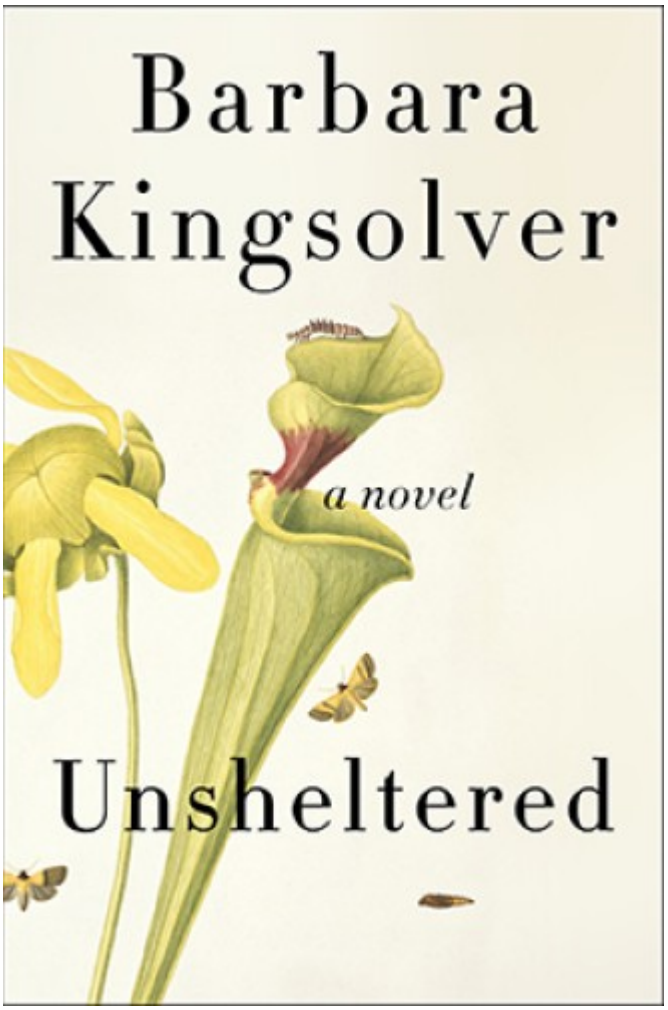
American houses built on sand

Barbara Kingsolver shows that without truth, foundations crumble.

by LaVonne Neff in the October 24, 2018 issue

In Review



Unsheltered: A Novel

By Barbara Kingsolver
Harper

“Your foundation is nonexistent,” the contractor tells Willa Knox. He is speaking about the house she has inherited from a recently deceased aunt, but he could just as well be describing her life. In her midfifties, Willa has lost her job as a magazine journalist. Her husband, Iano, formerly a tenured professor at a college that shut down for financial reasons, is about to begin a poorly paid, one-year teaching appointment. The crumbling house is also home to Iano’s ailing father, Nick. Hearing impaired and argumentative, Nick incessantly listens to right-wing radio at full volume. It is late summer 2015, and a billionaire that Willa calls “the Bullhorn” is vying for the Republican presidential nomination. Nick loves the Bullhorn’s crude racist comments. Willa can’t stand either the Bullhorn or Nick.

There’s nothing subtle about Barbara Kingsolver’s message: when the rains descend and the winds blow, a house built on sand will fall. A scientist by training and the author of seven other novels, Kingsolver consistently preaches that truth is the only secure foundation for a healthy society. When anything—fundamentalism, politics, greed, denial—obstructs truth, calamity follows; and aversion to truth, she believes, is a long-standing American tradition. While the odd-numbered chapters of *Unsheltered* tell Willa’s story, the even-numbered chapters are set in late summer 1874: same town (Vineland, New Jersey), same location (near the corner of Sixth and Plum), similar problems.

A contractor delivers bad news to Thatcher Greenwood. The house he lives in, inherited by his mother-in-law from her late husband, was built by unskilled amateurs. “It will eventually pull itself apart down the middle,” the contractor warns. Fortunately, Thatcher’s prospects look good. He has been hired to teach science at Vineland’s newly constructed high school. Though rebuilding a decaying house is well beyond his means, he can move his family to more suitable housing. But his wife and mother-in-law refuse to leave their family home, and Thatcher’s job is threatened when his lectures on Darwin clash with the school principal’s religious convictions.

It can’t be easy for a novelist to leap repeatedly from the 21st to the 19th century and back again without losing her balance, or perhaps her readers. A reader who enjoys Willa’s family drama may weary of Thatcher’s story, where exposition often takes precedence over action. Still, it’s easy to identify with both Willa and Thatcher as—startled by their impending loss of shelter—they grope for solutions.

Willa, endearing in her bafflement, desperately seeks for ways to save the old house while meeting the conflicting needs of her family members, who helpfully epitomize various American attitudes: the irascible Trump fan, the cheerful husband who ignores reality, the adult son who believes capitalism will save the world, the daughter who incessantly moralizes about American deficiencies.

Thatcher, a nice guy who always upholds truth and justice, is dragooned into public debates that read like unusually well-written general science texts. His supporting cast is as stereotypical as Willa's: the empty-headed Victorian wife and mother-in-law, the sanctimonious Christian principal, the outspoken newspaper editor who pursues truth at any cost, the misunderstood scientist who converses in long paragraphs of botanical information.

Interestingly, some of the 19th-century characters are historical. The scientist, Mary Treat, was an entomologist who carried on a lively correspondence with Charles Darwin. The newspaperman, Uri Carruth, edited the *Vineland Independent*. Vineland itself was founded by Charles K. Landis, whom Kingsolver depicts as a man with "grasping hands: not only was he Vineland's mayor and sole land agent but also its postmaster, acting police chief, hotelier, owner of many businesses, and autocratic editor of the *Weekly*. His governance had a habit of elevating his own enterprises and ruining competitors." It is not hard to identify his 21st-century counterpart.

And that's the point of this bifurcated novel: the troubles we face today have ancient roots. There is nothing new under the sun. Bullies will bully, most people have an astounding "capacity to live a life undisturbed by actual evidence," and the beliefs that once protected us may collapse for want of foundation. Unsheltered, we panic. "These are more dangerous times than we ever have known," says Thatcher.

But Tig, Willa's self-righteous millennial daughter, offers faint rays of hope. Unexpectedly, at least to Willa, she shows compassion for her politically opposite grandfather. In a moving graveyard scene, she also reaches out to Willa, who fears that not only her house but her entire way of life is doomed. "When God slams a door on you it's probably a shitstorm. You're going to end up in rubble. But it's okay because without all that crap overhead, you're standing in the daylight," Tig says. "What you have to do is look for blue sky." By the end of the book, blue-sky optimism is all that's left. For Willa, Tig, and Thatcher, it seems to be enough.