
REVIEWS

Signature: Contemporary Southern Writers. Videos on Barbara Kingsolver and George C. Wolfe. South Burlington, VT: The Annenberg/CPB Collection, 1997.

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About two months ago, two videos came across my desk courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association editors. Sheepishly, I have to admit they were lost for a bit under large piles of paper that managed to obscure anything resembling entertainment and a chance to sit back and enjoy a respite from the daily routine (angst?) of a new assistant professor. When I finally managed to rescue the videos, remember to bring them home, and slip them into my VCR, I found myself willingly and happily transported to the worlds of Arizona, New York City, and Kentucky through the eyes of Barbara Kingsolver and George C. Wolfe thanks to the Signature Series' *Contemporary Southern Writers* produced by the Annenberg/CPB Projects company.

The Annenberg/CPB Projects' mission statement asserts their position as the nation's leader in assisting colleges, universities, secondary schools, and community organizations with student learning through telecommunications. Created sixteen years ago, the Annenberg/CPB Projects offers a variety of resources on areas ranging from economics to geography to history to literature to psychology, among others. The Signature Series is composed of one-hour videos on writers, one each on Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, Marsha Norman, George C. Wolfe, Lee Smith, and Barbara Kingsolver. These video portraits invite viewers to step into the writer's life, to hear about the writer's influences, roots, successes, and ideas about the world in which he or she lives. Even better than a traditional interview, the videos offer the writers reading their work, responding to questions, visiting their hometowns and showing viewers around, as well as commentary from people who have worked with or know the writers personally. In many ways, the videos are more like a montage of the influences and ways of thinking and knowing the world that drives these writers' talents. Furthermore, for students of writing everywhere, each video offers insights into the writer's writing processes and strategies — a sharing of personal experience that may spark a viewer's own creative writing powers.

If the video programs on Kingsolver and Wolfe are any indication, the Signature people have created a valuable resource for teachers of literature. From the moment I heard Barbara Kingsolver's voice saying "What I want is so simple I almost can't say it — elementary kindness," as she read from one of her works, I was captured. Mixing footage of Arizona, Kingsolver's chosen community, and Nicholas County, Kentucky, Kingsolver's childhood roots, along with commentary by a myriad of people, among them author Amy Tan, Virginia Kingsolver (her mother), Katherine Seagraves (Kingsolver's English teacher growing up), and Frances Goldin (her New York literary agent), the editors present a comprehensive discussion of Kingsolver's influences, experiences, political beliefs, and dreams for the future. Moreover, the video touches on Kingsolver's best-known fiction, *The Bean Trees*, *Animal Dreams*, *Pigs in Heaven*, and her non-fiction work, a surprising success in terms of number of books sold, *High Tide in Tucson*. As in all of her work, Kingsolver continually returns to talk of community, the haves vs. the have-nots, the need for activism on the part of all people, and her desire for "people to be hopeful, to think that they can change the world." By the end of my visit with Kingsolver as her voice and image filled my living room, I found myself wanting to reread *The Bean Trees*. Even more so, I found myself returning to her question, "How do we be a self and still be responsible to the community?" — a question all the more real to me as my composition classes and I focus on the theme of community and how communities surround and influence us in all aspects of our lives.

Following a similar pattern, the video on George C. Wolfe examines Wolfe's career through readings of his work, musings regarding his influences and childhood in Frankfurt, Kentucky, and the words of the people who know him, ranging from producers and lyricists and composers to his own family. A Tony award-winning playwright and director, best known for writing *Jelly's Last Jam* and *The Colored Museum*, for co-creating *Bring in da Noise*, *Bring in da Funk*, as well as his direction of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and his leadership of the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Wolfe is a fast-talking, dynamic, screen filling presence. His language and ear for the rhythm of language becomes apparent in his readings of his work, and his interests and investments in history, identity, and the African American experience reveal themselves in the footage of performances, his actions at work, and his own comments on the influence of African Americans and the state of theater in the United States today. Using words found in *The Colored Museum*, Wolfe tells us that his "power is in [his] madness and [his] colored contradictions," a statement aptly and carefully explained by the video itself.

The quality of content in both videos translates effectively to the classroom. Accessible and informative for both high school and college-level students, the editors of the Signature series have created resources that deal with politics, race, class, and gender, as well as the role of influences and experiences for writers, in a non-threatening manner that encourages viewers to listen and give serious attention to the values and beliefs of the individual writer on screen. The Kingsolver and Wolfe videos compliment each writer's work and, in fact, I was impressed enough by the Kingsolver video to work it into my own composition class to expand our discussion of Kingsolver's essay "The Memory of Place" as we investigate what it means to come from a particular locale.

For those of you interested in bringing a well-rounded exploration of a writer's career into your classes, check out the Annenberg/CPB Projects web page for ordering information about their various resources (<http://www.learner.org/collections/multimedia/literature/siseries>). The *Signature: Contemporary Southern Writers* series comes in a set curriculum package, which includes all six tapes, a guide, and the right to duplicate one set of the videos for your department or campus. All in all, this is an inspiring and educational resource to access for our students and our own learning about these writers with roots in the South. ✨