

Flight Behavior



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This novel is the first that I've read that tackles the problem of climate change head-on. An environmental tragedy in Mexico has forced most of the continent's monarch butterflies to find a new winter habitat. *Flight Behavior* also narrates the story of a young woman, Dellarobia, who lives on a hard-scrabble farm in Appalachia. She's herded in by a strict mother-in-law, Hester, and even more so by the family's poverty. One day she decides to risk her marriage by having a tryst on the family's mountaintop with a telephone lineman named Jimmy.

After hiking up the mountain, Dellarobia sees through the fog (despite her severe myopia) that the hills and trees are on fire: hundreds of monarch butterflies have nestled there. The young woman abandons her plan for an affair and returns to her mother-in-law's to pick up her two young kids, Preston and Cordelia.

Dellarobia's history affects many pieces of the narrative: she's lost both her parents when she was young, got pregnant as a senior in high school, and married Cub to do "the right thing." Then she suffered a miscarriage and it took many years for her to have a child.

She was very smart in school but only had one decent teacher, her English teacher. She never went to college. Yet she defies her parents-in-law in their plans to log the mountain. Somehow the media finds out about the countless monarchs that have arrived in backwoods Tennessee and overnight Dellarobia becomes a media sensation.

Kingsolver, who studied ecology on the graduate level, knows her science. She also knows the people of Appalachia, how they think, how they react to newcomers and experts. For in a matter of hours, a bunch of college kids, environmentalists, TV crews, and scientists descend upon their land.

The novel is also examines Dellarobia's and Cub's marriage. Why is she always having crushes on other men? Why does she feel more like Cub's parent than his helpmate?

Dellarobia understands that Cub is a decent and kind man, yet intellectually she feels they have little connection. Complicating things is the arrival of Dr. Ovid, a monarch specialist who moves his study-trailer onto the field behind their house. He and his grad students soon transform the family barn (they pay decent rent) into a real laboratory where Dellarobia soon learns how to check lipid levels of the butterflies, weigh them, count them scientifically, and record their "flight behavior." Suddenly, Dellarobia has a career that fascinates her and a passion for her work. Dellarobia's best friend Dovey adds humor, and a hint of what Dellarobia's life would have been like if she hadn't married. Then there's Reverend Billy whose sermons begin to center on the natural world and our responsibility to protect it as the logging deal gets closer to happening. One of the closest relationships in the book is between Dellarobia and her son Preston, who at age five has already decided to become a scientist. Together, they study an animal encyclopedia from 1952 and books on lambing because Hester has finally consented to let Dellarobia help with that aspect of their farm.

The climate change theme never gets polemical though Kingsolver does incorporate a list of things that ordinary people can do to lower their carbon pollution. A fun fact about the book is

that all of the female characters' names come from Kingsolver's own family. Kingsolver really gets inside the heart and mind of this questing woman Dellarobbia--at a time of crises. In a wonderfully tense scene, Dellarobbia helps with a lamb birth, surprising herself with skills and dreams that she never knew she possessed. Another lyrical novel about butterflies, entomologists, and the fragility of life is *Sanctuary Line* by Jane Urquhart. For a nonfiction account of the science behind climate change, read *The Global Climate Reader* edited by Bill Mckibben.

Posted by Dory L. on December 18, 2012

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