

**The Fifth Child**  
By Doris Lessing  
Alfred A. Knopf  
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By Judith Kegan Gardiner

## Foul issues: Doris Lessing's lessons of unnatural nurture

### FICTION

**M**URDEROUS AS THE OUT-cast Grendel in the old English epic *Beowulf*, unresponsive to nurture as Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*, monstrous as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and diabolically distressing as *Rosemary's Baby*, Ben in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* is an unsettling, powerful creature that evokes our deepest fears—as does the book about him.

To reveal the novella's simple plot dissipates none of its readerly pleasures—which are as rich and overdetermined as a fairy tale's—but may indicate its dangers, which lie not in its potential for inducing nightmares, but rather in its reactionary ideology.

**The birth of horror:** In the promiscuous '60s, David and Harriet Lovatt espouse one another and old-fashioned British family values. They buy a lovely Victorian house and fill it with four lovely children. David the architect works hard, but all is well, even if his father has to help pay for their expansive hospitality and Harriet's mother must help with childcare. "Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they had chosen and what they deserved."

Then, despite being warned that she's borne more children than a modern woman ought to, Harriet gets pregnant for the fifth time in seven years. She's exhausted; the pregnancy is hard; the thrashing fetus won't let her sleep; she takes tranquilizers. And when baby Ben is born, he's a horror, not a sweet Down's-syndrome baby like her sister's, but a "Neanderthal baby," "an angry hostile little troll" with hunched shoulders and a sloping forehead, a baby "whom no one could love." He bruises his mother's breast when nursing, he strangles the pet dog and cat and tries to kill his brother.

Guilty and terrified, his mother devotes all her attention to the child she fears, even though he fails to respond. Her husband becomes estranged, and the once happy brood of children turn into watchful neurotics. At five, Ben's father sends him off to an institution for unwanted freaks. Harriet, in a pang of remorse, visits and discovers the hellhole is drugging and killing the children, and rescues her raging, traumatized child.

The Lovatts hire an unemployed drifter to babysit Ben, and the child becomes a motorcycle gang's mascot. Although he learns little and barely speaks, Ben drifts through public school without undue notice: "as everyone knows, all these schools have a layer, like a sediment,

of the uneducable, the unassimilable, the hopeless." By the '80s, "the barbarous '80s," he is the leader of a "leering and jeering" gang, "an alienated, non-comprehending hostile tribe" that thrives on theft and

riot while mouthing revolutionary slogans.

The book jacket wants us to read the novel as a parable, "a vivid reflection of society's unwillingness to confront—and its eventual complicity in—its most brutal aspects." This view finds some support in the novel, especially as it indicts the callousness of those who want deformed children to die out of sight and the complacency of school officials, psychiatrists, professors and other socially sanctioned experts. What the experts can't see but common people understand is that England is rapidly unravelling into "wars and riots; killings and hijackings; murders, thefts and kidnappings."

**Bourgeois marriage blues:** To think—like the experts—that Ben is a monster because his mother took drugs before his birth or didn't love him after it, is to miss the point. Ben is driven by rage and bloodthirsty hunger. Like Cain and Grendel, he attacks people out of spite, and is impervious to warmth or affection. Ben destroys his family, and his mother concludes, "We are being

punished...for presuming. For thinking we could be happy." Her husband disputes her, but Lessing, like baby Ben, delights in striking down the smug and self-satisfied. Throughout her recent fiction, people who think bourgeois marriage and the bourgeois family can make them happy are doomed to grief, and anyone who tries to beat fate faces a grim future.

The evils of society will not be cured by force, but they won't be helped by social reforms either, since the root of human nature is intractably primitive. Lessing's novel is profoundly conservative in this respect. As myth, Ben is uncanny and evocative; as anthropology, he is ludicrous: such homicidal ogres are hardly adapted for species survival. Yet Lessing regards her fiction as a kind of anthropology, teaching unpalatable but necessary truths.

