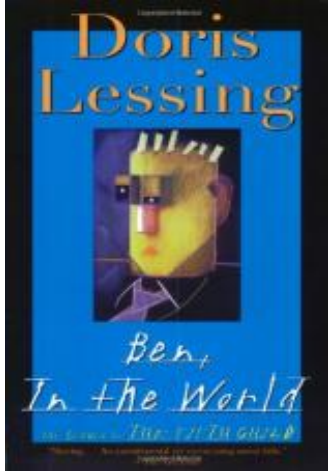


Ben, in the World: The Sequel to the Fifth Child

by Doris Lessing



About the Book

At eighteen, Ben is in the world, but not of it. He is too large, too awkward, too inhumanly made. Now estranged from his family, he must find his own path in life. From London and the south of France to Brazil and the mountains of the Andes. Ben is tossed about in a tumultuous search for his people, a reason for his being. How the world receives him, and, he fares in it will horrify and captivate until the novel's dramatic finale.

Discussion Guide

1. At the very beginning of the text is a note from the author explaining the origin of "the cages." As a result, the reader is aware of something grotesque that is going to be encountered throughout the reading of the book, and the cages do not emerge in the plot until near the end. Do you think it was the author's intention to influence the reader in this manner, or was the note a matter of cultural sensitivity? Did this influence your reading, and if so, how?
2. The narrator has a tendency to rush ahead to the end of various plot lines. We learn early on that Johnston and Rita will both survive well and be successful, and also that the girl in Alex's film will become a star. When Teresa and Alfredo meet, their happy future marriage is disclosed almost immediately. How does this affect your sense of the plot, and of your feelings toward the protagonist, whose future remains unknown?
3. If, as we are led to believe, the nature of Ben's deficiency is that he is indeed a throwback of sorts, a fully emotional human being but of the kind that walked the earth perhaps a hundred thousand years ago -- what does this indicate about how humans have changed?

4. Ben is incapable of coping with life, and yet often understands situations more than people give him credit for. It is as though his emotions overtake him from time to time in ways that they don't other people -- particularly fear and anger. How would you describe the precise nature of Ben's mental deficiency? Does he have more than one?

5. So many of the people Ben encounters are opportunists who seek to use him to their own benefit -- Johnston with the drug smuggling, Alex with his film, and, worst of all, the American scientist. Is this a jaded narrative, or a realistic one? How does this story reflect on human nature?

6. Of the people who are the most concerned for Ben's welfare -- Ellen and Rita in London, and Teresa in Buenos Aires -- each is female and has had a difficult life. What is the narrative position on the motivations of men versus women? Also, what does this say of how ethics relate to social class?

7. Teresa's closing statement at the end of the book carries a strong judgment, one that has all the more gravity because it ends the story. Why precisely are "we" glad not to have to think about Ben? Why is thinking about the likes of Ben a burden to us?

Author Bio

Winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing was one of the most celebrated and distinguished writers of our time, the recipient of a host of international awards, including the Somerset Maugham Award, the David Cohen Memorial Prize for British Literature, the James Tait Black Prize for best biography, Spain's Prince of Asturias Prize and Prix Catalunya, and the S. T. Dupont Golden PEN Award for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature.

Lessing was born of British parents in Persia on October 22, 1919, and moved with her family to Southern Rhodesia when she was five years old. She went to England in 1949, where she published her first book, *THE GRASS IS SINGING*, and began her career as a professional writer. In 1962, she broke new ground with her novel *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*. She wrote more than 30 books, among them the novels *MARTHA'S QUEST*, *THE FIFTH CHILD*, and her last work *ALFRED AND EMILY*; stories, reportage, poems and plays; and several nonfiction works, including books about cats, and two volumes of autobiography, *WALKING IN THE SHADE* and *UNDER MY SKIN*. She died on November 17, 2013. Her portrait hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.

Critical Praise

?Far from resting on her laurels, Lessing?goes from strength to strength?. Ben's half-human ignorance, paranoia, and rage are magnificently imagined and vividly present on every page. The condition of the outsider has hardly ever before in fiction been portrayed with such raw power and righteous anger?. Few, if any, living writers can have explored so many forbidding fictional worlds with such passion and conviction.?

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