

# Novelist Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*, a homage to Charles Dickens

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15 December 2022

*Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver, New York: Harper, 2022, 560pp.

The adjective “Dickensian” entered the English language to signify systemic social inequality and brutal poverty and squalor, especially regarding the cruel treatment of children who are victims of circumstance.

US author Barbara Kingsolver's latest novel *Demon Copperhead*, a coming-of-age narrative written in homage to Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, explores the way this term is applicable to the contemporary US opioid crisis in Appalachia, an area she knows intimately.

The social crisis emerged when giant US pharmaceutical companies pumped billions of opioids into the populations of some of the poorest, deindustrialised regions of the country, deliberately campaigning for doctors to prescribe them. Many an addict began with a prescription from a doctor.

Between 2006 and 2012, 76 billion prescription pain pills were pumped out, fuelling an epidemic to which the companies responded by pumping more pills into the hardest hit regions, above all Appalachia. Former coal mining centres in Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia and Tennessee were targeted in particular.

By 2021 US deaths from overdose of synthetic opioids rose to 71,000, up from 58,000 in 2020.

That Kingsolver has chosen to write about the impact of the opioid crisis, at the same time delving into the history of literature, lines up with the interest she has previously shown in social and historical issues. Her early novels (1988 and 1993) featured the adoption of an Indigenous child by a non-Indigenous parent. The 1998 publication of *The Poisonwood Bible*, about the consequences of an American family travelling to the then Belgian Congo in 1959 so the father could be a missionary, won her a wide following. *The Lacuna*, set in pre-World War II Mexico and post-war United States, won her the Orange Prize for literature.

Kingsolver must have a fascination with Victorian England and the connections it can have with today's United States. Her 2018 novel *Unsheltered*, which partly concerned

the contemporary threat of homelessness even for middle class people, featured an archival discovery of a real letter from Charles Darwin.

That a leading novelist like Kingsolver has embarked on a project paying sincere tribute to Dickens is positive, given some of the identity politics based hostility directed against him in recent years.

She has written, “I am grateful to Charles Dickens for writing *David Copperfield*, his impassioned critique of institutional poverty and its damaging effects on children in his society. Those problems are still with us. In adapting his novel to my own place and time, working for years with his outrage, inventiveness, and empathy at my elbow, I've come to think of him as my genius friend.”

Kingsolver's imaginative reworking of the novel Dickens described as “his favourite child” (for it wove in some autobiographical elements) is entirely readable as a stand-alone work of fiction, but she has faithfully graphed the plot line of *David Copperfield*, and sometimes transplanted conversations straight from Dickens.

Both *Demon* and *David*, born fatherless and soon orphaned and left with heartless stepfathers, have blighted childhoods. Kingsolver parallels the experience *David* endures at a vicious boarding school with *Demon*'s life at the hands of social security, farming him out to a foster parent who will take those children rejected by everybody else, only to work them unmercifully as cheap labour.

In England, *David*'s stepfather has more misery in store for the boy, and sends him *aged ten* to work in London in a bottle washing factory. Undoubtedly drawing on his own traumatic experience in a blacking (shoe polish) factory aged not much older than *David* when his (the novelist's) father was imprisoned for debt, Dickens depicts heart-wrenching loneliness, isolation and alienation in the metropolis.

For *Demon*, shunted from one foster home to another, the foster system is completely impersonal and dispiriting, but he finds emotional support in the countryside of Lee County, Virginia.

The area, however, is blighted by endemic drug usage

thanks to the campaign by big Pharma to target the area, once a centre of working class militancy, and reduce it to social misery.

Demon, whose mother died of a drug overdose, later himself becomes addicted after being prescribed opioids for a football injury, starting off with hydrocodone (Vicodin®) and graduating to oxycodone (OxyContin®).

Kingsolver has successfully followed Dickens in her translation of the somewhat idealised working class Peggotty family in David's life. For Demon, the rambling Peggotty family bears a similar relationship to David's interactions with Clara and Daniel Peggotty. Mrs Peggott, the matriarch of the Virginia clan and her beloved daughter June, who has become a highly qualified nurse, are among the only ones who withstand the OxyContin scourge.

As a positive role model, June Peggott is meant to mirror Dickens' upstanding seaman Daniel Peggotty, not only for her battle against the narcotics epidemic, but like him conducting a determined and protracted struggle to rescue her adopted daughter from ruin.

June attempts to warn Demon and his football coach, who had become his guardian, against the painkillers. "She and Coach left the room, but I heard them out in the hall. Coach using his fifty-yard-line voice, and she was also plenty loud enough, telling him she used to see two or three narcotic patients a year and now that many every day. Then she gave up on him and came back to work on me."

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Demon doesn't listen to her, because he desperately wants to get back on the football field. "This was legitimate, not using. With all the blood pumping through my heart, I believed that, and vowed as much to Coach. I would follow doctor's orders to the T, and he'd let me play... I went back to taking oxy's on the clock."

Together with his lover Dori, Demon falls into a lifestyle of addiction that spirals downward. The novel contrasts three funerals—two for victims of drug overdose and one for the kindly former miner Mr Peggott, who "went out on the tide" of old age. For his funeral, not only were the sprawling Peggott clan members assembled, but the entire remainder of the once tight-knit mining community.

"My own mum's funeral was stuck in my craw that day. It hit me hard, how different this one was... The service was so different from Mom's. The minister *knew* Mr Peg. He told all these stories on him, and everybody was right there.... Dead but still here, in other words. That's what killed me the worst. At Mom's funeral, the casket closed on her and she was just over and out. Whatever good was still known about her, if any, was all on me, and I was too pissed off to

do anything with it."

Dickens' outrage and genius that Kingsolver acclaims are nowhere so evident as in the cast of supporting characters he creates, with Mr and Mrs Micawber, as well as Uriah Heep and his mother, unforgettable masterpieces.

The Micawbers are perennially battling for respectability while they face continual bankruptcy and destitution. Mr M is irrepressible and Mrs M, who has married beneath her station, swears she will never leave him. The Heeps are determined to weasel their way up the social scale by trading on their servility to all their "betters." Uriah's machinations end in his entirely suitable downfall.

Kingsolver references these characters as the impecunious Mr and Mrs McCobb and devious U-Haul, but they pale in comparison with the Dickens originals.

Another distinctive pair penned by Dickens are James Steerforth, who is capable of boundless cruelty to those socially inferior to him, and his mother, who endorses absolutely her son's right to destroy the lives of others if it suits him.

Steerforth's double in Kingsolver's novel is Sterling Ford, known as Fast Forward, the former high school football hero, who trades on his earlier fame to further his pursuit of drugs, sex and anything else for his own amusement.

His is not the class arrogance of the upper middle class evinced by the Steerforth pair. Class lines in Kingsolver's setting have become more blurred, as the middle class has been hollowed out and virtually everybody is struggling.

Given the savage prospects for today's children and young people, Kingsolver tries to grapple dramatically with one deep social problem thrown up by contemporary capitalism. For doing that, while she also arouses interest in reading Dickens' masterpiece, she is to be applauded.



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