

Room to Read, Book Group Three  
September Meeting

***Unsheltered* by Barbara Kingsolver**

This is the story of the inhabitants of a very decrepit house in New Jersey in two different turbulent eras: in the aftermath of the American Civil War around 1870, and in the run-up to the momentous election of the Bullhorn - as he is referred to in the text - in 2016.

The title represents both a real and present worry to those inhabitants as the house falls down around their ears and a metaphor for the sense of threat and uncertainty engendered by the big issues of the day. The nineteenth century house-dwellers are a well educated but dirt poor schoolteacher, his shallow young wife (whom he married in lust and is repenting forever), his mother-in-law from whom his wife has inherited her sense of entitlement to things that cannot be afforded, and his 12 year old sister in law, who seems to be happily free of pretention, but about to be unwillingly launched into society in a corset. The schoolmaster is confronted by the considerable power and force of fundamentalism in his attempts to bring rationalism (and a good bit of Darwinism) to his students and neighbours. However, he finds two allies in Mary Treat, the botanist and correspondent of Darwin's, and the proprietor of a radical newspaper that repeatedly challenges the nefarious and corrupt man who "owns" the township.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century residents have much in common: the seriously ill father-in-law, whose utterances would sit well with the BNP, the two adult children of the household with strongly divergent ideas about how to live in the times they are in, the father, an impoverished schoolmaster, always at risk of the end of his tenure at the university, and the wife, Willa, who has never quite achieved her own expectations. The narrative of their lives is: it doesn't matter how hard you work, and what you deserve, the power to deny your plight and keep you down lies elsewhere.

This sounds like a real downer, but there is wit and hope in the novel. Barbara Kingsolver's style is accessible and smooth. I chose this book in the firm belief that everyone would love it, but this was not the case. It had two detractors: both felt it too long, with too much

dialogue and that it was overly contrived, though they could concede some passages of excellent writing. Those in favour loved it for its warmth and character development, the Kingsolver passion for environmental issues (evident in all of her writing) and for its laugh out loud moments. The range of views demonstrated that it was indeed a good book group choice.

Average scores out of 5: Readability 3.5, Book Group Choice 4.5

Annie Clouston