

*Ben, in the World*, by Doris Lessing

Reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

In her new novel, Doris Lessing gives a fresh twist to an old idea: What would our world seem like to an alien who found himself among us, and how would we react to such a being? But Ben Lovat is not a creature from another planet; he is from our own distant past--a throwback to a species near the beginning of human evolution. Lessing's 1988 novel *The Fifth Child* was told from the point of view of Ben's family, especially his mother. It recounts the havoc the birth of this monstrous child caused in what had been a happy, old-fashioned family. Lessing's sequel continues the story from Ben's point of view.

Now an adult, Ben lives in a frightening world from which he cannot protect himself, despite his great physical strength. He is an observer, always on the watch for the look of puzzlement and horror on people's faces as they become aware of him. His difference makes him a victim, repeatedly abused and cheated. His struggle to understand his environment and to survive takes him from England, then to France, then to Brazil. There he briefly is caged and made a subject of scientific research, and then finally discovers what he is and the people to whom he belongs.

Ben receives kindness--even affection--from a number of people themselves marginalized by age, poverty or social position, people who recognize his good intentions and pity his loneliness. His happiest time is when he cares for a sick old woman who tells him he is good, something no one else has ever recognized. But his last friend pronounces the world's final judgment on him--a being so different that he would always need the care and protection of the few who sympathize with him: "I know we are pleased that he is dead and we don't have to think about him."

Lessing makes us feel both the unease this strange creature causes in others and his terrible loneliness. Her book will make it impossible for readers ever again to see those who are radically different from themselves in quite the same way.