbara Kingsolver. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. NY: HarperCollins, 2007.

We made a mistake when we set the small broccoli plants out in their beds in the spring. We mulched right away, covering the bed in a thick blanket of new mown grass and clearing little spaces for the plants. Mulch does wonderful things—suppresses weeds, holds in moisture—but there is also the dark side. The blanket of mulch over the loosened soil of the bed creates the perfect environment for voles—diabolical, nearly sightless lumps of fur that tunnel under the soil and along the surface under the mulch. I found an exit hole in the space around each plant, and since voles eat plant roots, some were gone completely. Slugs also like mulch, where they can hide out during the day and come out to munch at night. Since our plants were either being nibbled, trampled, or undermined, I got my act together, skimmed off the mulch, crushed the tunnels, and put out some mousetraps. The traps have not caught anything, but it showed them I meant business. In the basement, I found some Sam Adams lager whose fresh-from-the-brewery-taste was long in the past, though it still produced a nice head in the shallow pans I embedded in the ground to attract and trap slugs. Eventually, the plants did get ahead of the predators.

I was slow in dealing with the voles because about two-thirds of the way through the planting, Madalene, my spouse, who does more than half of the garden work, had had a foot operation, so she was forced to sit out the game with her foot up. While all this was happening, I was reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver with contributions by her husband, Stephen Hopp, and her daughter, Camille Kingsolver, and the book's message could not have come at a better time for me.

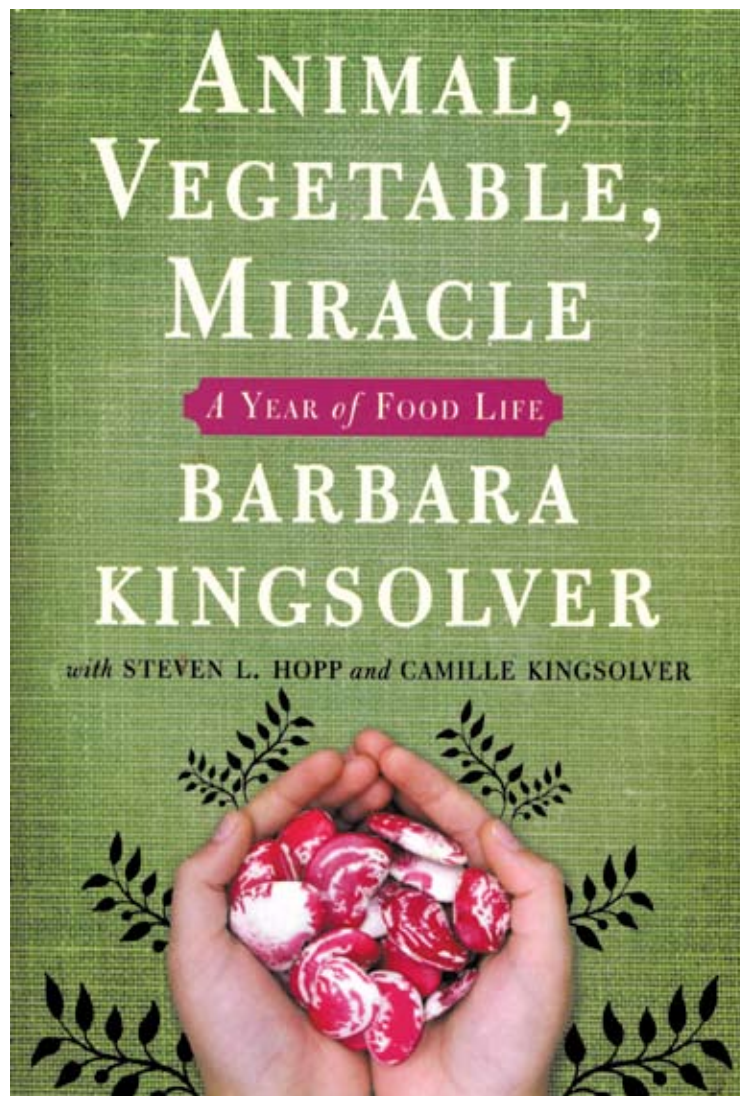
Kingsolver writes in praise of cooking and of being aware of where our food comes from. Kingsolver and her family had for many years grown some of their food and eaten fresh food obtained locally, but after moving from Tucson, Arizona, to southwestern Virginia, they decided to take the idea seriously and for a year to eat, as much as possible, only what they could find locally. During the year of eating locally, which the book chronicles, we see how the family establishes personal connections with local growers directly and through farmers' markets. The family works together growing and storing vegetables

(canning, drying, root-cellar), raising and butchering chickens and turkeys, and making sacrifices, like no fresh fruit in the dead of winter. They cook with some ingredients they cannot get locally (olive oil, for example, and flour), but what they are able to find is surprising. As Kingsolver also makes clear, an important component of eating locally is cooking the food yourself.

Not only was I on my own in the garden, at first I was pretty much on my own in the kitchen. Madalene is a skilled cook. She can bake a cherry pie, Billy boy, with a whole wheat crust, from scratch. I, on the other hand, am a skilled appreciator of her skill. But I had to boldly go where I had not gone much before, and, with some instructions called out from a nearby recliner, I managed to keep us fed. Kingsolver's praise of cooking whetted my appetite for learning to be a more active cook, and our working together in the kitchen turned out to be one of the positive aspects of Madalene's recuperation.

The book does not ignore the health value of eating fresh, chemical-free food; in fact, the sections written by her college-student daughter, Camille, who is majoring in nutrition, often involve health issues. Stephen, Kingsolver's husband, adds notes on the political and economic factors affecting food. But the vast majority of the material in the book is Kingsolver herself focusing on the social aspects of cooking and on how the way we obtain, prepare, and eat food has a profound impact on our individual and family lives, on local environments, on the social structure of the United States, and on the health of the planet. For Kingsolver, cooking is a big deal.

Though few of us will go to the extreme to which they went, the book is inspiring in its suggestions about how we can make food a more vital part of



our lives. I don't know whether my involvement in the cooking will remain expanded after Madalene recovers fully. There are so many time pressures pushing us into old habits. Kingsolver makes clear that how we eat is one of the fundamental components of our lives, and because changing the way we deal with food echoes so loudly through the chambers of the rest of our daily lives, making that change is both difficult and significant.

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