

***Demon Copperhead*, by Barbara Kingsolver**

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

In *Demon Copperhead*, Barbara Kingsolver recasts the Dickensian classic *David Copperfield* as a modern-day tale. Adapting an iconic Charles Dickens story is an audacious endeavor. Ms. Kingsolver, nevertheless, brilliantly pulls it off. *The New York Times*, among other publications, has proclaimed *Demon Copperhead* one of the Five Best Novels of 2022.

Set in rural southwestern Virginia, *Demon Copperhead* begins with its eponymous hero narrating his life's story. "First, I got myself born," he says, before noting that his teenage mother was dirt poor and his father had a fatal accident before his birth. His mother had named her baby Damon, but the boy acquired his "Demon Copperhead" nickname due to his flaming red hair and reptilian green eyes.

Demon and his drug-addicted Mom lived in a single-wide trailer next door to the Peggot family. Matt Peggot, nicknamed "Maggot," and Demon became life-long friends. When Demon turned eleven, however, his family circumstances drastically changed. Tossed into the foster care system, Demon experienced indifferent caseworkers and tedious child labor.

Throughout his troubling middle and high school years, Demon, however, is supported by strong women. Betsy Woodall, Demon's long-lost Grandma, stresses the importance of education. Nurse June, Maggot's aunt, tries to steer him away from drugs. Demon's art teacher Miss Annie encourages his artistic talents. And Angus, his feisty foster sister, harbors a secret love.

Mr. Armstrong, Demon's middle school guidance counselor, is the most influential male in Demon's orbit. "You are resilient," he tells the boy. "Sometimes you hear of miracles, where a car gets mangled in a wreck, but the driver walks out of it. I'm saying you are that driver. You got the wreck you didn't ask for. And you walked out."

As befitting any Dickensian tale, *Demon Copperhead* is populated with many shady characters, including Stoner, Demon's malevolent stepfather, and Creaky, on whose farm Demon and other foster kids were forced to work. But in Ms. Kingsolver's telling, Big Pharma is her novel's foremost villain. The raging opioid epidemic, which claims several major characters, is a looming presence.

Ms. Kingsolver, who grew up in Kentucky, still lives in southern Appalachia. In the Acknowledgements' page of *Demon Copperhead*, she writes, "For all the kids who wake up hungry in those dark places every day, who've lost their families to poverty and pain pills, whose caseworkers keep losing their files, who feel invisible, or wish they were: this book is for you."