



Ark Baby

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Tobias Phelps is a foundling, deposited as a very new baby on the altar in a church under the care of Parson Phelps in the village of Thunder Spit, on the Northumbrian coast of England. Parson Phelps, mistaking the baby boy for a piglet at first, accepts him as a gift from God to himself and his wife, childless after many years. Tobias, an extraordinarily hairy infant, has suffered a serious wound to his coccyx, but the warm-hearted and grateful Phelpses take him to their bosoms and rear the foundling as their own. On his fifth birthday, moved by the extraordinary vision of the cake baked for him by Mrs. Phelps, he utters his first words: "What a delicious-looking cake....Please, dear Mother, would you kindly be so good as to cut me a slice."

ARK BABY, Liz Jensen's first novel, covers 152 years, weaving together in a compelling fashion a host of themes as disparate as British veterinary practices, religious reaction to Darwin's ORIGIN OF SPECIES, the questions of cross species reproduction, human fertility in the post-modern world, vegetarianism, and love. But a problem emerges. For mysterious reasons, no British female has been fertile since the year 2000. The British, once the ruler of the world, now appear to be descending into extinction. Humanity, the British form at any rate, apparently has reached an evolutionary dead end. Jensen asks what if? What if the fate of the species rests in genetic material of a copulation that occurred in an Ark sent to collect samples of as many species as possible so that they could be killed, mounted, and exhibited as an example of man's supremacy? Weaving together various strands, the novel offers a surprising answer.

Jensen's style is lively, marvelously eclectic, and full of sly allusions to many of the standard nineteenth century authors.

Sources for Further Study

Kirkus Reviews. LXVI, March 1, 1998, p. 287.

Library Journal. CXXIII, April 15, 1998, p. 113.

The New York Times Book Review. CIII, May 24, 1998, p. 14.

Publishers Weekly. CCXLV, March 2, 1998, p. 61.

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