

The Fifth Child

by Doris Lessing

Information about the author

Doris Lessing was born as Doris May Taylor in Persia (now Iran) on October 22, 1919. Both of her parents were British: her father, who had been crippled in World War I, was a clerk at the Imperial Bank of Persia; her mother was a nurse. In 1925, the family moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Lessing has described her childhood as a diverse mixture of pleasure and pain. The nature, which she explored with her brother Harry, was a retreat from an otherwise miserable existence. Her mother, obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules and hygiene at home and signed Doris up for a convent school, where nuns terrified their students with stories of hell and damnation. Lessing was later sent to an all-girls high school from which she soon dropped out. She was thirteen then; and this was the end of her formal education. Frightened from her mother, Lessing escaped from home when she was fifteen and took a job as a nursemaid.



In 1937 she moved to Salisbury, where she worked as a telephone operator for a year. At nineteen, she married Frank Wisdom, and had two children. A few years later, feeling trapped in "a persona who she feared would destroy her", she left her family. Soon after, she was drawn to the "Left Book Club", a group of Communists "who read everything, but did not think it remarkable to read." Gottfried Lessing was a central member of the group and shortly after she had joined the club she married him and had a son.

During the post-war years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left in 1954. By 1949, Lessing had moved to London with her young son. That year, she also published her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, and began her career as a professional writer.

After writing the *Children of Violence* series (1951-1959), a formally conventional novel of education she wrote *The Golden Notebook* in 1962.

In the 1970s and in 1980s she wrote *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) which deals with cosmic fantasies, *Canopus in Augos* (1979), a science fiction roman about higher plans of existence and *Memoirs of a Survivor*. The novels *The Good Terrorist* and *The Fifth Child* followed in 1985 and 1988 respectively. Her book *Under My Skin: Volume One of her Autobiography*, appeared in 1995 and received the "James Tait Black Prize" for best biography.

Plot summary

The main characters in this novel are Harriet and David Lovatt. They met each other at an office party. Other people called them conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent. Both of them have the ideals - fidelity, love, family life and, above all, a permanent home. In the late 1960s, they decide to marry and invest their savings into a rambling Victorian house.

At first, all is idyllic. One child after the other is born and re-united relatives always crowd around the kitchen table at Christmas and Easter. Everybody enjoys the warmth and solidity of the Lovatt's home.

Harriet and David are happy with their four children and don't want any more. However, as fate would have it, Harriet becomes pregnant again. Already during the pregnancy, Harriet feels that this child is different from the others. The baby started moving violently and too early inside Harriet. The birth is one month too early and very difficult.

When the mother looks at her fiftieth child for the first time, she realises, that this baby is not only abnormal but also that she does not love it like she loves her other children. Their fifth child is called Ben.

Ben develops incredibly fast. After half a year he is already able to walk without help! But he is not only very strong, he is also extremely aggressive. He often beats his brothers and sisters. One morning, Lovatt's cat and the dog of one of their guests lay dead on the floor, killed by Ben. The other children are very suffering from Ben Therefore, Ben is sent to an school for abnormal children.

Now, the happy family life could go on. Nevertheless, after a few weeks, Harriet decides to visit his son. When she comes back with Ben, everybody is disappointed with her. Ben had not changed at all. Again he hits everything he can, and does not accept any love from his family.

John, a young man who works in the Lovatt's garden, often looks after him and eventually decides to introduce him to his friendly motorbike-gang. In this way many of the Lovatt's problems are solved. For quite a long time Ben only speaks with John. However, one day John gets a new job and has no longer time for Ben. Then Ben goes to a higher level at school and gets to know new friends. Through them he enters into another gang, which is not as harmless as John's. Now, Ben often returns home after more than five days only but once he arrives with his mates they always make a huge mess in the Lovatt's house. His gang often robs stores, steals cars and commits many other crimes.

