

**PinkMonkey® Literature Notes on . . .**

## **SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES FOR "THE BEAN TREES"**

**These are only excerpts from the complete summary to show you the format of the complete MonkeyNote booknotes.**

# *The Bean Trees*

by

**Barbara Kingsolver**



MonkeyNotes by D. L. Cassie

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## **Key Literary Elements**

### **Setting**

The novel begins in Pittman, Kentucky, a fictitious place that has the character and type of people you might find in any small Kentucky town. The characters pass through the Cherokee Nation area of Oklahoma. However, most.....

### **List of Characters**

#### **Major Characters**

**Taylor Greer** – She begins the novel as Marietta “Missy” Greer and changes her name as she travels west. Her life changes when an abandoned child is placed in her car. Taylor is the.....

**Turtle** – This abused child that ends up in Taylor’s care is the focus of much of Taylor’s conflict. She is .....

**Mattie** – She is the owner of Jesus Is Lord Used Tires, which doubles as a safe house for Central .....

**Lou Ann Ruiz** – She is an attractive young blonde, and the mother of a baby boy, Dwayne Ray. Her.....

**Estevan** – He was an English teacher in Guatemala but is now a refugee. He and his wife stay with.....

#### **Minor Characters**

**Mama** – Taylor’s mother, though not an actual player in this story, is a presence throughout the novel. Taylor remembers her, quotes her, and speaks on the phone to her. Mama gives Taylor self-confidence .....

**Angel Ruiz** – He is Lou Ann’s husband. He lost his leg in an accident and, unable to get over it, he .....

### **Conflict**

**Protagonist** - Taylor Greer is the key protagonist and the most developed character of the novel. She is the narrator, thus the reader sees everything from her angle. She struggles through life’s challenges and by the end of the.....

**Antagonist** - There is no true antagonist, no one character that plays the villain in the novel. Different situations cause conflict with the protagonist. The antagonist is the human condition. Taylor’s personality conflicts with her.....

**Climax** - The climax occurs when Taylor takes a stand on her relationship with Turtle and her feelings for.....

**Outcome** - Although the characters feel life’s struggle, all of their difficulties are resolved somehow through.....

### **Plot (synopsis)**

The novel follows the experiences of Marietta “Missy” Greer as she leaves her childhood home, Pittman, Kentucky. Unlike many of her peers, she has avoided pregnancy and is getting away. She heads west with a

barely functioning Volkswagen Bug, determined to change her name according to the first place she has to stop. She ends up in Taylorville. Now Taylor Greer, she drives through the Cherokee Nation area of Oklahoma and her car breaks down. Here an abused, abandoned baby girl is unloaded upon her. She names the child Turtle because of the baby's unrelenting grip.

Taylor and Turtle drive on together. Challenged with unexpected motherhood and two flat tires, Taylor arrives at Jesus Is Lord Used Tires in Tucson, Arizona. The tire shop is run by a woman named Mattie, and doubles as a safe house for Central American refugees. Mattie gives Taylor moral support and a job. Taylor learns that her own troubles are small compared to those of Estevan and Esperanza, a couple who have had to give up their daughter and are fleeing from both Guatemalan death squadrons and the I.N.S.

As the result of a newspaper ad looking for a roommate, Taylor now lives with Lou Ann Ruiz and her .....

### **Background Information**

Barbara Kingsolver grew up in eastern Kentucky and, like her character Marietta Greer, never imagined herself staying there. She left Kentucky and attended DePauw University in Indiana where she majored in biology. (She took one creative writing course.) She pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, receiving a Masters of Science degree. (She also took a writing class taught by author Francine Prose.)

After graduate school Kingsolver wrote for journals and newspapers as a science writer for the University of Arizona. In 1986 she won an Arizona Press Club award. In 1995 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from .....

### **Historical Information**

There are two items of history that will assist in the understanding of the author's development of the story. The first is the existence of the Cherokee Nation, the second, the Guatemalan Civil War.

