

Back to nature

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*Prodigal Summer*, by Barbara Kingsolver

*A Friend of the Earth*, by T.C. Boyle

These two "econovels" couldn't be more different. Barbara Kingsolver imagines a utopia of sex and fecundity ruled over by glorious nature and wise females. T. C. Boyle offers a dystopia in which all the efforts of environmentalists and ecoterrorists accomplish nothing, and the world succumbs to global warming. Curiously, Boyle's novel ends up being more reassuring.

Kingsolver tells three parallel stories that gradually come together. Deanna Wolfe is a wildlife biologist spending two years living alone in National Forest land on a mountain in southern Appalachia. Lusa Maluf Landowski is a lepidopterist whose marriage has brought her to a farm at the foot of the mountain. And Garnett Walker and Nanny Rawley are two old people from old area families living on adjoining farms and feuding over chemical intensive vs. organic farming. It is "the season of extravagant procreation," and among the humans as among the animals, pheromones call to pheromones and men and women are drawn into each other's embrace. But what if their goals conflict? What if one wants to protect coyotes and the other wants to destroy them? What if one likes nature wild and the other wants to farm and subdue it?

The women win. They are better educated than the men, and find endless opportunities to instruct and lecture them on nature's ways--on the prime importance of predators, on the harm pesticides cause, on ways to succeed at small-scale farming. Those who like to be instructed may relish this part of the novel; others may find it annoyingly didactic.

Lusa, for example, is half Jewish and half Palestinian. Her father's family lost its farm in Poland because they were Jewish; her mother's family lost its farm in Palestine because they weren't Jewish. Lusa's position between the three great monotheistic religions and her knowledge of the feast days of each enable her to develop a brilliant scheme for producing a crop that will save the farm from bankruptcy--at

least for another year.

In the end, the males are expendable. Widowed in the first year of her marriage, Lusa concludes that her husband "wasn't supposed to be my whole life, he was just this doorway to me." She is grateful to him for bringing her to the place and work for which she was meant. She adopts the two children of her dying sister-in-law and settles down to maintain the family homestead and tradition. Deanna spends a summer of love with a young man who both understands and threatens the ecology of her mountain, and then returns alone to the farming community to bear his child. As in the coyote families that miraculously extend their range into the Appalachian mountains, the females form a sisterhood that protects and nurtures the young.

As in Kingsolver's earlier novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, fundamentalist Christianity plays the role of villain. The heroes of her story believe in a remote God, who loosely guides evolution, and in the glorious cycles of a benign nature. In Kingsolver's idyllic natural world, no one gets dirty or smelly, no matter how primitively they live, and loss is always the doorway to greater joy.

T. C. Boyle's characters are less likeable and the natural world he presents is far less benign. The story moves back and forth between 2025-26--a period in which most species have died and climate changes are turning California alternately into a lake and a desert inferno--and 1989 and 2000, when a band of environmentalists resort to terrorism to try to stop the despoiling of the Oregon and California forests. In 1989 Ty Tierwater is a middle-aged businessman whose new wife is inducting him into the radical fringes of environmental activism. By 2025 he is a tired, disillusioned and bitter old Noah working to save the species "only a mother could love."

Tierwater is unsentimental about nature. After all, his first wife died from anaphylactic shock following a bee sting while they were on a camping trip. He becomes an ecoterrorist as much out of revenge as out of ecological commitment. It's hard to like Tierwater, but it is impossible not to sympathize with his stubborn integrity and his love for his wife and, above all, his daughter.

What gives the novel its depth is its biblical imagery. Tierwater and his wife, Andrea, become heroes of the environmental movement when they head naked into the wilderness (journalist in tow to record their adventure) to spend a month living completely at one with nature. As they turn their backs on the gathered crowd, "Tierwater was reminded of nothing so much as Raphael's depiction of the expulsion

from paradise. But that wasn't right. It was paradise they were entering, wasn't it?" Of course it isn't. They pass the month in semistarvation. Yet out of Boyle's ironic narrative of self-delusion and self-importance, a deep sense of love for the natural world and for humanity's place in it emerges.

Tierwater loses everything--his wife, his daughter, and even the animals he has tried to save. Yet the novel ends on a note of hope and regeneration as Andrea and Ty are reunited and again head for the blasted mountain forests to rebuild the wrecked house in which they had once lived. They watch the woods begin to come back, "the shoots of the new trees rising up out of the graveyard of the old, aspens shaking out their leaves with a sound like applause, willows thick along the streambeds."