Finally, Harriet and John are alone in their big house like twenty years ago, when they bought the house and decided to have a big family. All their relatives visit them no more, and the children are all living anywhere else, because of Ben.

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It was a windy cold night, just after Christmas. The room was warm and wonderful. David wept. Dorothy wept. Harriet laughed and wept. The midwife and the doctor had a little air of festivity and triumph. They all drank champagne, and poured some on little Luke's head. It was 1966.

Luke was an easy baby. He slept most peaceably in the little room off the big bedroom, and was contentedly breast-fed. Happiness! When David went off to catch his train to London in the mornings, Harriet was sitting up in bed feeding the baby, and drinking the tea David had brought her. When he bent to kiss her goodbye, and stroked Luke's head, it was with a fierce possessiveness that Harriet liked and understood, for it was not herself being possessed, or the baby, but happiness. Hers and his.

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Towards the end of the holidays, someone came bringing a dog, a little terrier. Ben could not leave it alone. Wherever the dog was, Ben followed. He did not pet it, or stroke it: he stood staring. One morning when Harriet came down to start breakfast for the children, the dog was lying dead on the kitchen floor. It had had a heart attack? Suddenly sick with suspicion, she rushed up to see if Ben was in his room: he was squatting on his bed, and when she came in, he looked up and laughed, but soundlessly, in his way, which was like a baring of the teeth. He had opened his door, gone quietly past his sleeping parents, down the stairs, found the dog, killed it, and gone back up again, quietly, into his room, and shut the door . . . all that, by himself! She locked Ben in: if he could kill a dog, then why not a child?

When she went down again, the children were crowding around the dead dog. And then the adults came, and it was obvious what they thought.

Of course it was impossible – a small child killing a lively dog. But officially the dog's death remained a mystery; the vet said it had been strangled. This business of the dog spoiled what was left of the holidays, and people went off home early.

Dorothy said, 'People are going to think twice about coming again.'

Three months later, Mr McGregor, the old grey cat, was killed in the same way. He had always been afraid of Ben, and kept out of reach. But Ben must have stalked him, or found him sleeping.

She was at the end of a long ward, which had any number of cots and beds along the walls. In the cots were – monsters. While she strode rapidly through the ward to the door at the other end, she was able to see that every bed or cot held an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly. A baby like a comma, great lolling head on a stalk of a body . . . then something like a stick insect, enormous bulging eyes among stiff fragilities that were limbs . . . a small girl all blurred, her flesh guttering and melting – a doll with chalky swollen limbs, its eyes wide and blank, like blue ponds, and its mouth open, showing a swollen little tongue. A lanky boy was skewed, one half of his body sliding from the other. A child seemed at first glance normal, but then Harriet saw there was no back to its head; it was all face, which seemed to scream at her. Rows of freaks, nearly all asleep, and all silent. They were literally drugged out of their minds. Well, nearly silent: there was a dreary sobbing from a cot that had its sides shielded with blankets. The high intermittent screaming, nearer now, still assaulted her nerves. A smell of excrement, stronger than the disinfectant. Then she was out of the nightmare ward and in another corridor, parallel to the one she had first seen, and identical. At its end she saw the girl, followed by the young man, come a little way towards her and then again turn right. . . . Harriet ran fast, hearing her feet thud on the boards, and turned where they did, and was in a tiny room holding trolleys of medicines and drugs. She ran through this and was now in a long cement-floored passage that had doors with inspection grilles in them all along the wall facing her. The young man and the girl were opening one of these doors as she arrived beside them. All three were breathing heavily.

'Shit,' said the young man, meaning her being there.

'Literally,' said Harriet as the door opened on a square room whose walls were of white shiny plastic that was buttoned here and there and looked like fake expensive leather upholstery. On the floor, on a green foam-rubber mattress, lay Ben. He was unconscious. He was naked, inside a strait-jacket. His pale yellow tongue protruded from his mouth. His flesh was dead white, greenish. Everything – walls, the floor, and Ben – was smeared with excrement. A pool of dark yellow urine oozed from the pallet which was soaked.

