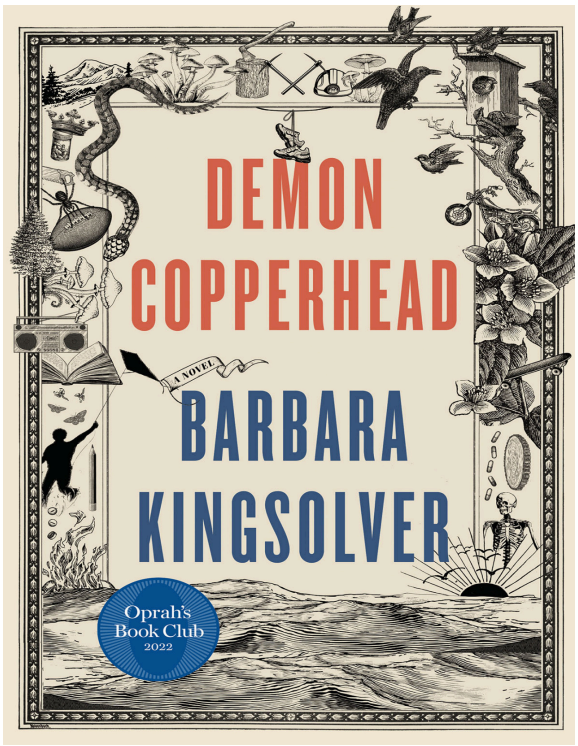


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Dedication

For the survivors.

Epigraph

“It’s in vain to recall the past, unless it works some influence upon the present.”

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

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Acknowledgments
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1

First, I got myself born. A decent crowd was on hand to watch, and they've always given me that much: the worst of the job was up to me, my mother being let's just say out of it.

On any other day they'd have seen her outside on the deck of her trailer home, good neighbors taking notice, pestering the tit of trouble as they will. All through the dog-breath air of late summer and fall, cast an eye up the mountain and there she'd be, little bleach-blonde smoking her Pall Malls, hanging on that railing like she's captain of her ship up there and now might be the hour it's going down. This is an eighteen-year-old girl we're discussing, all on her own and as pregnant as it gets. The day she failed to show, it fell to Nance Peggot to go bang on the door, barge inside, and find her passed out on the bathroom floor with her junk all over the place and me already coming out. A slick fish-colored hostage picking up grit from the vinyl tile, worming and shoving around because I'm still inside the sack that babies float in, pre-real-life.

Mr. Peggot was outside idling his truck, headed for evening service, probably thinking about how much of his life he'd spent waiting on women. His wife would have told him the Jesusing could hold on a minute, first she needed to go see if the little pregnant gal had got herself liquored up again. Mrs. Peggot being a lady that doesn't beat around the bushes and if need be, will tell Christ Jesus to sit tight and keep his pretty hair on. She came back out yelling for him to call 911 because a poor child is in the bathroom trying to punch himself out of a bag.

Like a little blue prizefighter. Those are the words she'd use later on, being not at all shy to discuss the worst day of my mom's life. And if that's

how I came across to the first people that laid eyes on me, I'll take it. To me that says I had a fighting chance. Long odds, yes I know. If a mother is lying in her own piss and pill bottles while they're slapping the kid she's shunted out, telling him to look alive: likely the bastard is doomed. Kid born to the junkie is a junkie. He'll grow up to be everything you don't want to know, the rotten teeth and dead-zone eyes, the nuisance of locking up your tools in the garage so they don't walk off, the rent-by-the-week motel squatting well back from the scenic highway. This kid, if he wanted a shot at the finer things, should have got himself delivered to some rich or smart or Christian, nonusing type of mother. Anybody will tell you the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose.

Me though, I was a born sucker for the superhero rescue. Did that line of work even exist, in our trailer-home universe? Had they all quit Smallville and gone looking for bigger action? Save or be saved, these are questions. You want to think it's not over till the last page.

It was a Wednesday this all happened, which supposedly is the bad one. Full of woe etc. Add to that, coming out still inside the fetus ziplock. But. According to Mrs. Peggot there is one good piece of luck that comes with the baggie birth: it's this promise from God that you'll never drown. Specifically. You could still OD, or get pinned to the wheel and charbroiled in your driver's seat, or for that matter blow your own brains out, but the one place where you will not suck your last breath is underwater. Thank you, Jesus.

I don't know if this is at all related, but I always had a thing for the ocean. Usually kids will get fixated on naming every make and model of dinosaur or what have you. With me it was whales and sharks. Even now I probably think more than the normal about water, floating in it, just the color blue itself and how for the fish, that blue is the whole deal. Air and noise and people and our all-important hectic nonsense, a minor irritant if even that.

