

CHILDREN OF MEN – SUMMARY

Rated (MA)

Theo Faron (Clive Owen) is a jaded, alcoholic civil servant in London in the year 2027. All around him, society is on the verge of collapse. National borders have been closed, armed police patrol the streets and all refugees ('fugees') are being rounded up and sent to detention centres. Various terrorist groups are fighting back, while extreme religious sects call the nation to repentance. Whatever happens, the world's future is extremely bleak since no children have been born for over eighteen years. When the world's youngest person is killed in a brawl, people are overcome with grief.



Then Theo is abducted by an activist group known as the Fishes and taken to a meeting with their leader Julian (Julianne Moore). Julian is Theo's ex-lover, but now she wants his help: she needs transit papers for a young woman, and she thinks that Theo might be able to persuade his cousin, a Government minister, to arrange it. Theo reluctantly agrees – for a fee. However, he is only able to get joint transit papers, so he offers to accompany the woman for an extra payment. Theo and the woman, Kee (Claire-

Hope Ashitey), set off towards the south coast accompanied by three members of the Fishes: Julian, Luke (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and Miriam (Pam Ferris). But while they are driving down a narrow country road, they are ambushed and Julian is killed.

They flee to a safe house where Kee reveals her extraordinary secret to Theo. The Fishes were attempting to convey her to a ship, the *Tomorrow*, belonging to a highly secretive organisation called the Human Project. During the night, Theo is disturbed and overhears that the attack had been planned by Luke in order to eliminate Julian. When he learns that he is also to be killed and that Kee is to be used as a political pawn, he wakes her and Miriam and they flee to the house of his good friend Jasper (Michael Caine). Jasper has a contact at the Bexhill-on-Sea refugee internment camp who may be able to get them inside in order to rendezvous with the ship. But the Fishes are close behind them and the stakes are high.

BACKGROUND

Children of Men is based on the novel by P.D. James, but the screenplay went through several versions before director Alfonso Cuarón rewrote it again into its final form. It may be best to think of the film as inspired by James's novel rather than being an adaptation, since many characters and plot elements are significantly changed.

Theo and Julian have a very different relationship in the book, and the character of Kee is new to the film – she takes over Julian's role, in fact. Luke is changed from a clergyman to a terrorist, and Jasper becomes a much more benign character. The Human Project doesn't exist in the book – and nor does the virtual civil war. In the film, the implication is that the fertility problem affects women, but in the book it affects men. Most significantly, James's Christian worldview is almost entirely lost in Cuarón's telling of the story.

The Fishes of James's imagination are a Christian group, whereas the only group member in the film who clearly expresses any spirituality is Miriam who spouts a mixture of

Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and New Age ideas. P.D. James describes her novel as a Christian fable, taking the title from Psalm 90 in the version found in Thomas Cranmer's [Book of Common Prayer](#) (1662), but Cuarón's film functions more as myth and makes no reference back to this source.

He [says](#), 'The P.D. James book is almost like a look at Christianity, and that wasn't my interest. I didn't want to shy away from the spiritual archetypes but I wasn't interested in dealing with Dogma.'

This recreation of the story has divided critics, angering some who believe that the story could and should have been left relatively intact. [Anthony Sacramone](#) is one, calling the film an 'act of vandalism'. He laments, 'What's insufferable is his pressing into service someone else's vision as a commercial vehicle for a personal political screed.'



Others, particularly those who were not already familiar with P.D. James's original novel, have been very enthusiastic. Jonathan Ross describes it as 'one of the most outstanding films I've seen in years,' and *Guardian* film critic [Peter Bradshaw](#) says that it 'has simply the most extraordinary look of any movie around,' and calls it 'the thinking person's action movie.' [Rich Cline](#) agrees: 'There's so much to enjoy about this film that we don't want it to end. It's a feast for the eye and the mind. It's packed with harrowing story twists and shocking revelations that provoke us to really think about the issues involved . . . And all of this combines into a film that's about as satisfyingly entertaining as movies get.'



Some critics, however, question whether it is really as thoughtful as it appears. They share in the almost universal acclaim for the technical mastery of the film (watch out for three spectacularly long takes during the action sequences). But they lament that (in the words of [David Poland](#)) 'in the end, it is lacking in basic human emotion . . . basic human logic . . . and never really explores the themes it keeps throwing in our faces.' Cuarón defends his approach, arguing that

film-makers too often make the story explain everything rather than giving people an experience which hints at questions, themes and meanings, and will make them think.

He [says](#), 'The principle of cinema is that you are looking at that screen. A lot of reviewers nowadays, they fall into that vice: they want stories. They want explanations, they want exposition and they want political postures. Why does cinema have to be a medium for making political statements as opposed to presenting facts, presenting elements and then you making your own conclusions – even if they are elusive? There's nothing more beautiful than elusiveness in cinema.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

How plausible a view of the future did you find the setting of *Children of Men*? What made it believable? What kind of emotional impact did this have on you?

To what extent could you understand the global grief over the death of Baby Diego? How do you think attitudes to young people would change in such a world?

Why do you think the Government is dealing with refugees in such a brutal fashion? What do you think it would take to bring us to such a situation?

'Julian was wrong. They thought it could be peaceful. But how can it be peaceful when they try to take away your dignity?' (Luke)

How important is human dignity? How is taken away or undermined within our world? Christians see human dignity as grounded in the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God ([Genesis 1:26](#)). What other ways do people within our society see it? Which perspective makes most sense to you? Why? What principles does society need to hold fast to in order to preserve human dignity?

What was your initial reaction to Theo Faron? How did your understanding of him develop as you discovered more about his past?

Everything is a mythical cosmic battle between faith and chance. . . . Theo's faith lost out to chance. So, why bother if life's going to make its own choices? (Jasper)

What do you think Jasper means by this? Do you agree with him? Why/why not? Jasper puts the emphasis on the faith itself, not on the object of that faith. What difference does it make to life when it is based on genuine faith in God rather than on faith in political movements or vague spirituality?

How would you describe Theo's character in the early part of *Children of Men*? What would you say his goal was? How did he change? What did his goal become? What made the difference in him?

In what other ways are Kee's pregnancy and journey paralleled with those of Mary in the gospels? In what ways are they contrasted (see [Matthew 1:18-2:18](#); [Luke 2:1-20](#))? How does the setting of this birth help you to understand what it was like for Mary and Joseph?

'Kee, your baby is the miracle the whole world has been waiting for.' (Jasper)

In what ways does the film see the baby as a miracle? How does the significance of Kee's baby reflect the significance of the birth of Jesus? How are they different?

Do you see hope or hopelessness at the end of *Children of Men*? Why? Where do you see signs of hope in our world? What do you think of the Christian conviction that, ultimately, hope is found in God alone and his promise that Jesus Christ will return again to establish perfect justice and peace?