



# The Only Ones

*Carola Dibbell*

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## **The Only Ones** Carola Dibbell

Inez wanders a post-pandemic world, strangely immune to disease, making her living by volunteering as a test subject. She is hired to provide genetic material to a grief-stricken, affluent mother, who lost all four of her daughters within four short weeks. This experimental genetic work is policed by a hazy network of governmental ethics committees, and threatened by the Knights of Life, religious zealots who raze the rural farms where much of this experimentation is done.

When the mother backs out at the last minute, Inez is left responsible for the product, which in this case is a baby girl, Ani. Inez must protect Ani, who is a scientific breakthrough, keeping her alive, dodging authorities and religious fanatics, and trying to provide Ani with the childhood that Inez never had, which means a stable home and an education.

With a stylish voice influenced by years of music writing, *The Only Ones* is a time-old story, tender and iconic, about how much we love our children, however they come, as well as a sly commentary on class, politics, and the complexities of reproductive technology.

## **The Only Ones Details**

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Author : Carola Dibbell

Format : Paperback 356 pages

Genre : Fiction, Science Fiction, Dystopia, Apocalyptic, Post Apocalyptic

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# From Reader Review The Only Ones for online ebook

## wishforagiraffe says

This is a near future dystopia with a focus on pandemics and (really only hints of) climate change. It's written in a difficult narrative style, but well worth reading. Definitely more on the side of being "message fiction," so there are plenty of negative reviews here on goodreads because of a disagreement with the message. I personally thought the book had a lot of really excellent things to say about empathy, humanity, motherhood, cloning, and disease.

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## Holly Booms Walsh says

First - if you can get this in audio - do it. The narration by Sasha Dunbrooke takes a good book and elevates it to a GREAT book. This book is told in first person, in a sort of dialect in which the grammar is not always correct, and Dunbrooke keeps our protagonist (Inez, or "I") from sounding stupid, and layers in some of the best emotional performances I've ever heard in an audiobook narration. Through her voice, we know that Inez is brave, not foolhardy; uneducated but not stupid; savvy if not smart; practical but not unfeeling; scared but determined.

The world of the book is set in the near future (2070's) in New York after a series of pandemics and epidemics have decimated the population of the world. This is a gritty, fearful world but it is not a police state. There is enough government left that there are online message boards to use to communicate and food drops of MRE rations to help sustain life. Inez is 30 when we meet here, and she is the conduit through which we learn the state of the world and the history of the pandemics, but the backstory never feels like exposition. The language is dynamic, abbreviated, colloquial (Inez only finished 3rd grade. We're dealing with a lot of people that had no infrastructure for schools during the worst of the pandemics). There is new technology and new slang for it. The story is action-packed, with struggles for survival and the have versus the have-nots, but there is very little actual violence.

The focus of the book mostly centers on the fact that the pandemics and vaccine effects have made reproduction very difficult. People are selling eggs and sperm, IVF, test tube fertilization and even fertilized embryos in both a black and a grey market system. People that have proven that they are immune to one or more of the pandemics are selling blood, eggs, teeth, skin cells to the people that supply this "alt repro" industry. Or they take jobs testing vaccines.

Inez answers an ad to be a test subject, and ends up proposing that she donate eggs and help raise some "viables" for sale. The process that finally takes is essentially cloning, which will produce a disease-resistant baby. The wealthy client backs out last minute, and Inez is given her "daughter" Ani, essentially a clone of herself. The bulk of the book follows Inez and Ani through childhood, in which Inez does everything she can to offer Ani a life as different from Inez's own perilous, abandoned, and abusive one that she can.

The language of the book reminded me of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, with its similar themes of parenthood and post-apocalyptic survival. It's like no PA book I've ever read though. It really tugged on my emotions by the end, despite the very "just the facts" abbreviated language of the book and almost entire lack of sentimentality in the narrative. The first person PVO is perfect for this story, making it very immediate, visceral, and tense.

This was one of the best books I've read in 2015. Heartily recommended, particularly in audio format.

NOTE: I received a copy of this audiobook from the author, narrator, or publisher in exchange for an unbiased and honest review.

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### **Annet says**

This is a bleak, dark story of a post pandemic world, with a tragic atmosphere yet also of hope.... Very intriguing read.

A story of a girl – the young mother - and her daughter struggling to survive in the ruins of Brooklyn and Queens.

Kind of reminds me of *The Road*, but then different.

The story is told by a young girl, Inez, who wanders a post pandemic world that gets hit by several types of flu, every time causing death, chaos, disorder, burning down city parts, disinfecting.... She is strangely immune to a succession of killer flues, she is, as we learn, a 'sylvain hardy'.

