

FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR

Barbara Kingsolver

Introduction

Flight Behaviour (2012) is a novel by Barbara Kingsolver that examines the intersection of **environmental change, social issues, and human emotion**. Set in the rural Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, it explores how global issues, particularly **climate change**, manifest in the lives of ordinary people. The novel combines **ecological awareness, personal transformation, and social critique**, making it a compelling study of humanity's relationship with nature.

The story centers on **Dellarobia Turnbow**, a young woman whose encounter with a miraculous natural phenomenon triggers both personal and communal transformation. Through Dellarobia's journey, Kingsolver conveys the **urgency of climate awareness, the power of education, and the importance of moral responsibility**.

Setting

The novel is set in the **Appalachian Mountains**, a region known for its natural beauty, conservative rural culture, and economic challenges. The Turnbow family farm, where much of the story unfolds, is emblematic of **poverty, tradition, and the hardships of rural life**. Kingsolver's vivid descriptions of mountains, forests, and weather patterns not only create a rich backdrop but also serve as a reflection of the **larger ecological changes** affecting the world.

Main Characters

1. Dellarobia Turnbow

- The protagonist, a 28-year-old woman trapped in poverty and an unfulfilling marriage.
- Intelligent, curious, and ambitious, Dellarobia dreams of a life beyond her farm but feels constrained by social and economic limitations.
- Her encounter with the monarch butterflies triggers a transformation, awakening her **intellectual curiosity and ecological consciousness**.

2. Cub Turnbow

- Dellarobia's husband, kind but complacent.
- He represents traditional rural masculinity and a focus on survival over change.
- His relationship with Dellarobia shows the tension between love and societal expectations.

3. Bear and Hester Turnbow

- Cub's parents, representing older generations with **resistance to change** and skepticism about science and modern ideas.
- Their views reflect the community's traditional mindset and limited exposure to environmental issues.

4. Dr. Ovid Byron

- A lepidopterist (butterfly scientist) who studies the sudden appearance of monarch butterflies in the region.
- He represents the **voice of science**, seeking to explain ecological phenomena and raise awareness about climate change.
- He bridges the gap between rural life and scientific knowledge, helping Dellarobia understand the broader significance of her discovery.

5. Other supporting characters

- The community of Feather River Valley: villagers, teachers, and neighbors who illustrate **varied reactions** to the butterflies, ranging from wonder to skepticism.
- Scientists and journalists who visit to study the butterflies, highlighting the **intersection of global knowledge and local experience**.

Plot Summary

1. Dellarobia's Dissatisfaction

The novel begins by introducing Dellarobia Turnbow's life, which is **monotonous and constrained**. She lives on a sheep farm with her husband, Cub, and their two children. Dellarobia's youthful dreams of education and independence have been curtailed by early motherhood, poverty, and social expectations. She feels trapped and unfulfilled, longing for escape. This sense of restlessness sets the stage for her eventual transformation.

2. The Miraculous Discovery

One day, on a walk to escape her daily responsibilities and possibly meet another man for a fleeting affair, Dellarobia notices **trees glowing orange on the mountainside**. Initially, she interprets the phenomenon as a **miracle or divine vision**.

Later, she discovers that what she saw were **millions of monarch butterflies** that had unexpectedly migrated to Tennessee instead of Mexico, their usual wintering grounds. This abnormal migration is caused by **climate change**, which disrupts their natural behavior and threatens their survival. Dellarobia becomes the first in her community to witness the butterflies' arrival, making her a key figure in the unfolding scientific investigation.

3. Arrival of Science and Media Attention

The sudden appearance of the butterflies draws **scientists, journalists, and tourists** to the rural town. Dr. Ovid Byron and his research team arrive to study the butterflies. He explains that their presence in Tennessee is **abnormal and dangerous**, highlighting the consequences of **global climate disruption**.

While the scientists view the event through a lens of research and ecological concern, the villagers, including Dellarobia's family, initially see it as a **miraculous event**, demonstrating the **tension between faith and science**.

4. Dellarobia's Transformation

Dellarobia becomes deeply involved in understanding the butterflies and the environmental changes they represent. She engages in conversations with Dr. Byron, learns about climate change, and develops a sense of **scientific curiosity and responsibility**.

Her personal journey parallels the ecological narrative: just as the butterflies must adapt to survive, Dellarobia must navigate **social, moral, and intellectual challenges** to grow as an individual. She begins to assert her independence, think critically, and consider a future beyond her constrained rural life.

