



Baby Steps: Genetic Pressure Volume I

Eugene Clark

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Genetic engineering is behind the movements of Baby Steps, a novel that dramatizes both philosophical musings and scientific revelations.

In Eugene Clark's robust novel *Baby Steps*, independent parents grapple with the morality and ethics of designer babies.

Rachael is a hardworking woman who's driven to reduce her environmental impact with a self-sustaining farm. Despite her successful career as a horse breeder, Rachael feels incomplete. A troubled romantic past, her asexual nature, and several genetic disease markers push her away from having a child of her own.

Then, a wealthy friend introduces her to an elite genetic engineering company that specializes in designer babies, complete with surrogates, specialized care, and a secluded island. The company draws in Max, a tech entrepreneur with a string of disastrous relationships behind him, for the same reason. Rachael and Max are driven to pass on their genes and raise children by themselves, but the company and implications of designer babies harbor sinister secrets.

Rachael is intriguing. Her family has a lengthy history of fatal genetic diseases, and she refuses to pass those genes on. She builds a life and career complete with affable friends and doesn't seem to feel the urge to become a mother. It's therefore an out-of-character twist when she expresses desire to have a child and agrees to the demands of the genetic manipulation clinic. Once she's on the island, her actions and thoughts contradict the directions she's pushed in. Conversely, Max is off-putting; he seems to have no reason for wanting children, engineered or otherwise. Interest in his goals wanes.

The scenes that take place during Rachael's life on her farm are the best realized, with detailed descriptions of the environment and the characters in it. Comparatively, the events on the island, and those from Max's past, are bland.

Abrupt jumps in time confuse the story's pacing, especially in Rachael's story. Though it is linear, moving from college to her working life to her experiences designing her baby, many of the more intriguing events in her life, including those related to her genetic father, her birth father, and her mother's deception, are relegated to the sidelines. Elsewhere, Max's story leaps back and forth in time to establish his failed relationships, but these jumps end up adding little to the larger story.

When it focuses on the morality of designing babies, the book emphasizes themes like nature versus nurture and perfecting the human condition, but these compelling topics are shunted off to focus on Max's dating habits and Rachael's friends' successful attempt to amass an incestuous cult. The latter half of the novel brims with strange concepts and themes that are disconnected from its first half.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (June 25, 2020)

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