She is hired to provide genetic material to a wealthy grief-stricken mother who lost her children to the diseases. Because Inez is a sylvain hardy she is the ideal host, to create a child immune to disease. She needs the money. This experimental 'cloning' work is done at 'The Farm', a creepy and scary type of activity, although done by Rauden and Henry, brothers who run this seedy work but in a sentimental sort of caring way. When the mother backs out at the last minute (she found a replacing son in India), Inez is left responsible for the baby girl, Ani. Ani is the only one alive from a series of clones.

In a sad and persistence voice Inez tells us of the bringing up of her Ani, a brave mother, who persists and persists, dealing with all the challenges she has to overcome. She has to be very careful, there are movements who disagree with the reproductive technologies used, also on her and Ani, they threaten and kill. So this story is about the ethical questions of creating life in an abnormal way in a post pandemic world. It is also a story of a single mother bringing up a daughter in extremely difficult circumstances. It is a heart breaking story, the style is chaotic, not always nice, and hard to follow at times, not always beautiful, but totally matching the tragedy of the story.

It is not your usual apocalyptic story. Not a pretty story, but well worth exploring, recommended.

"A bracing, tough-minded, farsighted novel about bravery and endurance, a mother fighting for her child, and the way life goes on even after the world ends –every sentence pierces." Kelly Link.

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### **Althea Ann says**

'The Only Ones' started off 5-star strong.

I loved the character of Inez - her voice was incredibly well-developed and believable. She's an ultimately pragmatic individual, horribly uneducated, with a limit of vision that restricts her scope and her ability to understand things in a terrifying way. However, within her own sphere she is a tough, capable survivor. I absolutely loved the combination of her slangy Queens vocabulary and the half-understood medical argot which she has picked up through her years of working as an experimental subject. (The matter-of-fact way in which she repeats, "It was invasive" - bone-chilling and heartbreaking.)

In this falling-apart future NYC (and the whole world), plagues are everywhere, and babies are hard to come by. However, Inez seems to be immune to all the horrific ailments that are decimating the planet. When a vet-turned-amateur-geneticist-for-hire notices this immunity, a scheme is hatched to get immune babies out of Inez. However, since her reproductive system was destroyed by a previous medical experiment gone wrong, the only possibility may be cloning. And although this is a dystopic future full of weird and grotesque horrors, cloning seems to be the one 'unnatural' thing that society still is repulsed by (this is a major weakness of the book, in my opinion.)

When the client who'd agreed to 'purchase' the cloned babies pulls out of the deal, forcing Inez to take a baby in an agreement which seems to exist just to further the plot, at first I was impressed. Inez' attempt to care for an infant, without any experience or planning for motherhood, is grueling and more realistic than any other depiction of taking care of a baby during an apocalypse that I've ever read.

However, then the book gets into what I feel is the author's main reason for writing the book - and that's where it lost me.

The story begins to work on a metaphorical level, exploring the issues of motherhood and identity. Inez' daughter is a clone of herself, and she's terrified, from what she's been told, that her daughter may in some way BE herself. It gets into some depth exploring how parents might emotionally invest their children with their own (the parents') identity. It also goes on at length (a lot of length) about the self-sacrifice of parents, the lengths they're willing to go to for their children, and how the children are inherently ungrateful, as they are incapable of seeing how and why such things might be a sacrifice. It also acknowledges that these sacrifices may be misguided.

This part of the book is undeniably well-done. However, it was also unspeakably tedious. I am just not that interested in the travails of motherhood, and I am not at all interested in the details of efforts to get a child into the best school possible. Not even in an apocalypse.

Read for post-apocalyptic book club.

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## **Linda Robinson says**

Post-multiple-pandemic world, (how can you not devour a book with a pandemic called slatewiper?) with the remaining population wearing nylon sheets, masks; doused regularly with anti-plague spray whose origins are dicey and which might kill you outright itself. People steal children, grief-stricken with loss. Sweeps into quarantine are arbitrary and, if you live through it, at least you get some food and a place to sleep in relative safety. There are vaccines around which also might kill you outright. I. Fardo lives in this world, 13 or 15 or 19 years old. She trolls for buyers of product. She is a hardy. A Powell's Cove hardy. She can sell soma, skin, organs, teeth, blood to buyers who think they can get hardy as well. We will discover that she is more hardy than she knows, and the nuclear transfer done by a shady med tech will result in a dependent Inez isn't

prepared to raise or abandon. Dibbell writes Inez with such open raw humanity, I couldn't let go of her, even after I finished the book. Raising an oppositional offspring with "needs" in a world with survival as its root goal, and education a teeth-gritting daily travail with no experience and no support, Inez is fiercely devoted to a better life for the young Ani. Gritty, frightening and bare-knuckled, but Inez' voice is poetic in its cadence and urgency. Inez Fardo is a strong earthy female lead and Dibbell wrote her brilliantly.

