

The Children of Men, P.D. James (1992)
Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

The year is 2021 and the setting is England. No children have been born since 1995, for man has become infertile.

P.D. James' novel, *The Children of Men*, is divided into two parts: *Omega* and *Alpha*, the End and the Beginning. We move from a slow, distanced narrative deadened with despair to a vibrant style alive with hope.

The unsympathetic narrator challenges the reader's attention in the first pages with a sluggish pace. Professor Theodore Faron seems incapable of love; he is selfish and removed from others. Yet as he reflects on his world, a humanity with no future, we see he is an honest protagonist. He admits his flaws. He is capable of penitence, and thus, redemption.

P.D. James' acute portrayal of a world without children brings home the terrible implications of a decreasing population. The natural world inevitably takes over the civilized world, as fewer workers are available to maintain roads, to clear creeping forests and tame wild life. For those left, violence increases as life grows meaningless, inviting the rising power of the State. People are only concerned with "freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom." Suicide of the aged – essentially euthanasia – is achieved through paid incentives to survivors. The elderly and infirm board ferries that will sink in the sea as violins play.

How did mankind come to such a place? Faron reflects in his journal:

Much of this I can trace to the early 1990s: the search for alternative medicine, the perfumed oils, the massage, the stroking and anointing, the crystal-holding, the non-penetrative sex. Pornography and sexual violence on film, on television, in books, in life, had increased and became more explicit but less and less in the West we made love and bred children. It seemed at the time a welcome development in a world grossly polluted by over-population. As a historian I see it as the beginning of the end.

These last generations are no longer interested in history, only present comfort, immediate gratification. A dying statesman encapsulates one of James' themes: "Man is diminished if he lives without knowledge of his past; without hope of a future he becomes a beast."

And what of Christianity in this infertile age? Does faith provide hope for a future? Theodore Faron describes trends, all too familiar to many of us:

During the mid-1990s the recognized churches, particularly the Church of England, moved from the theology of sin and redemption to a less uncompromising doctrine: corporate social responsibility coupled with a sentimental humanism. (They have)... virtually abolished the Second Person of the Trinity together with His cross, substituting a golden orb of the sun in glory... Even to unbelievers like myself, the cross, stigma of

the barbarism of officialdom and of man's ineluctable cruelty, has never been a comfortable symbol.

Into this dying world, James introduces a few humble "revolutionaries," ordinary folk who wish to challenge the power of the State, to call for individual freedom and respect for human life. They bring Faron into their group, and as the novel progresses Faron begins to change.

The Children of Men is, of course, a warning to our Western culture. But it also posits answers, as we see Theodore Faron learn to love. The narrative becomes lucid and compelling as the plot builds, as language reflects the change in Faron's vision of his world. Scriptural images, while not overt, point to the source of that love and vision, and the most promising and redemptive characters are Anglo-Catholics. Luke the priest celebrates Mass in the woods; Julian, the deformed, listens to God's promptings as she bears possible salvation within her.

In *Book 1, Omega*, Theodore meets this small band of protesters, and finds he is falling in love with Julian, feeling "an unfamiliar tingle of excitement, more worrying than pleasant." In *Book 2, Alpha*, he joins them as they flee the State, embodied in his cousin, the Warden of England. Swept into the story, the reader travels through the broken and wild country of crumbling England. Good confronts evil; battles rage within and without, in the immanent and the transcendent, in the awakening heart and on the rutted road, as man meets beast.

Theo's heart opens and James' prose sings. His memory of visiting Rome:

Standing before the Michelangelo Pieta in St. Peter's . . . the rows of spluttering candles, the kneeling women, rich and poor, young and old, fixing their eyes on the Virgin's face with an intensity of longing almost too painful to witness. He remembered their outstretched arms, their palms pressed against the glass protective shield, the low continual mutter of their prayers as if this ceaseless anguished moan came from a single throat and carried to that unregarding marble the hopeless longing of all the world.

Theo's soul opens too as he reads a psalm from the *Book of Common Prayer*, and we see not only the source of the novel's title, but James' gentle and powerful answer to the suffering of modern man:

'Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were made: thou art God from everlasting, and world without end. Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night.'

The Children of Men is a stunningly brilliant novel. While I have enjoyed Baroness James' mysteries, this is her greatest achievement, laced with lucid images and arching metaphors. Read it twice to fully realize the perfect execution, the carefully drawn characters, the steadily rising, suspenseful plot. This is P.D. James at her best.