'I told you not to come!' shouted the young man. He took Ben's shoulders and the girl Ben's feet. From the way they touched the child, Harriet saw they were not brutal; that was not the point at all. They lifted Ben

thus – for in this way they had to touch very little of him – out of this room, along the corridor a little way, and through another door. She followed, and stood watching. This was a room that had sinks all along one wall, an immense bath, and a sloping cement shelf with plugs all along it. They put Ben on this shelf, unwound the strait-jacket, and, having adjusted the temperature of the water, began washing him down with a hose that was attached to one of the taps. Harriet leaned against the wall, watching. She was shocked to the point where she felt nothing at all. Ben did not move. He lay like a drowned fish on the slab, was turned over several times by the girl, when the young man interrupted the hosing process for the purpose, and was finally carried by them both to another slab, where they dried him and then took a clean strait-jacket from a pile and put it on him.

'Why?' demanded Harriet, fierce. They did not answer.

They took the child, trussed, unconscious, his tongue lolling, out of the room, down the corridor, and into another room that had a cement shelf like a bed in it. They put Ben on it, and then both stood up and sighed: 'Phew.'

'Well, there he is,' said the young man. He stood for a moment, eyes closed, recovering from the ordeal, and then lit a cigarette. The girl put out her hand for one; he gave it to her. They stood smoking, looking at Harriet in an exhausted, defeated way.

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One morning, she came down the stairs to find Ben eating breakfast with Derek. That time she said nothing, but knew she could expect more. Soon she found six of them at breakfast: she had heard them, very late, creep upstairs and find beds for themselves.

She stood by the table, looked at them bravely, ready to face them out, and said, 'You aren't just to sleep here, any time you feel like it.' They kept their heads down and went on eating.

'I mean it,' she insisted.

Derek, said, laughing, intending to sound insolent, 'Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry I'm *sure*. But we thought you wouldn't mind.'

'I do mind,' she said.

'It's a big house,' said Billy the lout, the one she was most afraid of. He did not look at her, but crammed food into his mouth, and made a noise eating.

'It's not your house,' said Harriet.

'One day we'll take it away from you,' said Elvis, laughing loudly.

'Oh, perhaps you will, yes.'

They all made 'revolutionary' remarks like this, when they remembered.

'Come the revolution, we'll . . .' 'We'll kill all the rich shits and then . . .' 'There's one law for the rich, and one for the poor, everybody knows *that*.' They would say these things amiably, with that air of repletion people use when copying what others do; when they are part of a popular mood or movement.

Characters

Harriet:

Harriet was the oldest of three daughters. When she was eighteen she left home. After school she went to an arts college where she became a graphic designer. Eventually, she married David at the age of twenty-four.

David:

His parents had divorced when he was seven. His mother's second husband was Frederick Burke. His father James married again. David's stepmother is called Jessica. He was thirty when he met Harriet, and he had been working in the dogged disciplined manner of an ambitious man: but what he was working for was a home.

Dorothy:

Dorothy was a widow, and this life of hers was mostly visiting her daughters. She had not found it easy bringing up th three girls. Her husband had been an industrial chemist, not badly paid, but there never had been much money. For Harriet and David she was like a mother. She very often looks after the Lovatt's children and cleans th huge house.

The story takes place in a village near London in a period of thirty years. The story can be splitted into three parts. In the first one Harriet and David met each other at an office party, then they had a happy life together with their four children Luke, Helen, Jane and Paul.

The second part starts when Ben was borned. Now there are lots of problems and the harmonic life of the Lovatts broke down. Because of Ben's bad behaviour they decided to put Ben in an establishment.

The third part is where Harriet called Ben from this place in the north of England. Back at home therer are the same problems. However, Ben has some friends, which were part of a gang and so Ben loose more and more the relationship to his parents.

Main characters

