



***Unsheltered*, by Barbara Kingsolver**  
***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, January 2019***

Barbara Kingsolver sets her latest novel *Unsheltered* in the leafy town of Vineland, New Jersey. The book incorporates a pair of alternating storylines centered on families who have lived on Plum Street, albeit in different centuries. The first narrative takes place during the run-up to the 2016 presidential election while the second one reverts to the mid-nineteenth century.

As *Unsheltered* begins, the Tavoularis family has moved from Virginia to a rundown Victorian era house which Willa, the middle-aged matriarch, had inherited from her aunt. Now an out-of-work journalist, Willa had lost her job when the magazine she had worked for folded. Her husband, Iano, who was on track for tenure before the college where he taught closed, takes an adjunct position at a local community college to make ends meet.

The dilapidated house, indeed, is a metaphor for the Tavoularis family's disintegrating fortunes. "How could two hardworking people do everything right in life," Willa wonders, "and arrive in their fifties essentially destitute?"

Into the mix come the couple's 20-something son Zeke and daughter Antigone, nicknamed "Tig." Ivy League educated Zeke, much to his parents' chagrin, has mounted huge student-loan debts and returns home with a baby in tow. Free-spirited Tig, fresh from a trip to Cuba, rejoins the family, as does cranky Grandpa Nick now in his dotage. Even their ancient dog Dixie has seen better days.

The alternating nineteenth-century plot involves science teacher Thatcher Greenwood whose rambling house on Plum Street—along with his marriage—is crumbling. Thatcher's social-climbing wife Rose and the school's principal don't approve of his progressive Darwinian views. Thatcher, in turn, befriends next-door neighbor Mary Treat, a real-life biologist who corresponded regularly with Charles Darwin.

Ms. Kingsolver connects the two storylines by starting chapters with the last word of the previous chapter. Mary Treat becomes a character in both plots when Willa decides to write a book about the famous nineteenth-century woman scientist who once had lived on Plum Street.

Merging two dueling narratives into one novel is a daunting endeavor. The plot involving the Tavoularis family is the more successful, as Ms. Kingsolver's prose is better suited to contemporary fiction. Nevertheless, she scores high points for originality, featuring universal themes which transcend time.