**Barbara Kingsolver/Erica Wagner**

In 2018 it can seem as if the world is more unstable than it ever has been before. So many things that we take for granted – the survival of democracy, the reliability of the weather – are under threat. Speaking to the Barbara Kingsolver is a reminder that, just perhaps, we’ve been here before. She’s on her farm in Virginia, and I’m in London, and we’re talking on the phone about her latest novel *Unsheltered*, a book which builds a bridge between two turbulent times, the present day and the 1870s. “Everything I read suggested that the 1860s and 1870s was a time when people couldn’t wrap their minds around a wholly new way of looking at the world. At times like that we’re very tempted to cling to charlatans who claim that they can make America great again.”

The novel opens in 2016. Willa Knox has just moved with her family to Vineland, New Jersey; she and her husband have lost almost everything when the university at which he was employed folded, bankrupt. Luckily they’ve inherited a falling-down house in the town – a place which, Willa discovers, has a fascinating history. A parallel narrative concerns that history: it is set in Vineland, in 1871, not long after the town’s founding by Charles Landis, a charismatic charlatan with an interest in real estate (sound familiar?). Willa becomes obsessed with the story of Mary Treat, a local woman who corresponded with Charles Darwin; arguments over Darwin’s new theories are causing tumult in the town. Willa Knox is Kingsolver’s invention; Landis and Treat may be found in the historical record.

It’s a truly marvellous book. Kingsolver has always had a remarkable ability to weave history, science and storytelling into a seamless and compelling whole; she began her career as a biologist, but it was fiction which brought her fame. *The Poisonwood Bible*, set in the Belgian Congo, is an acknowledged classic; *Flight Behaviour* addresses climate change through the migration of monarch butterflies; *The Lacuna*, which touches on the lives of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, won the Orange Prize in 2009.

Kingsolver tells me that she’d wanted to write for a while about the moment of cultural and scientific tumult kicked off by the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. She’d considered writing about Darwin himself, and went to Down House, his home in Kent to start research: “but I realized that I’m an American novelist; I needed to set this story in the country where I lived.” It was looking at the work of Asa Gray, the Harvard professor who was Darwin’s champion in the United States, which led to her Mary Treat: she had corresponded with both men. When she began to explore Treat’s life, “I discovered that I had hit gold. This woman who had led a really interesting life – not just professionally but personally, too. And she had lived in a place right out of a storybook, which I didn’t know until I went there, to Vineland. The more I read about this Charles Landis character -- town father, business owner, circus ringmaster, charlatan, saviour of the people – the more I thought, Wow, that’s a parallel. I found so many parallels between then and what’s happening now in the United States. Much of which hadn’t even started happening when I was writing.”

 Kingsolver interests and influence stretch beyond the pages of her novels. In 2007 she published *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* – an account of the year she and her family spent trying to eat entirely locally on their Virginia farm. She is the founder of the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, worth $25,000 and the largest monetary prize for an unpublished work of fiction in North America. Most literary prizes, she says, “are a pat on the back for someone who doesn’t really need it”; the PEN/Bellweather is meant to be “a career-founding award”. As it has been: The film adaptation Hillary Jordan’s 2006 winner, *Mudbound*, found acclaim last year; Lisa Ko’s *The Leavers*, which won the prize in 2016, went on to be a finalist for the National Book Award. The prize is part of the grass-roots activism which, she says, “is so exciting to me”. The increase in social engagement is the upside to what she sees as a dire political situation in her native land: she’s delighted by all the young women, in particular, who she sees running for office. “I know we wouldn’t have that if we didn’t have abysmal governance.”

 What’s wonderful about Kingsolver’s work is her ability to convey optimism in even the most difficult situations – without ever sugarcoating anything. “Something I know to be true about the human animal is that we don’t change anything when we’re comfortable,” she says. “When we get uncomfortable, we move in one of two directions. One is to grab hold of the past in any way we can, even if that means getting selfish and mean – or we look to the future. We don’t get to opt out; you have to be hopeful.” Kingolver is a writer to treasure, to read and re-read: she sees the world as it is, but believes, always, in the possibility of change.