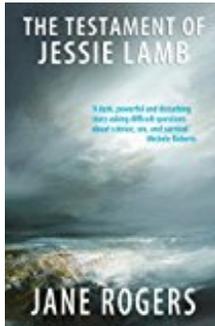


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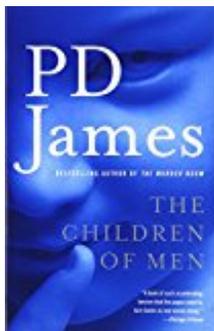
Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

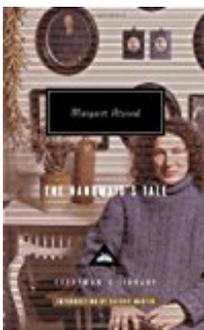
"Mother of the People": Biology as Destiny in the Dystopias of Jane Rogers, P.D. James, and Margaret Atwood



Imagine a world where the human race can no longer reproduce itself due to a virus, a likely product of bioterrorism, that attacks a woman's brain at the moment of conception, killing her within days. This is the premise of Jane Rogers's recent novel *The Testament of Jesse Lamb*. In P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992), an equally mysterious virus renders all sperm on Earth, frozen and otherwise, sterile. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, humanity's reproductive ability has been so compromised by nuclear disasters, chemical warfare, industrial toxins, and contaminated food supplies that the few women left with the potential to breed are forced by the state to devote themselves entirely to producing offspring.



The desolation of a world without children, gruesomely depicted in these novels, would arise not so much from the absence of the children themselves, though surely this would have its downsides, but to the acute, ever-present awareness that life is distinctly pointless when all human prospects are nullified. Of course, a "big picture" thinker might agree with the statistical paleontologist in James's novel that "of the four billion life forms which have existed on this planet, three billion, nine hundred and sixty million are now extinct... in the light of these mass extinctions it really does seem unreasonable to suppose that *Homo sapiens* should be exempt." Still, for most of us, the idea that we're all contributing some small measure, good or bad, to the planet's future is a psychological boon to existence.



Patrimony -- the etymology of the word is particularly apt -- lies at the heart of these novels. Each deprived world asks what patriarchal society, with its endless monuments to unaging intellect, believes it is leaving behind. All three books postulate that humankind's essential bequest begins and ends with the continuation of the race -- something our

present civilization in its frenzied quest to get and spend summarily neglects.

In *The Testament of Jesse Lamb*, fast-paced, though schematic in plot and characterization, Maternal Death Syndrome has killed off millions of women and their fetuses. The world's youth, including sixteen-year-old Jesse Lamb, is livid about the mess of a planet they have inherited from their greedy, self-absorbed, cynical, or indifferent parents. Protests, subversive action, and general riots abound. Only when Jesse decides to undergo a new procedure making it possible to bring a fetus to term at the cost of her own life does she feel hope and personal fulfillment.

The year Omega marks the date when infertility struck globally in *The Children of Men*, set in England. Twenty-five years on, an evil dictator rules the UK. The Quietus, one among many draconian measures, forcefully exhort the old and infirm to kill themselves for the greater good. Bands of "Omegas," the final generation of humans to be born, lawlessly roam the countryside ritualistically slaughtering their elders. The novel's heroine Julian, deeply faithful to Christian morality, begins a grassroots organization to oppose the government, then discovers she is pregnant. Though gripping, the novel lacks scientific plausibility, curtailing the reader's ability to suspend disbelief.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred recounts her experience as a Handmaid, or walking womb, in the Republic of Gilead. In a post-apocalyptic era, this repressive society is run by the Commanders. Unwomen, those who don't qualify as Handmaids, Marthas (maids), Wives, or Aunts (indoctrinators), are exiled to the colonies to clean up toxic waste. The Handmaids are trained by the Aunts to passively submit monthly to copulation with their assigned Commanders. During the "celebration," a Handmaid is held down by the Commander's Wife, whose role will be to raise the child, should they all be so lucky. If Offred fails to breed within three years, her status will revert to Unwoman. A novel of outstanding literary merit, *The Handmaid's Tale* is abundant with sharp, dazzling images, trenchant descriptions, sardonic observations, and disarming poignancy.

Against extraordinary odds, and conscious of humankind's legacy, the female protagonists of all three novels triumph, albeit with requisite ambiguity. Their weapon is pregnancy. Motherhood, these novels suggest, is grievously undervalued -- environmentally, politically, psychologically, spiritually -- which raises the question: Is the propagation of the race a feminist issue?

In fact, women in our actual world are severely punished for their role in continuing the species. A prospective mother dies every ninety seconds from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth, with over ninety-five percent of these deaths avoidable given adequate medical care. In the developed world, since the 1950s, the maternal death rate has dropped dramatically, but according to the Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths (a British organization whose ominous name evokes these novelistic dystopias), the death rate among pregnant women in the UK (and in the US) is increasing at a "worrying" rate due to substandard care, the failure to diagnose indirect causes, and a significant tendency for

clinicians to "prioritize the health of the foetus over that of the mother," often resulting in the death of both. Feminists are appalled by these statistics, but while striving to achieve universal justice for women, they are philosophically divided on the issue of female biological function.

Jane Kramer's excellent *New Yorker* profile of the Frenchwoman, Elisabeth Badinter, one of the world's leading feminists, describes her as a staunch equality feminist vehemently opposed to "difference" or parity feminism, which she believes reduces women to "the status of female mammals, programmed to the 'higher claims' of womb and breast." Badinter considers the maternal instinct a social construct, recalling Simone de Beauvoir's famous line: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." Badinter decries what she calls "motherhood fundamentalism," a neo-Rousseau-inspired epidemic in the West: "a movement dressed in the guise of a modern, moral cause that worships all things natural."

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred stunningly describes what happens to a woman if she is identified exclusively with her biology:

I sink down into my body as a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own.

Badinter would undoubtedly see these novels as illustrations of the tyranny of biological destiny, both in their dystopian reduction of women to their childbearing role and in their utopian solutions of locating ultimate female power in the womb. But perhaps both brands of feminism -- equality and difference -- are, so to speak, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Ultimately, it is the combination of the means of production *and* the control of the means of production that holds true power. In fact, Badinter's next book will examine the "political utilization of maternity." In Kramer's article, Badinter describes how the Hapsburg empress Marie Thérèse of Austria (mother of sixteen, including Marie Antoinette) "saved her empire, and her authority over it, by sweeping into the Hungarian parliament with her first baby in her arms and declaring herself 'mother of the people.'"

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