
“If someone you loved was dying, what would you do?” (p.441.) Some 400 pages into the book, somewhere in the middle of a conversation revolving around butterfly genetics, super insects, migratory behaviour and volunteers who were slowly beginning to lose hope in the *cause* and leave, Dr Ovid Byron, ecologist and entomologist, poses this question to Dellarobia Turnbow, high school passout, housewife, mother and daughter-in-law. I begin the review of *Flight Behaviour* with a quote so far into the book because it is at this point that a question jumps up at the reader, suddenly and impactfully, and the question is not just something one fictional protagonist in the book asks another but a real answer that the book demands of its real readers from their real lives.

Herein lies the beauty of the book and the ingenuity of its plot. *Flight Behaviour*, even as it deals with what most in the book hope to believe to be a “miracle”, at no point seems to paint a distant, imaginary world or events but instead recounts a real, relatable, scary, sad, frustrating yet hopeful set of narratives played out by everyday characters in an everyday setting. This review essay first provides a brief introduction to the author and an overview of the book’s broad storyline. This is followed by a more detailed discussion around the key characters, their background stories, their journeys, their hopes and its lack thereof, while we delve into some of the key issues and themes the book superbly brings to light, sometimes subtly, sometimes blaringly directly. The essay concludes with a discussion of points of personal connect with the book and the possibilities of the advancement of environment sustainability through literature such as *Flight Behaviour*.

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. Having received degrees in biology from DePauw and Arizona University, she began her career as a freelance writer and later as a full-time novelist and

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poet. The key themes that run through most of the award-winning pieces of work she has produced are those of human–nature relationships and the place of justice, class, gender, education and communities in shaping such relationships. Two of her most acclaimed works include *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle. Flight Behaviour* came out in 2012 and has been on various bestseller lists.

The novel is set in Southern Appalachia, in a place called Feathertown in the rural hinterland of Tennessee. Feathertown is the typical American countryside county, farming and cattle its economic mainstay, small markets areas its recreation, the bank and post office its amenities and forested living hills an ignored, taken-for-granted, everyday affair. The nearest city is one called Cleary where, the book keeps stressing as its main distinguishing point, there is a college for after-school education. The county and the state in general have been shown to be undergoing the strangest of all winters (the story spreads over a winter season beginning in November and ending with the arrival of spring in March), with non-stop rains and erratic temperature rises and falls, with farming having taken a severe hit and whole harvests having gone bad.

Dellarobia couldn`t remember a sadder-looking November. The trees had lost their leaves early in the unrelenting rain. After a brief fling with coloration they dropped their tresses in clumps like a chemo patient losing her hair. (p.67) Summer`s heat had never really arrived, nor the cold in its turn, and everything living now seemed to yearn for sun with the anguish of the unloved. The world of sensible seasons had come undone. (p.67)

The town, its people and one particular family, the Turnbow family, comprising Hester and Burley (affectionately called Bear) Turnbow, their son Cub and his wife Dellarobia and their grandchildren, Preston and Cordelia, are caught in this lull of ordinariness until one day a married, exhausted, simultaneously confused and certain mother of three (one an unborn child), Dellarobia Turnbow, set out up the hill on her in-laws` family farmland to break away from a life she had resented for too long, hoping to find the passion she had lost way back, in another lover. Upon nearing the top of the hill, what she encounters marks the end of everything ordinary. She walks into a forest full of clusters of fiery orange “things” loaded up on every branch of every tree. Right there, in that moment of witnessing the glittering forest of orange and gold, Dellarobia feels something of a wake-up shake-up, the realisation of some new purpose, the horror of the mistake she had climbed up here for and, most of all, the assurance that once she went back to the home and life she had thought to abandon, nothing would be the same again.
Unearthly beauty had appeared to her, a vision of glory to stop her in the road. For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows became a brightness rising. It looked like the inside of joy, if a person could see that. A valley of lights, an ethereal wind. It had to mean something. (p.21) Nothing had changed except every conscious minute and a strange fire in her dreams. (p.68)

After her encounter with the fire creatures in the mountain, Dellarobia discovers her in-laws had plans to cut off the entire forest stretch along the mountain in the parts that fell within their farmland area, which would mean bringing down the trees with the orange world up there. She tries to convince her husband of the value of the forest, her only argument being they should know what all there is on their land before they give it up, since she cannot reveal her prior visit and her intentions behind it. The family then goes up the mountain and encounters the same magical view, unsure now about chopping off the trees. This is followed by the church and the entire county getting involved in discussing what a miracle they had been blessed with.