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## **Luke says**

This has taken my top spot for novel of the year. This is dystopic fiction, but unlike any you've ever read.

I found myself constantly drawing comparisons to Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road' (one of my all-time favorite novels), because they share the common thread of parenthood and sacrifice in a dystopic world, the lengths that one will go to protect the ones they love and too often the futility of it all. But aside from those parallels, these are completely different novels. 'The Road' revolves around a father/son dynamic, 'The Only Ones' around a mother/daughter one, and their tones are completely different.

What sets 'The Only Ones' apart from any dystopic fiction I've ever read is the narrator's voice. This novel is a masterclass in what Chuck Palahniuk calls "burnt tongue". Saying things wrong, reorganizing the syntax; anything to give the narrator a unique voice and slow the reader to a more deliberate pace. The protag's voice in this novel is infused with enough humor and naivete to alleviate much of the tension of the bleak world she finds herself in.

And while 'The Road' is pretty much cover to cover horror and despair, the world of 'The Only Ones' has much more of a functioning society, one decimated by plagues, but constantly going through the ebbs and flows of disaster and recovery, which means the issues presented by the mother/daughter dynamic are much more universal and relatable; ones any parent will likely see a bit of their own lives in. It also spans the course of almost two decades, so you follow the characters through multiple stages in their lives, growing with them along the way.

These pages are soaked in humor, tenderness, love, absolute heartbreak and everything in between. Not only is the story itself inspiring, but the fact that it's the *debut* novel of a 70 year old woman is remarkable in its own right. I'm hoping for more big things from Carola Dibbell.

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## **Kenya (ReviewsMayVary) says**

In this world of pandemics, egg doners, and surrogate mothers, we meet Inez, who has grown up earning money with her body. When a buyer leaves her with an expected child, her maternal instincts kick in and she becomes super boring... no. But, it's true that I didn't care as much about the motherhood part.

I loved Inez's voice as a world-weary, no-nonsense child, to a newly anxious mother, to a reflective woman looking into the future.

File this under: no matter what you do for your kids, they can still be little shits.  
Also: unexpected motherhood woes

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## **Snotchocheez says**

I suppose Ms. Dibbell may have an audience out there somewhere for this dystopian post-pandemic cautionary tale. Sadly, the main character/narrator Inez's erratic speech (one minute conversant in words like 'mitochondria' and 'in vitro fertilization', the next unable to discern the difference between 'should of' and 'should have' (for instance)) was just too jarring to ignore. The story was okay; the narrative much less so.

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## **Molly says**

Really dry. Very boring to read. I got approximately 150 pages in and just couldn't keep going. It's hard to read because of the voice the author gave the main character. Very flat and detached, it was hard to understand what was going on at points. The flat and detached tone results in a very, very choppy read... I liked the main premise of the book, but that's all I liked. Once you actually start reading it, it really doesn't go anywhere, it's way too slow and the characters aren't developed beyond a few attributes (i.e. this one is a drunk, this one is in a wheelchair, this one dislikes the main character, etc.). The lack of character development and overall description makes it hard to connect with anything in the book, or even to visualize yourself in this volatile, on-going pandemic area. There is no sense of urgency.

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## **Kinsey says**

A brilliant, bizarre, and heart-breaking look at what it means to be a "mother". In a future dystopian America - complete with monthly pandemics and religious fanatics - Inez agrees to help a woman in exchange for money and somehow ends up the unwitting guardian of a baby girl. The circumstances behind the girl's conception and birth are considered crimes against nature and Inez is forced to lie, cheat, and steal in order to keep their secret all while trying to give Ani the best kind of life she can.

This book was filled with so many interesting ethical and philosophical questions that I felt like I could only read a few chapters at a time in order to truly think everything through. What would you do to survive in a world that was nigh-un survivable? What would you do to make sure your children survived? (view spoiler) Told in the first person, it doesn't take long to get emotionally invested in Inez and Ani - especially as you "grow" with Inez as she tries to become everything she thinks a "mother" should be.

If I had one complaint about the book it would be that - towards the end - I began to fall out of love with Ani. Although I understand that her actions were simply the way a sheltered pre-teen would act, it was hard watching Inez work so hard to give Ani every chance she never had only to be shot down. (view spoiler)

Although some would disagree with me, I believe that the book ended on a hopeful note. After all, the main theme of Inez's life has always been survival, pyrrhic or not...

