

Book Review: Demon Copperhead
By Barbara Kingsolver

In 1850, Charles Dickens wrote and published “David Copperfield,” a story, according to the book’s official blurb, “of a young man’s adventures on his journey from an unhappy and impoverished childhood” to that of an adult novelist.

One-hundred-and-seventy-two-years later, Barbara Kingsolver wrote and published “Demon Copperhead,” the story of a child born into a life of poverty in Appalachia, and his journey through the foster system and opioid epidemic to his coming of age as a young adult.

The similarities between the two novels are numerous. And in crafting a modern day version of the Dickens classic, Kingsolver has produced a novel that was a co-recipient of the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and could prove to be just as timeless as the novel it was inspired by.

Demon, who narrates the story, has the deck stacked against him virtually from the day he is born. His mother gave birth to him when she was 18. He lost both parents at an early age. His father jumped to his death at a local swimming hole, and soon thereafter his mother, an addict, dies from an overdose.

For several years Demon is shuttled through various foster homes until he hitches a ride to a small town in Tennessee where his paternal grandmother Betsy lives. While happy to see him, his grandmother cannot care for him, and places Demon in the home of Mr. Winfield, who coaches the local high school football team.

Here, Demon seems to find himself. He becomes a star football player, and is now well known and respected within the community. But after a severe injury during a

football game, he develops an addiction to painkillers. And his efforts to kick the habit are regularly short-circuited by his girlfriend, Dori, who has her own addiction to contend with.

Demon spends the next several years in rehab working to not only get clean, but pull his life back together so his dreams can be realized.

Demon's story is not unusual. According to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control, opioid dependency "begins within a few days of initial use. Among people in the study who had been given a month-long prescription, the rate of addiction was 30 percent," a staggering number. "Three million U.S. citizens ... have had or currently suffer from opioid use disorder."

Written in the first person, and thus told through the eyes of the main character, Kingsolver enables the reader to experience Demon's life as he experiences it. We feel his pain, and the story touches us personally because we know he's a good kid, not unlike so many adolescents today who, through no fault of their own, learn early on that life can be cruel. Every day is a struggle to survive. Demon's story may as well be a case study of real life in Appalachia.

"Demon Copperhead" will move you in many ways. But apart from the emotions it provokes, I believe you'll agree that it's an extremely well written novel with an important story to be told.

I highly recommend "Demon Copperhead," and give it a 5 out of 5 stars. You will not be disappointed, and I welcome hearing your thoughts if you check it out.