Dellarobia becomes famous overnight because of her husband’s claim that she had miraculously foreseen the miracle up in the mountain. What is important at this point, however, is that everybody, the church, the county folk, Dellarobia and the rest of the Turnbows, thinks of the scene up there as a miracle, and the only reason they do not want to allow the logging of the trees is to protect the miracle, to not defy something the Lord has wished. The Turnbow farm becomes a spot for curious tourists and miracle-seeking churchgoers.

An encounter with a Mexican family, whose kid went to school with Preston, leads Dellarobia to understand that the creatures up there are butterflies. They are called monarch butterflies and are orange, black and white in colour. She also comes to know that the butterflies were not supposed to be there, but in a place called Angangueo, Michoacán, in Mexico, where a fatal landslide on the mountains in the course of an expedition to count the monarch butterflies had left it empty of people, trees and butterflies, leading to a loss of lives, livelihoods and beauty. Adding to this knowledge is the information she gets from her encounter with and later employment under Dr Ovid Byron, an African-American scientist who has studied monarch butterflies all his life.

It is with Dr Byron and his team, who set up a lab in her family barn, that Dellarobia learns the truth behind the butterflies, a truth she grapples with through the book. She learns of feedback loops, legacy effects, community interactions, and the difference between cause and correlation, all brought
out through wonderfully engaging conversations between Dellarobia and Dr Byron, where science is broken down through simple daily life examples and explanations. The butterflies are no longer the miracle that had saved her, nor are they a pretty sight to be seen as tourists, but are instead symptoms of a larger systemic disturbance in the world. Butterflies are, what Dr Byron calls, “complicated systems”, a community that has learnt its ways of survival over millions of years since it first appeared.

Monarchs are tropical insects that migrate to the warmer, steadier winters of Mexico, where after a period of hibernation up in the Mexican mountains, they break into a flurry of mating during spring, after which the female monarchs fly millions of miles north to lay eggs where the milkweed plant grows, and this cycle continues as these butterflies have charted this map over millions of years of interactions and community dynamics. That they were up on a mountain in South Appalachia, where winters are much more severe than Mexico (though this year particularly erratic), was hence neither beautiful nor the Lord’s wish but a result of climate change or man’s wish. The story goes on to show Dellarobia’s journey of knowledge, her struggle with the knowledge, her struggle with trying to pass on the knowledge to a world where people believe whatever makes them happy, her changing relationships with family and friends, ending ultimately in a spring flood with the thawing of the snow.

The book ends with Dellarobia squatting against flood waters, while above her the surviving monarchs fly away to an unknown destination, what Dr Byron once called “a new Earth”. The ending can be interpreted in different ways, either as the biblical floods of destruction or a symbol of hope where both humans and the butterflies set out to ward off the floods and chart out new ways, with Dellarobia heading off to college (signifying education and the hope of a better world through it) and starting a new life with the realisation that her marriage was keeping two good people unhappy.

The larger theme of education, its value and the consequences of the lack of it or a lack of proper quality of it runs through the novel in several ways, whether it is through the sense of self that education creates (and its absence prevents), the challenges the poor have to face in accessing it, the honesty with which a child is capable of loving and understanding nature or the sad disbelief people develop in things that sound like bad, uncomfortable news.