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## **Sarah says**

I really wanted to give this a 2 just based on the premise but honestly...I just didn't like it. It was a struggle to finish and when I did get done, I wasn't sure what the point was to the whole story. Meh.

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## **Lori says**

Read 1/28/15 - 2/2/15

4 Stars - Strongly recommended to fans of unique voices, dystopian pandy's, and unexpected motherhood

Pages: 354

Publisher: Two Dollar Radio

Releases: March 2015

In the near future, wave after wave of infections and viruses have greatly reduced the world's population. Many of those who survive are rendered incapable of having children on their own and require the services of "Donors" and "Hosts" - women who allow their eggs to be harvested or agree to become surrogate mothers for money.

Inez, our narrator, is one such woman. Immune to infection, Inez understands her status as a "hardy" makes her a hot commodity and when we are first introduced to her, she's busy selling her blood, eggs, and teeth on the streets of New York to make ends meet. She's amazingly naive and unfazed by danger, treating her body as nothing more than a borrowed shell to loan out to strangers for payment. Her "let's see what happens" attitude eventually finds her in the company of a guy named Rauden. He runs a farm - not an "old MacDonald had a" farm, but one that specializes in experimental "product" trafficking. The baby-making-stuffs. Before she can fully grasp what's happening, Inez participates in a battery of experimental tests and agrees to donate her eggs and skin samples to a wealthy, grieving "client" who is desperate to replace her recently deceased children.

After multiple failed attempts to genetically engineer a baby for hosting purposes, Rauden and his team finally break new ground. They successfully produce the world's first batch of clones from Inez's genetic material. During the tank-gestation period, they lose all but one baby and at the very last minute, the client backs out, leaving a reluctant Inez in charge of the infant she helped to create.

Now forced to forage for two, and on the run from horseback-riding religious vigilantes, Inez must protect the secret of the farm and the truth about her daughter Ani at all costs.

God, did I get lost in Carola Dibbell's vision of dystopian New York City. Coupons replace cash; swipes and spit tests replace photo ID's; phone calls and messages are received on Boards (which are both personal devices and outdoor, ATM-like machines); and public transportation consists of bubble cars, unreliable wind-powered trams and boats, and hovering magnetized trains. Giant domes encapsulate wealthy neighborhoods as a feeble attempt to protect against the threat of death that lives in every breath. It's a stark and gritty world where babies are conceived in basement laboratories and sold as "viables" in the global underground market.

The Only Ones was one of many post-pandemic novels I was itching to get my hands on this year. It hinges



itself on more than just surviving the unsurvivable. It tackles more than just rebuilding society. Dibbell's novel sticks its hands into the evolutionary food chain and calls into question the roles of man and god.

It's a story about understanding your worth and overcoming your "heritage". It's about embracing motherhood, even if you don't know what that is, and the near-obsessive desire to give your children a better childhood than you had.

I loved the language of the book. And Carola eases us into it so smoothly, it's like we've been talking her lingo all along.

Inez's apparent ignorance regarding the world around her is both refreshing and grating. With her, what you see is what you get. She is incredibly human, unrepentantly stubborn, and proud of her faults. Yet as her daughter begins to develop her own personality, full of flaws, Inez's certainty in things starts to falter. She worries and fears that Ani is damaged, that these might be signs of anomaly, defects due to Ani's method of creation.

The way Inez reacted to Ani throughout the novel was simultaneously humorous and maddening. The initial pride she took in keeping her alive as a baby was sweet. "Does she breathe? She does breathe. Still alive." The joy she took in the odd things Ani did as a baby was adorable. "The sofa cover got loose ... she took a big bite of the foam! With the big bite in her mouth she hopped one two three to the mirror and spit out the foam. Man! What was she thinking?" But her ever-growing confusion over Ani's wide range of emotions and her obsession over the influence her "environmental factors" might have on Ani became exasperating in that "new mother who always has to tell you about what their kid is doing and saying every single second of the day in very explicit detail" way.

Though ultimately, all of that aside, the change we witness in Inez over the years, from naive reckless young woman to determined and protective mother, the selfless decisions she makes, and the things she is prepared to do as Ani learned how to become her own woman left me breathless more often than I'd like to admit.

The Only Ones is not a novel you read. It's a novel you experience.

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## **Muse Monthly says**

I was not really prepared for how beautiful The Only Ones was.

