



Ben, In the World

By Doris Lessing
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Introduction What are the prerequisites for survival in the modern world? What would happen if a fully-grown man of limited mental faculties, but strong of body and with a good spirit, were to engage with the world completely unassisted? How would a man cope with life in the western world if he couldn't make rational decisions, and also could not trust anybody? In *Ben, In the World*, the sequel to *The Fifth Child*, we are given the story of what happens when Ben Lovatt, the main character of both novels, is released into the world to fend for himself. The story crosses national borders, continents, and social classes, and the result is profound -- for while the reader is presented with the complexities of coping with the modern world as a person of insufficient understanding, Ben Lovatt also acts as a touchstone of human nature globally. Through him and the people he encounters, we discover which qualities inspire sympathy, and a whole spectrum of emotions, ranging from ambition and pride to indignation and fear. The all-too-common willingness to exploit the disadvantaged and the limitations on the human capacity for sustaining concern for others through difficult situations is the unavoidable theme of this novel. And yet there are also those with beautiful, humane and kind qualities, people he bumps into by accident. They manage to peer through Ben's peculiar appearance and see a person

with feelings that require the same caution and consideration as any person with more normal faculties. The differences could hardly be more explicit, and so the book consistently operates on a highly philosophical plane. Rich with twists of plot and literary intrigue, *Ben, In the World* is an exceptional work of fiction. However, the novel manages to ask very fundamental questions about life and society: What is human nature? How are our behaviors and motivations driven by evolution? A driving force in the novel is the very lack of clarity surrounding Ben's apparent mental deficiencies. Much comes from a close third person perspective -- we are aware of his feelings as they come and go, but their origins remain as mysterious as our own. The result is a richly textured and engaging tale of the scarcely explored and often unintelligible qualities of the human spirit. **Discussion Questions**

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?

About the Author: Doris Lessing was born to British parents in Persia in 1919 and moved with her family to Southern Rhodesia when she was five years old. She went to England in 1949 and has lived there ever since. She is the author of more than 30 books -- novels, short stories, reportage, poems, and plays -- and is considered among the most important writers of the postwar era.