According to lectures she published last year under the title *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, she believes that 90 percent of people are unthinking conformists governed by primitive mass emotions. Her theme in these lectures is "how often and how much we are dominated by our savage past." Enjoying war, people are governed more by "an older part of the human brain...than the decent, human, rational part." "Nearly everyone...behaves automatically," and women are not "inherently more peaceable

than men." Only a few "glorious individualists...stubbornly insist on telling the truth as they see it," and these "natural leaders" of society include writers, who "are by nature more easily able to achieve this detachment from mass emotions and social conditions." Like historians and anthropologists, writers "enable us to see ourselves as others see us."

**Lessing not laughing:** Lessing decries people who divide others into good and evil categories, yet she is self-righteously dogmatic. Like angry arguers who hiss that they must be right because they have not raised their voices, she inveighs against mass movements that breed "violent, emotional, partisan" minds and so make it "impossible to talk in the cool, quiet, sensible low-keyed tone of voice which...is the only one that can produce truth." Moreover,

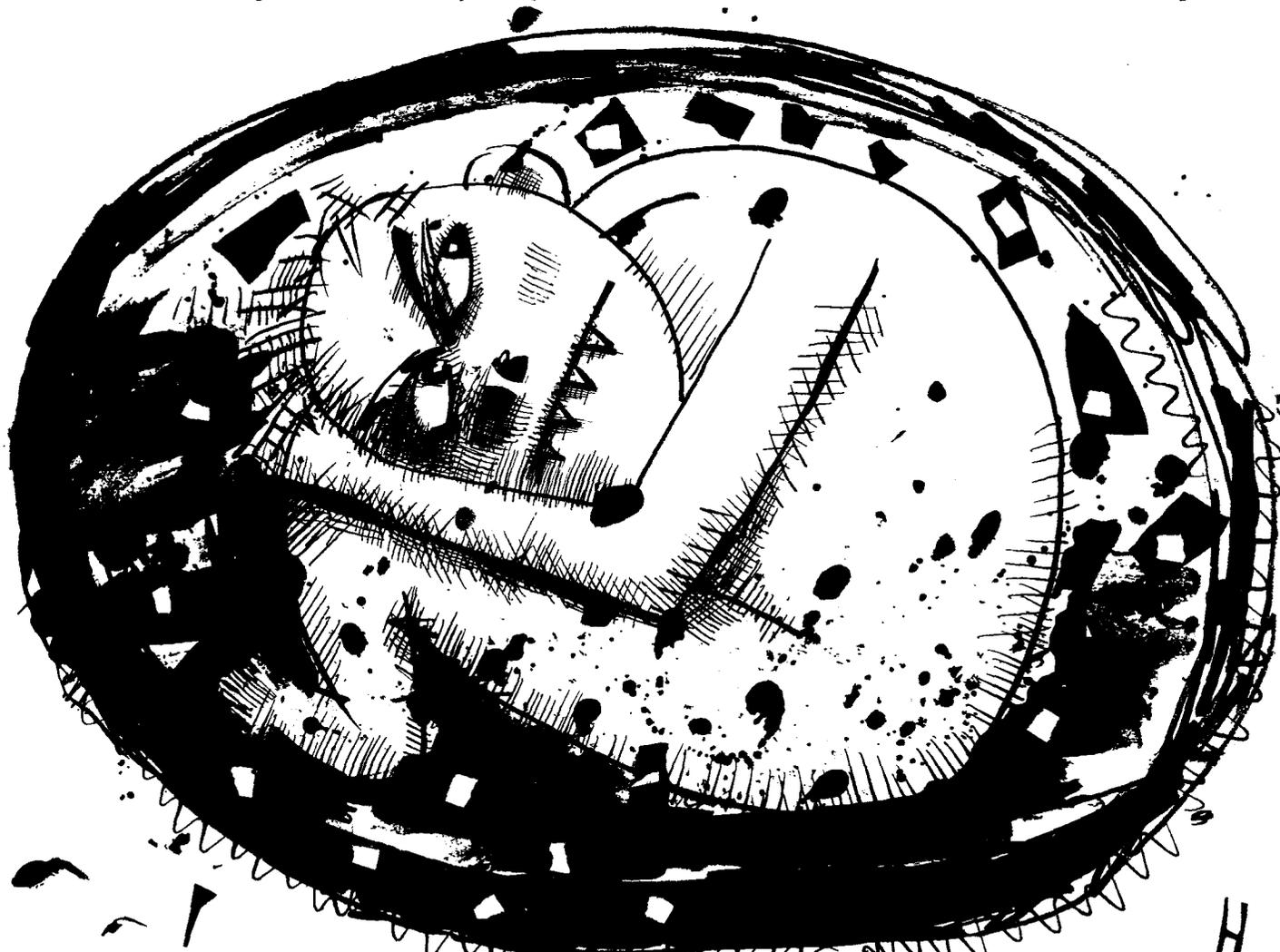
**The novel taps into every pregnant woman's fears about her child's future and every parent's occasional bewilderment at children's sheer otherness.**