The Cherokee Nation was established in 1839 after almost 17,000 Indians were forced from their southeastern homeland and marched to "Indian Territory", now the state of Oklahoma. About 4,000 died of hunger, exposure, and disease on this *Trail of Tears*. The Cherokee Nation is the second largest Indian tribe in the U.S. Many of its.....

## **Chapter Summaries with Notes**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Summary**

The Bean Trees begins as Marietta (Missy) Greer describes how Newt Hardbine's father was blasted over the top of a Standard Oil sign by the explosion of an overfilled tractor tire. She describes Newt as an elementary school flunky whose life will amount to nothing much. She then describes herself as raised without a father but encouraged by her mother who would carry on about how special Missy was. Missy intended to amount to something.

In high school, though she was not unfamiliar with boys, Missy was one of the few girls who had made it to senior year without having to drop out due to pregnancy. It was then that Mr. Hughes Walter, with his blonde hair and tight jeans, became the science teacher. Every girl wanted an excuse just to speak to him. His wife, a nurse, asked him if he had someone in his classes that could work at the hospital. Missy was quite sure that

she wouldn't be chosen, but her mother convinced her that she was "plenty good enough" for the job and should tell Mr. Walter so. Missy got the job (she was the first to ask).

She had been working in the lab, filing papers, carrying human waste products and counting platelets under the microscope, less than a week when "hell busted loose". Newt Hardbine and his wife Jolene were rolled into the hospital hurt and bloody. Jolene had been shot in the shoulder and Newt was dead. Feeling sympathetic, Missy listened to Jolene tell how Newt's father beat him up, beat her up, and even hit their baby. Desperate, Newt shot himself and Jolene. This whole scene upset Missy to the point that she vomited twice and spent the remainder of the day counting the same platelets over and over, convinced that she would quit this job. However, by the time Missy finished telling her mother what happened, she decided she'd probably seen the worst of it and had no reason to quit. Once again, Missy's mother, in her special way, made Missy feel, "like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good."

Missy kept the job at Pittman County Hospital for five and a half years. But all along, she had a plan to get away from there, away from Kentucky. With the money she'd saved after helping her mother with the rent and the bills, Missy bought herself a '55 Volkswagen Bug with no windows, no back seat, and no starter. She explains how she had to push start it and how her mother made sure she could handle anything that might come along. Mama let the air out of the tires and stood there while Missy pumped them back up with a bicycle pump (all the while envisioning Newt's daddy flying up in the air).

Missy left Pittman County making two promises to herself. The first promise was to get herself a new name. Wherever she ran out of gas she'd look for a sign. She kept this promise, ending up in Taylorville. Her new name would be Taylor Greer. The second promise was to drive west until her car broke down and wherever it stopped running, she would stay. As she drove, Missy (now Taylor) became depressed by the flat, hopeless nothingness of the Great Plains. She wouldn't keep the second promise.

Her car gave out in Oklahoma in an area owned by the Cherokee Nation. She was amused because she had a great-grandpa who was Cherokee and her mother used to say that the Cherokee Nation was their "ace in the hole", that they could live there if they ever ran out of luck. Taylor thought the treeless emptiness was no place where.....

## Notes

The use of the first person narrative immediately sweeps the reader into an intimacy with Missy Greer's humble but outspoken manner. She first compares herself physically and economically to Newt Hardbine. But then she describes her relationship with her mother and we see that she really is not cut from the "same mud" as Newt. Missy thinks and acts for herself. She, not Newt, will be *The One to Get Away* (chapter title).

The colloquial language sets the tone of the novel, which is illustrated in the first chapter. Life is not easy, but it has beauty and humor, and our resourceful heroine is a woman who could handle whatever comes her way. When she leaves Pittman County and changes her name, we sense that Taylor's travels will cross boundaries of both geography and emotion. The appearance of the child punctuates Taylor's struggle and refocuses the direction of the journey.....

## Overall Analyses

### Characters

**Taylor Greer** – Taylor begins the novel as Marietta “Missy” Greer. She has not had an easy life growing up in rural Kentucky, but she has a mother who is always proud of her. It is from her mother that she gets her clear-eyed, spirited outlook and her confidence. Unlike her peers, she makes it through high school without getting pregnant, and then promptly leaves Pittman.

