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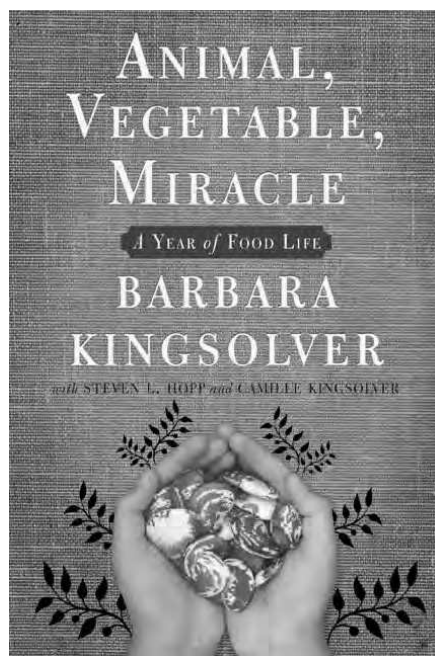
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My Farmer, Myself
ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE:
A YEAR OF FOOD LIFE

by Barbara Kingsolver, with help from Camille Kingsolver and Stephen L. Hopp.

HARPERCOLLINS, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$26.95.

If you value free time, don't read this book. Because once you do, you'll become obsessed with finding local food and stocking up for winter ... Oh wait! It's totally safe to read over the holidays because the farmer's market soon closes for the season. But early in this description of the Kingsolver clan's attempt to eat locally, Barbara talks about poring over seed catalogues. In January, Which is coming up kind of soon.

While I've always enjoyed Barbara Kingsolver's works of fiction (except the second half of *The Poisonwood Bible: Editor! Please!*), her essays usually contain a more deft touch. That's partly her science training, which emerges in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* as well. She's a bit too scathing about the unsustainability of city-dwellers (she should check out local writer Heather C. Flores' *Food Not Lawns* for ideas about how to grow food high-on everywhere), and the self-righteous essays college-aged Camille adds show that she's definitely her mother's daughter, but the book provides inspiration to those who need a little urging to pickle beets and beans, to plant just a few more tomatoes and to spend many Saturdays getting to know local farmers and their offerings. Hopp, Kingsolver's husband, adds scientifically solid pieces about why genetically modified food truly *isn't* the answer for feeding the planet, among other contributions, and of course does half of the adult work on the farm.

Read this in tandem with *Plenty: One Man, One Woman, and A Raucous Year of Eating Locally* by Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, and soon you'll be growing as much as you can, gently urging Market of Choice or Kiva to stock a lot more local food and perhaps dealing with the reality of turkey from farm to holiday table. Seasonal recipes round out each section, recipes you can also get at the book's website (www.animalvegetablemiracle.com) and, now, make with

the corn you froze, the squash you grew and the kale or chard that's out there sweetening in the frost. — *Suzi Steffen*

Mostly Everything Is Illuminated

READING COMICS: HOW GRAPHIC NOVELS WORK AND WHAT THEY MEAN by Douglas Wolk. DA CAPO PRESS, 2007.

HARDCOVER, \$22.95.

I fell into Douglas Wolk's friendly, uncommonly accessible book about graphic novels much as I do into a good graphic novel: wholeheartedly and quickly, with an eye to



both the familiar and the strange, the comforting and the disconcerting. Wolk is an enthusiast, and his love of comics comes through on every page, even when he's disparaging the lesser work out there or looking down his nose — with a wry smile — at some of the worst superhero clichés. He's not afraid to criticize or to be a total fanboy, and it's this realistic and intelligent appreciation that makes his book such a pleasure to read.

The first half of *Reading Comics* is part history, part theory, and presents Wolk's division of the comics world: on the one hand, superhero comics, with their years of history and convoluted timelines; on the other, art comics, more concerned with expressing the perspective of the artist than with the established characters and relationships of superhero books. It's a simple line to draw, and a useful one. He discusses the escapism of comics, the metaphors, the psychology, the design and art, and then, in the book's second half, takes what he's explained and applies it to a generous selection of books. It's not exhaustive; as Wolk explains, it's just a group of books, largely falling on the art comics side of the divide, that he finds interesting to talk about, reaching from the precise aesthetic of Chris Ware to the memoir of Alison Bechdel to the sprawling world-building of Carla Speed O'Neill and the groundbreaking work of Will Eisner. Even Wolk, though, can't make Grant Morrison's brilliant, dizzying *The Invisibles* any less dense; reading a few sentences from the chapter on this series out of context is, appropriately, as confusing as a single page from one of Morrison's books would be.

Reading Comics comes at a perfect time as comics gain mainstream appeal and admirers and as creators continue to take their work in new directions, tackling new topics and trying more and more new things. Wolk is perceptive and calm, possessed of an uncanny ability to express why he loves what he does and how comics work or don't with clarity and humor. Like an issue of a long-running superhero series, there's plenty here to grab and keep the attention of a newcomer, but under the surface, there are additional layers for those who know the story's past. — *Molly Templeton*

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