5. Social and Community Reactions

The novel examines **how communities respond to climate change and environmental anomalies**. Many villagers are skeptical of scientific explanations, viewing them as irrelevant to their daily struggles or as threats to traditional belief systems. Economic hardship, lack of education, and reliance on religion shape their responses. Some see the butterflies as **divine signs**, while others worry that the attention from scientists and media could **disrupt their fragile livelihood**.

Through this, Kingsolver shows that climate awareness is not simply a matter of knowledge—it is also **shaped by social, economic, and cultural realities**.

6. Personal and Environmental Interconnection

A key feature of the novel is its **interconnection between human experience and ecological reality**. Dellarobia's personal dissatisfaction and search for meaning mirror the butterflies' struggle to survive in an altered climate.

Kingsolver emphasizes that **environmental crises are inseparable from human life**, and solutions require both **scientific understanding and personal engagement**. The novel repeatedly illustrates how **small choices—like conserving land, respecting nature, or educating oneself—can have broader consequences**.

7. Climax and Resolution

The climax occurs as Dellarobia gains **full awareness of the significance of climate change** and the urgent need to act. She becomes a mediator between the scientific community and her local village, helping translate scientific knowledge into understandable, relevant terms for her neighbors.

By the end of the novel:

- Dellarobia begins to envision a **new path for herself**, balancing family, personal growth, and social responsibility.
- The butterflies, while threatened, symbolize **hope, resilience, and the possibility of adaptation**, echoing Dellarobia's own transformation.

The resolution is both **personal and symbolic**, showing that awareness and action—though challenging—can lead to **renewal and hope**.

Major Themes

1. **Climate Change and Environmental Crisis**
 - The novel dramatizes climate change as a **real, tangible, and urgent issue** affecting both humans and wildlife.
 - Kingsolver illustrates how global warming disrupts ecosystems, migration patterns, and community life.
2. **Faith vs. Science**
 - Villagers interpret the butterflies as miracles, while scientists emphasize evidence and research.
 - Kingsolver portrays both perspectives empathetically but underscores the **importance of scientific literacy and ecological awareness**.
3. **Personal Transformation and Empowerment**
 - Dellarobia's journey reflects growth, critical thinking, and self-realization.
 - The novel emphasizes that **personal awakening is connected to social and ecological responsibility**.
4. **Social and Economic Inequality**
 - Poverty, gender roles, and lack of education influence how individuals perceive and respond to climate change.
 - Kingsolver critiques societal structures that **limit awareness and action**.
5. **Interconnectedness of Life**
 - Humans, animals, and the environment are deeply connected.
 - Disruption in one part of the ecosystem (like butterfly migration) reflects **broader consequences for human life**.

Symbolism

1. **Monarch Butterflies**
 - Represent beauty, fragility, and the effects of climate change.
 - Symbolize the connection between **human and ecological survival**.
2. **The Mountains and Forests**
 - Symbolize both **stability and vulnerability**.
 - Reflect rural life, tradition, and human dependence on nature.
3. **Dellarobia's Journey**
 - Her personal growth parallels ecological adaptation, highlighting **resilience and hope** in the face of adversity.

Writing Style

Kingsolver's style is:

- **Lyrical and descriptive:** Detailed imagery of the Appalachian landscape and butterflies.

- **Emotionally engaging:** Characters' internal thoughts and feelings are vividly portrayed.
- **Scientific yet accessible:** Complex environmental concepts are explained through narrative rather than technical jargon.
- **Culturally rich:** Dialogue reflects local dialects and rural Appalachian culture.

Conclusion

Flight Behaviour is both a **climate change novel and a story of human growth**. Barbara Kingsolver shows how global ecological issues manifest in local communities and everyday lives. Through Dellarobia Turnbow's awakening, readers understand the **interdependence between humans and nature**, the **importance of scientific awareness**, and the **power of personal action**.

The monarch butterflies symbolize the fragility and resilience of life, while Dellarobia embodies hope, curiosity, and responsibility. The novel reminds readers that **change begins with awareness**, and even small acts of understanding or care can have far-reaching consequences for both humanity and the natural world.

Kingsolver's work is a call to **empathy, education, and ecological consciousness**, making *Flight Behaviour* both a **compelling story and a moral guide** in times of environmental crisis.