The story begins with Inez (or simply "I", which is a poetic choice for a first-person narrative), a young woman of little education but high wit and what we call 'street smarts', stepping off a bus in New Jersey, but not New Jersey as we know it. This is a near-future America that has been ravaged by plague and virus. Diseases that readers might recognize - tuberculosis and the flu, for example - as well as what's referred to as The Big One wipe out millions at a time, leaving those who are left in a damaged and diseased world. Inez, who comes from a desolate background, has done whatever she could to survive - which includes selling teeth, fingernails, and now she has come to The Farm to sell her genetic material. The buyer, Rini Jaffur, is a woman who has lost her daughters to illness and seeks to replace them. As Inez seems to be immune (or "hardy") to the dangers of this world, they clone her, but when the buyer backs out at the last minute, Inez promises to care for the child herself, despite the fact that she is unprepared to be a mother. Inez narrates with the frankness of a woman who has seen it all and who has had to grow up at a very young age. She has lived a hard life and become a realist because of it. She is surprised by little and shows the strength of

someone who is prepared to do anything to keep herself afloat.

The novel begins with questions of ethics - is it a crime against nature to clone, to combat the high infant mortality rate with science, and is the resulting child a crime against nature herself? Is the child, as a product of cloning and her "gene-for-gene replica", destined to become exactly like her? As Inez learns to care for and protect Ani, the child she is left with, she is continually asking herself this. It is a discussion of nature vs. nurture, and Inez is careful about the "environmental factors" that Ani is exposed to. As her motherly affections for Ani grow and she learns to care for someone other than herself, her questions and concerns evolve. Inez now not only is concerned with keeping Ani alive and safe, but is also determined to give Ani a better life than the one she had. She wants to know that Ani is 'normal' and is growing up like other children. She wants Ani to be educated and not have to live a life on the streets like she did, and is constantly fighting to get her child into good schools. And most of all, she wants to protect Ani from the truth that might put them both in danger. As the novel evolves, Inez begins to ask existential questions about her purpose in life, about motherhood, and the choices she has made.

The Only Ones is not only beautifully written and incredibly moving, but also intelligent and sure to spark some debate. In a similar vein to *Never Let Me Go*, Carola Dibbell raises questions for readers about our existence and what qualifies as 'humanity', as well as offers a unique view into a very possible near-future. It will move you, it will make you use your brain. It should frighten you a little bit. It should make you want to call your mother. This is a cant-miss novel, and one that will surely stick with you after the last page is turned.

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

The jacket copy for Carola Dibbell's *The Only Ones* claims that this book proves that there's still original things to be done in the post-apocalyptic genre; and damned if that didn't turn out to be spectacularly true, although I suppose we should expect no less from the always excellent Two Dollar Radio. A novel which continues Two Dollar's habit of stories told in the first-person voice of abused but smart girls, the thing that sets this apart is the fascinatingly incomplete narration of our confused hero, a New York teenage prostitute in a world whose population has been decimated by a series of pandemic diseases, who gets hired to go on a road trip by an out-of-state customer and only very slowly comes to understand what's going on. (For what it's worth, what's "going on" is that the girl is one of the few lucky people to have been born with a natural immunity to the diseases that have wracked the human race, and her "john" is a black-market doctor who's been hired by a desperate client to see if he can't make healthy babies out of the girl's genetic material; or at least, that's the gist I got from the addictively vague way this storyline is actually parceled out by the unknowing narrator in question.) Featuring a style that can best be called "blue-collar poetry," with information that is very slowly and very deliberately dolloped out bit by bit over 375 pages, this is an easily readable, page-turning genre thriller that doubles as a smart and philosophical indie-lit novel; and although admittedly you're going to have to already be a fan of post-apocalyptic stories to really love this one, if you are then this is an absolute must-have, one of the better books of this genre that I've ever read.

Out of 10: **8.9**, or **9.8** for fans of post-apocalyptic literature

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## **C. L. Phillips says**

I only made it to page 70. And that was a chore. The premise of the book is ok, but the writing is terrible. Nearly every sentence has a tense shift from present to past, or vice versa, as if the narrator has no idea whether this story is happening now or sometime in her past. And the dialogue tags..."he goes" is not a replacement for "he says." I could go on but it would just be mean. Don't read this. Just don't. I picked it up because the back cover says it should be "shelved alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." This is a false statement. I don't believe whoever wrote that blurb has actually read *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred, the main character in *The Handmaid's Tale*, had a rich, personal voice that kept me travelling with her through every page of her journey; I, the main character in *The Only Ones* can't even manage to speak full sentences or to keep straight what tense she's speaking in.

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