What is striking through the book is the constant suffocating discomfort that Dellarobia carries around with herself. Reasons for frustration with her life are unclear in the beginning, and it might appear to the reader to be rooted
in the poverty that the family lives in or in the drudgery involved in being a mother. However, through the course of the book, one realises that even as poverty is not pleasant in any way and has held Dellarobia back, it is not the lack of money per se that makes her uncomfortable in the life she is living. It is instead the longing of the life that could have been, had the pregnancy and marriage not happened, had her parents not been taken away so young, that is killing her. She craves to know who she could have been had she gone to college; it is the lack of ambition, the lack of a goal, in both her and her husband that frustrates her. She does not mind being a mother and loves her children, but it is the possibility of being both a mother and whatever an education may have led her to become that keeps her unhappy.

Dellarobia displays an earnest desire to know and learn, and her anger at having missed that chance is apparent in multiple places when she mentally compares herself to the city helpers of Dr Byron, to the city-educated wife of Dr Byron. This is particularly apparent in her outburst during the interview with Dr Byron for a position in the lab, where she tells the story of how getting to the exam hall was itself a difficulty, let alone the science and maths that she was taught by the football coach at school in Feathertown.

Another theme that runs through the novel is the tussle between science and religion. Here is where the characters of Hester Turnbow and Pastor Bobby Ogle come in. Hester is a loyal churchgoer who looks down upon anybody who misses Sunday church as doomed. Pastor Bobby Ogle is a dynamic, charming person, who leads everyone to leave behind their sins outside the church and to catch up right back on them once outside. What is interesting, however, is the different kinds of results religious beliefs or the lack thereof produced. On the one hand, belief in the Bible led people of Feathertown, people such as Hester and Cub, to deny climate change and call the rain, the snow, the heat, the flood, the butterflies all simply as the Lord`s wishes—“Weather is the Lord`s business”(p.361)—and accept not having to do anything about it. On the other hand, the belief that the Lord`s creation has to valued and protected led protesters (local, city and national) to turn against Bear Turnbow`s plan to cut down trees. Bear himself being non-religious did not believe there existed a connection between cutting trees and landslides or erratic rainfall.

The question that was constantly tugging at my mind through the book, particularly in parts where Dr Byron expresses disbelief at the condition of school education in Feathertown and when Dellarobia thinks of herself as “uneducated”, is whether education is only of the kind that is provided by
formal schooling and college? Is schooling and college education a guarantee of producing an educated person? If yes, then what would explain the millions who go through the education system but deny climate change and their role in it? Why did the people from Cleary (a town with a college and educated people) come to simply to look at the butterflies as a source of beauty? And following from this, does a lack of formal education imply an uneducated person?

What then will we call Dellarobia, whose negligible knowledge of science was no barrier to her earnest quest to know more about monarchs, to worry for them, to hope for their survival, to accept the ugliness behind their beauty and to fight her own family for them. Dellarobia’s concern for the monarchs was rooted in how they had made her feel, and not in her knowledge of them, while Dr Byron’s was rooted in his research and understanding of the systems of which the butterflies were a part. The outcome in both cases was concern. This implies that knowledge can be of multiple types, each interacting and strengthening the outcome of concern.

“One of God’s creatures of this world, meeting its End of Days,” she said after a quiet minute. Not words of science, she knew that, but it was a truth she could feel. The forest of flame that had lifted her despair, the migratory pulse that had rocked in the arms of a continent for all time: these fell like stones in her heart.(p.315)

I don’t know. I was so focused on my own little life. Just one person. And here was something so much bigger. I had to come back and live a different life. (p.288)

Another important idea running through the story is that of the conflicts scientists face, the helplessness they feel at having to be harbingers of hope and good news as well as conveyors of bad news to a bunch of people refusing to believe what they do not wish to. The book shows different sides of Dr Byron, one which aches with despair at having to see the beautiful creatures he almost considers as family perish, while the other puts faith in the objectivity of science and sets aside emotions to gather information on not how to save them (this is something Dellarobia focuses on) but what their story can tell to understand and prevent future extinctions. On one hand, he is empowered with knowledge and, on the other, he is helpless to the point of tears at not being able to convince a news reporter (someone with the ability to influence millions) about the reality of climate change. The media and its role as an institution that immensely guides and shapes public opinion is also adequately and directly brought to light, wherein all the buzz around
the butterflies ends up as gossip around Dellarobia and is not once about the information that Dr Byron has to share.