Upon crossing the Pittman line, “missy” makes two promises to herself – one to change her name to the name of the first place she ran out of gas, the other, to settle down wherever her windowless, push start Volkswagen stopped running. Her name change, a symbol of her break with her past, was destiny, facilitated by a conscious decision to continue driving so as not to end up being named Homer, Cerro Gordo, Decatur, or some other cognomen distasteful to “Missy”. She coasts into Taylorville “on the fumes” and becomes Taylor Greer. The second promise, she does not keep. Her rocker arm breaks on the Great Plain in Oklahoma. Taylor finds the flat emptiness depressing and plans to move on. Though this stop does not provide Taylor with a new home, it does change her life in a powerful way – she is given.....

**Turtle** – Turtle is a physically, sexually and emotionally abused child who ends up in Taylor’s care. In terms of change, she is the most dynamic character in the novel. She grows from being a pitiable wet bundle wrapped..... in a blanket to a speaking, feeling, normal child.

Turtle’s past is revealed to the reader bit by bit through her experiences with Taylor. At the Broken Arrow, we learn of the abuse. At the doctor’s office we learn her age (close to 3 years). And at Lake o’ the Cherokees we learn that she has seen her dead mother buried. Her past has been unthinkable, yet she endures. The birds in the story represent to Taylor this ability to carry on despite Turtle’s difficult past. Turtle gains security and identity through Taylor.....

**Lou Ann Ruiz** – The reader meets Lou Ann in two short chapters at the beginning of the novel (chapter 2 and chapter 4, which are not in Taylor’s first person narrative). She is feeling hopeless because of the imminent break up of her marriage. She knows that the problems stem from her husband, Angel, being unable to get over the.....

**Mattie** – Mattie is a strong woman who nurtures others. As owner of Jesus Is Lord Used Tires, she gives Taylor a job. Almost immediately the reader senses the mother-daughter type bond between the two women. Mattie is.....

**Estevan** – Estevan is an attractive, well-educated Guatemalan man. He is charming, well mannered and in tune with women’s feelings and ideas. When Taylor meets him she finds him unbelievably attractive and has no.....

**Esperanza** – Esperanza is the small, sad wife of Estevan. Though it is hinted right off that her sadness involves a child like Turtle, it is not until Estevan’s talk with Taylor, on the night of Esperanza’s attempted suicide, that the.....

### Plot

The novel is written in the voice of Taylor Greer. In this instance of first person narrative, Taylor is not only the medium through which the story is conveyed, but also the central character. The people and events of the

novel are presented to the reader after having been percolated through Taylor's senses and moral code. Each chapter ends with a remark that punctuates Taylor's feelings about the preceding events.

Unity of time is maintained in the novel, but once Taylor heads west, unity of place is disrupted. The events in Taylor's story are portrayed chronologically with a traditional path of story development. The beginning chapters are introductory (including the two chapters not narrated by Taylor) and we are eventually led into Taylor's quest toward self-discovery. Though there is a straight line of time, there is not just one high point. The story rises and falls in ripples of emotion as something significant happens each time Taylor changes location. The final climactic swell occurs when.....

### **Themes**

The most powerful of the three themes is the theme of family. The interesting twist is the fact that none of the "families" in the novel are actually families in the nuclear sense. Taylor Greer, the protagonist, comes from a nonstandard family. She was raised solely by her mother, in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and self-esteem. The absence of a father had no obvious negative impact. Mother and daughter made an effective family unit.

Taylor ventures out into the world and becomes an instant mother when a child is left on.....

### **Point of View**

Being told in first person by Taylor Greer, the novel obviously comes from a female point of view. This point of view, however, goes beyond narration. There are virtually no "good" men in this novel. From page one, Newt Hardbine and his father are depicted as scrubby riffraff; Marietta's mother describes Marietta's father as.....

### **Study Questions**

1. What political views does the author express?  
Is the novelist unduly harsh toward men? Discuss.....

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