I've not seen the real thing, just pictures, and this hypnotizing screen saver of waves rearing up and spilling over on a library computer. So what do I know about ocean, still yet to stand on its sandy beard and look it in the eye? Still waiting to meet the one big thing I know is not going to swallow me alive.

Dead in the heart of Lee County, between the Ruelynn coal camp and a settlement people call Right Poor, the top of a road between two steep mountains is where our single-wide was set. I wasted more hours up in those woods than you'd want to count, alongside of a boy named Maggot, wading the creek and turning over big rocks and being mighty. I could go different ways but definitely a Marvel hero as preferable to DC, Wolverine being a favorite. Whereas Maggot tended to choose Storm, which is a girl. (Excellent powers, and a mutant, but still.) Maggot was short for Matt Peggot, related obviously to the screaming lady at my birthday party, his grandmother. She was the reason Maggot and I got to be next-door-neighbor wild boys for a time, but first he'd need to get born, a little out ahead of me, plus getting pawned off on her while his mom took the extended vacay in Goochland Women's Prison. We've got story enough here to eff up more than one young life, but it is a project.

Famously, this place where we lived was known to be crawling with copperheads. People think they know a lot of things. Here's what I know. In the years I spent climbing around rocks in all the places a snake likes to lie, not one copperhead did we see. Snakes, yes, all the time. But snakes come in kinds. For one, a common spotty kind called a Water Devil that's easily pissed off and will strike fast if you make that mistake, but it's less of a bite than a dog deals out, or a bee sting. Whenever a water snake gets you, you yell all the curse words you've got stored up in your little skull closet. Then wipe off the blood, pick up your stick, and go on being an Adaptoid, thrashing on the mossy stump of evil. Where, if a copperhead gets you, that's the end of whatever you planned on doing that day, and maybe with that part of your hand or foot, period. So it matters a lot, what you're looking at.

If you care, you'll learn one thing from another. Anybody knows a sheepdog from a beagle, or a Whopper from a Big Mac. Meaning dogs matter and burgers matter but a snake is a freaking snake. Our holler was full of copperheads, said the cashiers at the grocery whenever they saw our address on Mom's food stamps envelope. Said the school bus driver, day in, day out, snapping the door shut behind me like she's slamming it on their pointy snake faces. People love to believe in danger, as long as it's you in harm's way, and them saying bless your heart.

Years would come and go before I got to the bottom of all the heart-blessing, and it was not entirely about snakes. One of Mom's bad choices,

which she learned to call them in rehab, and trust me there were many, was a guy called Copperhead. Supposedly he had the dark skin and light-green eyes of a Melungeon, and red hair that made you look twice. He wore it long and shiny as a penny, said my mother, who clearly had a bad case. A snake tattoo coiled around his right arm where he'd been bit twice: first in church, as a kid trying for manhood among his family's snake-handling men. Second time, later on, far from the sight of God. Mom said he didn't need the tattoo for a reminder, that arm aggravated him to the end. He died the summer before I was born. My messed-up birthday surprised enough people to get the ambulance called and then the monster-truck mud rally of child services. But I doubt anybody was surprised to see me grow up with these eyes, this hair. I might as well have been born with the ink.

Mom had her own version of the day I was born, which I never believed, considering she was passed out for the event. Not that I'm any witness, being a newborn infant plus inside a bag. But I knew Mrs. Peggot's story. And if you'd spent even a day in the company of her and my mom, you would know which of those two lotto tickets was going to pay out.

Mom's was this. The day I was born, her baby daddy's mother turned up out of the blue. She was nobody Mom had ever met nor wanted to, given what she'd heard about that family. Snake-handling Baptist was not the half of it. These were said to be individuals that beat the tar out of each other, husbands belting wives, mothers beating kids with whatever object fell to hand, the Holy Bible itself not out of the question. I took Mom's word on that because you hear of such things, folks so godly as to pass around snakes, also passing around black eyes. If this is a new one on you, maybe you also think a dry county is a place where there's no liquor to be found. Southwest Virginia, we're one damn thing after another.

Supposedly by the time this lady showed up, Mom was pretty far gone with the pains. The labor thing coming at her out of nowhere that day. Thinking to dull the worst of it, she hit the Seagram's before noon, with enough white crosses to stay awake for more drinking, and some Vicodin after it's all a bit too much. Looks up to see a stranger's face pressed so hard against the bathroom window her mouth looks like a butt crack. (Mom's words, take or leave the visual.) The lady marches around through the front door and tears into Mom with the hell and the brimstone. What is she doing to this innocent lamb that Almighty God has put in her womb?