“People can only see things they already recognize,” she said. “They’ll see it if they know it.” “And how do they see the end of the world?” Ovid asked. She considered this for a long time. “They know it’s impossible.”(p.391)

“Nobody was asking why the butterflies were here; the big news was just that they were.”(p.292)

“I think people are scared to face up to a bad outcome. That’s just human. Like not going to the doctor when you’ve found a lump. If flight or flight is the choice, it’s way easier to fly.”(p.318)

“Humans are in love with the idea of our persisting,” he said. “We fetishize it, really. Our retirement funds, our genealogies. Our so-called ideas for the ages... (p.390). Man against Nature. Of all the possible conflicts, that was the one that was hopeless. Even a slim education had taught her this much: Man loses.” (p.339)

What the book does is also bring out another side to the question of disbelief. In a conversation between Dellarobia and Dr Byron, as Dr Byron expresses sadness and helplessness at the inability of humans to realise, accept and engage with their actions and its consequences, Dellarobia struggles to explain how humans are not all equals, how their struggles are different and how the rut and fears of day-to-day existence sometimes wipe out the possibility of acceptance and engagement. Man, caught in his daily struggles (no doubt self-created), is often left with little time to think of anything beyond how to get through the day.

“I don’t know how a person could even get through the day, knowing what you know,” she said. “How does Dellarobia get through hers?” asked Ovid. “Meeting the bus on time,” she answered. “Getting the kids to eat supper, getting teeth brushed. No cavities the next time. Little hopes, you know? There’s just not room at our house for the end of the world. Sorry to be a doubting Thomas.” (p.391)

Lastly, Preston is another interesting and delightful character in the book, the curious little boy in love with animals, nature and its ways, wanting to know what the butterfly ate! His curiosity keeps the story alive and somehow gives the reader the hope that seems to get lost amidst all the believers and disbelievers. Dellarobia is proud of her inquisitive son, but she worries that in the future world there will be no nature for him love. “Dellarobia felt an entirely new form of panic as she watched her son love nature so expectantly,
wondering if he might be racing toward a future like some complicated sand castle that was crumbling under the tide” (p.341).

As for why the book appealed to me personally and how I think this relates to and furthers sustainability, there are five key points. One, the book manages to situate climate change within the day-to-day experiences of the most ordinary of men and women, instead of the usual gulf between it being a subject of discussion at international climate summits and not being a subject of discussion at all. By making climate change the story of ordinary people that readers can visualise and relate to, as opposed to reading about it in academic journals, the book furthers the cause of sustainability.

Second, the book raises a discussion on how people can only see what they know and believe only what they see. This is why Dellarobia says that the end of the world is not in people’s imagination, which is why they do not believe it. Dr Byron knows and hence his state of despair; the rest in the story (and in life in general) do not know and hence their state of disbelief/indifference. The gap then seems to hinge on one’s ability to know. Knowing, in turn, can be made possible through education and here lies the second line of advice the book provides for pursuing sustainability.

Third, one gets a feeling of double powerlessness in Dellarobia’s struggle to defeat the fate of the butterflies. Social powerlessness (lack of access to education or a low social standing) adds to the hurdles of sustainability, since the poor—as seen in Dellarobia’s encounter with a city environmentalist who tells her to reduce her carbon footprint (which she laughingly says she barely has)—may be contributing the least to unsustainability but suffering the most. Hence, social equity is another way to go for sustainability.

Fourth, there is the question of hope. The book shows three kinds of hope: one, Dr Byron’s belief that he will be able to save other creatures based on what he can learn from the monarchs’ extinction, second, Dellarobia’s hope for the butterflies to survive and, third, Preston’s innocent unquestioned hope for being able to be as close to nature as he wishes and know as much about it as he can. Perhaps a mix of all these kinds is what we need today. Finally, what appealed to me by the end of the book was that the name of book could refer to the flight behaviour of butterflies as well as that of humans, the latter referring to our tendency to look at a problem and instead of facing it, more often than not, choosing flight.