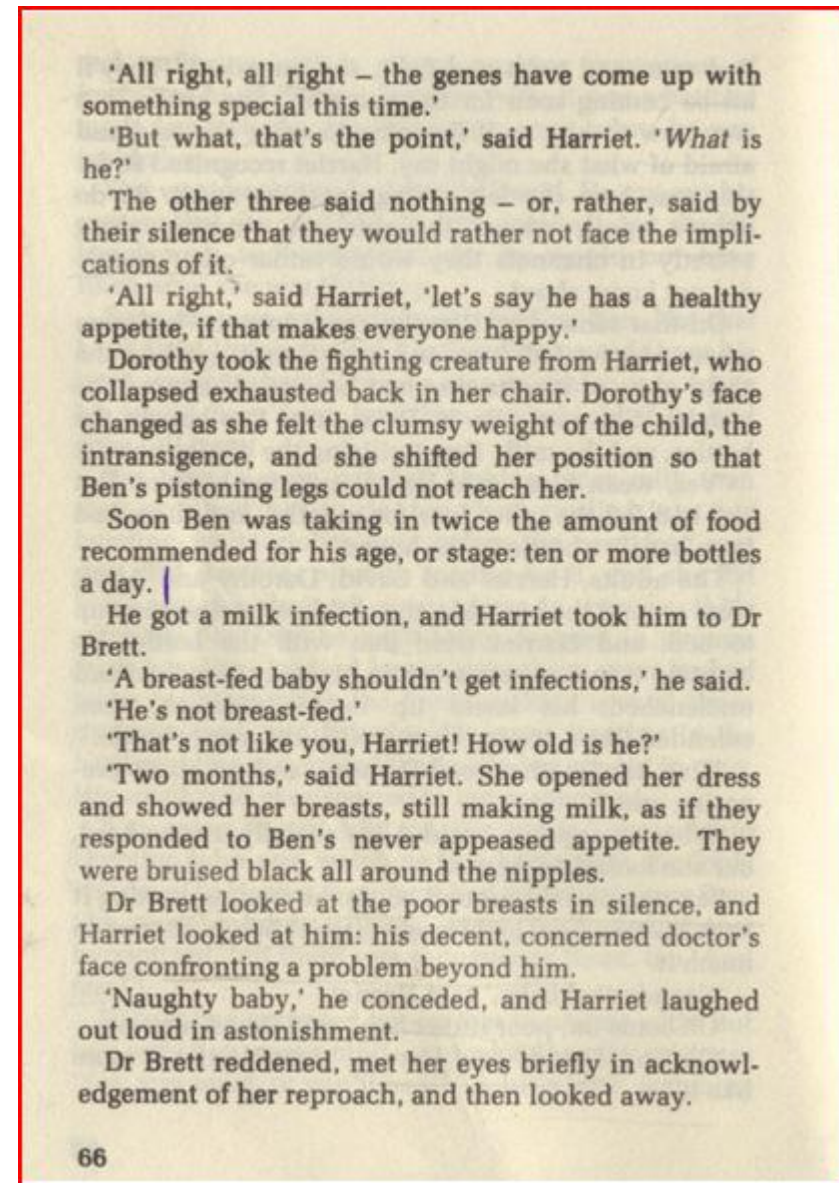
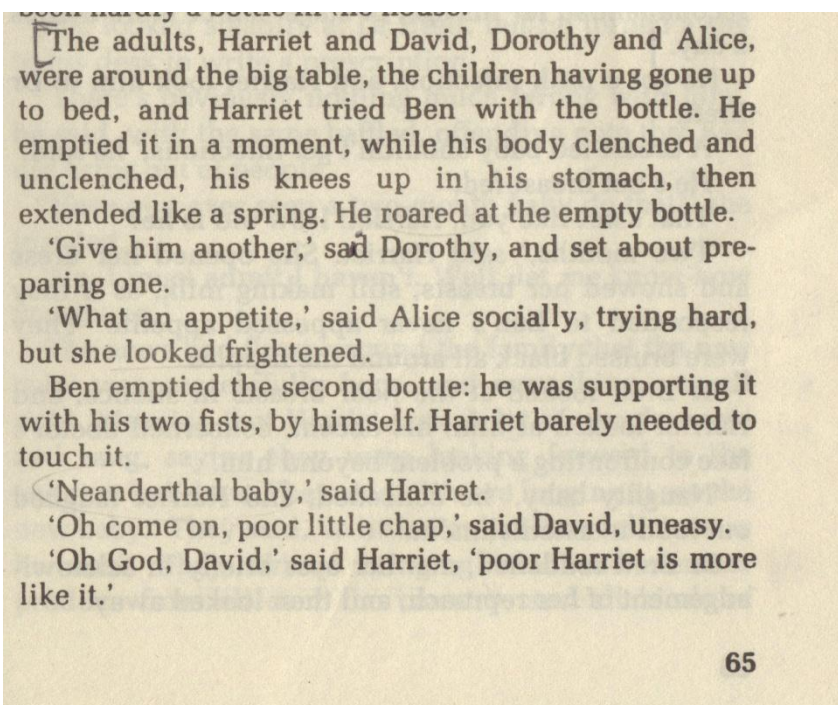


The Fifth Child

Doris Lessing – 1998

Read the following pages, from the middle of the novel.



'All I need is a prescription for diarrhoea,' said Harriet. She added deliberately, staring at him, willing him to look at her, 'After all, I don't want to kill the nasty little brute.'

He sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed them slowly. He was frowning, but not in disapproval of her. He said, 'It is not abnormal to take a dislike to a child. I see it all the time. Unfortunately.'

Harriet said nothing, but she was smiling unpleasantly, and knew it.

'Let me have a look at him.'

Harriet took Ben out of the pram, and laid him on the table. At once he turned on to his stomach and tried to get himself on all fours. He actually succeeded for a moment before collapsing.

She looked steadily at Dr Brett, but he turned away to his desk to write a prescription.

'There's obviously nothing much wrong with him,' he said, with the same baffled, offending note that Ben did bring out of people.

'Have you ever seen a two-month baby do that?' she insisted.

'No. I must admit I haven't. Well, let me know how you get on.'

The news had flown around the family that the new baby was successfully born, and everything was all right. Meaning that Harriet was. A lot of people wrote and rang, saying they were looking forward to the summer holidays. They said, 'We are longing to see the new baby.' They said, 'Is little Paul still as delicious as he was?' They arrived bringing wine and summer produce from all over the country, and all kinds of

people stood bottling fruit and making jams and chutneys with Alice and Dorothy. A crowd of children played in the garden or were taken off to the woods for picnics. Little Paul, so cuddlesome and funny, was always on somebody's lap, and his laugh was heard everywhere: this was his real nature, overshadowed by Ben and his demands.]