"only the civilized, the liberated, the free person can laugh at herself, himself." Lessing isn't laughing at herself in these lectures or in her novel, but the novel solicits a much wider range of thoughts and emotions than the lectures, and the fears it portrays, however regrettable, are widely shared.

The novel taps into every pregnant woman's apprehensions about her child's future and every parent's occasional bewilderment at children's sheer otherness. Yet some of the novel's estrangement from youth results from Lessing's personal disillusionment with Marxist ideas of progress, a disillusionment followed by despair about the future and by a desire to disclaim responsibility for a younger generation that has not improved the world of its parents.

Although the book ostensibly focuses on "the fifth child," it never shares Ben's alien consciousness. Instead, the novel identifies its viewpoint with the monster's mother, a conscientious woman who grows from married complacency to wise, lonely introspection. She complains that everyone treats her "like a criminal" for having borne the monster and as still more of a criminal for saving his life. Humane and decent, she has tried her best but is rejected—like, one feels, her famous but defensive author, who in this book, as in her recent lectures and space fiction, also brings forth a bleak, conservative vision of human nature that causes people to react with "condemnation, and criticism, and dislike." ■

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The *Milagro Beanfield War*: so buffed, so cuddly, so very smug that it seems to congratulate itself. Above, Carlos Riquelme and Roberto Carricart.

## Redford's *Milagro* doesn't add up to a hill of beans in this crazy world

**The *Milagro Beanfield War***  
Directed by Robert Redford

By Pat Aufderheide

**T**HIS IS NOT GOING TO BE THE Latin equivalent of *The Color Purple*," boasted Panamanian singer-composer Ruben Blades to *American Film*, while he was still on location for *The Milagro Beanfield War*. In Robert Redford's interpretation of the John Nichols cult-classic novel, Blades plays the local sheriff in a small New Mexico Chicano community.

Well, if not *The Color Purple*, how about *Fiddler on the Roof* meets *It's a Wonderful Life* in the old-style Disney studios?

I do feel churlish picking on this movie. Phrases like "uplifting," "life-affirming" and "Capra-esque" dot reviewers' blurbs, and it seems to go right along with Easter bunnies and spring blossoms. In a world short on good news and multiplexes littered with movies like *D.O.A.*, it ought to be at least heartwarming that a star the likes of Robert Redford wants to film a boldly polemical novel and celebrate southwest Chicano culture.

But *The Milagro Beanfield War* is so buffed, so cuddly, so very smug that it seems to congratulate itself, leaving little necessity for a viewer to do so. The gaily jumping figure in the ads (can you hear "Zippedy-doodah" in the background?) is the right

icon for this movie, which bounced back from setback after setback in production and, on screen, refuses to let viewers get too depressed, engaged or, indeed, too *anything*.

The basic plot and characters are still (after some back-and-forth between author Nichols and screenwriter David Ward) anchored to

### FILM

Nichols' 1974 book, written, in Nichols' own words, as a "radical novel." In a small New Mexico village, Chicano farmer, husband and father Joe Mondragon (Chick Vennera) illegally irrigates his deceased father's parched beanfield.

The action triggers community controversy over the key resources of land and water. And it openly challenges the plans of encroaching developers who want to turn the beanfield into a golf course and the town into a resort. Hot-blooded car mechanic Ruby (Sonia Braga) bullies the townsfolk and depressed liberal lawyer Charley (John Heard) into the fray against thuggish developers, their sycophantic hangers-on and political toadies.

