

Fiction as Career Inspiration

I read a lot of non-fiction and sometimes historical novels, and have written about a number of these in this series about The Magic Library Card! But in between I do read fiction as well, for a change of pace and perspective. There are certain authors whose works I especially love. I am for example drawn to novelists who include science in the storyline. Those storylines often reveal the workings of real professionals, and it seems to me that young adults (YAs) who are trying to understand what a career in science might look like can find no better place to find a characterization than in one of these entertaining works of fiction.

Barbara Kingsolver, perhaps the best author example of all, has her college degree in biology. There are biology and biologists in her wonderful novels. “Flight Behavior,” for example, published in 2012, is titled in part for the seasonal flight behavior of the Monarch Butterfly. In Kingsolver’s telling the southward trek back to Mexico away from winter is driven awry by climate shift and pollution, putting the in-transit but resting colony in harm’s way because of an early freeze in Tennessee. Entomologist Ovid Byron enters the Appalachian story, and a not-scientifically educated but able Dellarobia Turnbow’s life takes flight in the glow of his world of science. That’s a part of the story.

In Kingsolver’s more recent book “Unsheltered” (2019), Charles Darwin’s indisputably magnificent, and thoroughly verifiable, inspiration that is “The Origin of Species” (1859) is centerstage (inspired by his “The Voyage of the Beagle” (1839)). There is no doubt that Kingsolver, unlike many of Darwin’s most vocal antagonists, is well schooled in this classic, which was published well before “microbiologist” was even a word. Her characters, some of whom live not long after Darwin’s time and some in near present time, reside in two related and chapter-alternating narratives, told with biologist characters in each. Vineland, New Jersey is the setting for each plot. The book is a perfect adult ramp into actually reading Darwin in his own words, and suitable to a YA’s taste for Darwinian biology, meaning modern biology, without the “drudge” of 19th-century wordcraft (which I do like!).

In “When the Killing’s Done,” T.C. Boyle’s protagonist is biologist Alma Boyd Takesue, of the National Park Service. Her environmental science story is about saving endangered native species on California’s Channel Islands from invasive species such as rats and feral pigs. She has a human antagonist named Dave LaJoy, and therein is the tale.

All three novels are about biology and environmental science. They are New York Times bestsellers by established and loved authors, bookends to Edward O. Wilson and Rachel Carson’s books. They are all the kind of stories that make for wonderful reading, but they are also resources for learning about how biologists do their work. The novels are not necessarily thought about that way, but I am suggesting that they should be.

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So if you are a YA reading this article and thinking also about a career, especially one in biology or environmental science, head for your Library with your card in hand, or just download one or more of the books with a free ecard. If you are a parent of such a YA, then take the lead with her/him and read the books together. Then you will have a basis for career discussion in the most entertaining way, simply by sharing a very good novel!

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