The novel, if not great literature, had vitality that drew on social and political conflicts and an engagement with southwest and Chicano culture. That was, apparently, what attracted Redford to the project, since he, in the same *American Film* article, said, "*Milagro* is about the

eccentricity of a culture not understood by another culture. It's about acceptable mysticism in our time, and it's about the decimation of a culture because of profit."

But the movie never risks presenting audiences with the experience of the culture that is not being understood. Instead it translates the magical power of a mountain subculture into mainstream-movie clichés of quaintly quirky characters and story gambits.

**Politics takes a backseat:** The plot creaks as it alternates between the good guys (the pro-beanfield faction) and the bad guys (the bankrollers and the bimbo with a heart of gold, who Melanie Griffith valiantly tries to make human). Splashes are added of local color, spectacular scenery and references to spiritual presence (icons, and a visiting angel, played with father-knows-best aplomb by Robert Carricart).

"There's probably a little bit more accident in the film than in the book," Redford said, "because otherwise it gets political, and I don't believe in being too overtly political in film. The politics should take a backseat to the more major things for an audience, which are story and character."

That division between politics and experience is familiar, and self-consciously "radical" art that moralizes in the name of political righteousness (a tendency that Nichols hasn't been immune to over his publishing

career) only feeds it. But in life and in the art that moves us to empathy, politics both shapes and is shaped by culture and character, and can't be neatly separated from story without losing its grounding in experience.

This movie falls back on generic character clichés (bad bankers, corrupt politicians, quaint aged townsfolk, tempestuous spitfire women). And the multinational Latin cast never overcomes its generic international flavor to convince us that we're watching a community with ancient local roots and traditions. Brazilian star Sonia Braga's distinctive accent slips through despite her labored efforts to resyncopate her English, although awful lines don't give her any help. "What good is a hometown if everyone you know is gone?" she laboriously articulates. The pros' performances clash noticeably with the look and demeanor of the locals, who decorate scenes like framed paintings on a wall. Christopher Walken camps up a villain part that's written to be flintily macho; he seems to be playing the John Waters' version of this movie. The one actor who looks like he belongs in a movie from the Nichols book—although he's not given much to work with—is superb Mexican character actor Carlos Riquelme, who plays patriarch Amarante.

Stylistically, *Milagro* never moves off the mainstream dime, the spot held by easy-to-read movies that can be shown on airplanes and watched by three generations in a living room without raising an eyebrow or ruffling expectations. (One of the ironies of the movie year has to be this movie's "R" rating, which comes from three glancing uses of the "f" word.) As the movie opens with an

Our Town tour of the little village, we are introduced to people who might as well have "Town Character" pasted on their foreheads.

Magical moments are registered visually by such scenes as one in which newspapers are flung into the air and scatter across a blue-blue sky like birds, to inspiring string music. Action is moved along with self-consciously cute scenes, such as one in which oldsters come into a store to buy ammunition to defend beanfielder Mondragon. The camera gives us face after weatherbeaten face asking for different brands of ammo, until finally the last face asks for a can of food...and a box of ammo. "Dum-dum!" goes the soundtrack, an upbeat over-and-out cue. This kind of pacing and editing borders on ultrasafe, made-for-TV-movie cuing.

**Risks and results:** Redford gambled plenty in the making of *Milagro*. It took him years to first gain rights (from coproducer Moctesuma Esparza) and then pull the production together. The town where he wanted to film in New Mexico decided—in a neat recapitulation of the movie's theme—that they didn't want big-time money disturbing their peace. He began production slightly uphill, without a cast or working script. Post-production problems blew the originally small-budget production into one of the bigger-ticket items of the year.

Redford gambled everywhere but where it counted, on authenticity. Now he's got a small movie whose budget doesn't show up on screen and which, *pace* Blades, does have its parallels to *The Color Purple*. Like Spielberg's film, it refers more to other movie conventions than it does to the texture of the experience and culture of its subjects.

*The Milagro Beanfield War* is a film you don't hate and you don't love. Of course, just for that reason it may be a long-range if medium-cool market success. It's the kind of film that people feel obscurely guilty for not having loved more, the kind of film for which those adjectives of displaced or obligatory emotion—"heartwarming," or "uplifting"—are perfectly appropriate. ■

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