LIONEL SHRIVER
Game Control
London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994. vii + 277 p. $10.95 (pbk.).

Game Control brings to life in dramatic form the polarized views of recent debates on population growth and economic development. It is the perfect novel for anyone interested in the present and future of the human population, the environment, and development. It combines a thriller plot, a delicate love story, a believable ghost, and impressive technical accuracy in demography and AIDS epidemiology—all in a prose style by turns lyrical, ironical, humorous, and moving. Paul Ehrlich, *Famine 1975!, The Limits to Growth,* Roy Anderson, Paul Harrison, John Bongaarts, Julian Simon, and Ben Wattenberg appear by name, though not in person, and their positions are accurately represented. Lionel Shriver adds her own wild ideas, ideas that might best be concealed from some of the real participants in population debates lest they prove too tempting to resist.

The opening scene is a Population Council conference in Nairobi, Kenya; the year is 1988. The hero, perhaps a long-lost descendant of Don Quixote, is Calvin Piper, 51 years old, fired six years before from his position as Director of the US Agency for International Development population division, for outrageous conduct in promoting family planning programs. To his credit, he is an avid reader of *Population and Development Review.* The heroine is Eleanor Merritt, 37 years old, a family planning worker and field supervisor for the Pathfinder Fund. They had met, and made love, 16 years earlier at a Nairobi conference on population and environment, and the older man had never lost his power to fascinate Eleanor. But, by the time the story begins, their views had diverged.

> 'The Pathfinder Fund,' Calvin explained, 'belongs to that dogged IUD-in-the-dyke school, flogging the odd condom while the population happily doubles every eighteen years. When the fertility rate plummets from 6.9 to 6.87, they take credit, and Ford slips them a cheque.'
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> 'It is incredibly arrogant,' said Eleanor, 'to march into someone else's culture and tell them how many children to have. Raising the status of women and giving them power over their own reproduction is the best way to reduce the birth rate —'
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> 'There is nothing wrong with arrogance,' said Calvin, 'so long as you are right.' (p. 8)

Eleanor gradually sees the merits of Calvin's views.

> . . . Tanzanian villages, and Dar itself, were beginning to waft with the gaunt, empty-eyed spectre of wide-spread HIV. Weak, matchstick mothers would arrive at Pathfinder's clinics and there was absolutely nothing to do. The irony of trying to prevent more births in towns where up to half the adult population was dying was not lost on Eleanor, nor was it lost on her patients. Contraception in these circumstances transformed from a perverse Western practice to flagrant insanity. And it shattered Eleanor to watch families bankrupt themselves on bogus witchdoctor therapies, even if she conceded that her own people's medicines were no more effective. (p. 19)

Calvin's opposite number is Wallace Threadgill, Kenyan-born, Oxford-educated, first employed at the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D.C. Wallace was an evangelist for zero population growth until a young African he did not know accosted him, showed Wallace his young son, and cried, "You are the enemy of the smile on this child's face." Then Wallace became an apostle of Julian Simon.

> 'I realized the man was right, that my work was all about preventing his son's conception.
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> '. . . the population explosion is a myth. That we are all dropping into a fetid cesspool is a myth. Life on earth, historically, has done nothing but improve. And the profusion of our species is not a horror but a triumph. We are a thriving biological success story. There is no crisis of "carrying capacity"—since the Second World War, the species has only been better fed. Per capita calorie production continues to rise. Incidence of famine over the last few hundred years has plummeted. Arable land is on the increase. Pollution levels are declining. Resources are getting cheaper. The only over-population I uncovered was in organizations like the one I worked for, which were a scandal.' (p. 52)

Since being fired from USAID, Calvin has mysteriously become prosperous, with no visible sources of income. Wallace has been spying on him uneasily, worried that Calvin is up to some diabolical scheme. Indeed Calvin is, but for a long time he will not reveal it even to Eleanor. It would spoil the story to reveal it here. Calvin's scheme unfolds, and eventually unravels, in unexpected ways.

Even more surprising than the plot is that this book has been published only in England, not in America. Is it too rich in ideas for American readers? Months after my first reading of *Game Control*, as the details of the story slipped from my mind, what remained was a lifelike, pastel-painted image of two adults haunted by past love, seeking and yet afraid of love in the present and future. *Game Control* is a novel about people as well as an adventure of ideas and action. It brings Lionel Shriver's novelistic gifts to her careful research into stacks of articles from *PDR*. It would make excellent reading for an undergraduate course on population, development, and the environment. I cannot understand why an American publisher has not snapped it up.

At the end of the story,

> . . . Calvin refined a theory in relation to all the problems of the day which he called Muddling Through, a position somewhere between apathy and religious conviction: everything would sort out somehow. Population, after all, was self-correcting: if the earth could not support more people, then it would not. An orbiting voyeur, he would watch an unfolding wonder or imploding apocalypse with equal fascination. (p. 274)

Calvin and Eleanor made peace, punctuated by ferocious arguments, with Wallace Threadgill. Calvin took to making pottery. For her association with Calvin, Eleanor was fired from Pathfinder. As she delivered Calvin's coffee mugs to tourist traps,

> . . . she could always discuss with shop-keepers the benefits of smaller families, how much more feasible it was with fewer children to send them all to school. Ordinary economics was increasingly persuasive in East Africa, more so than 'development theory' or appeals to environmental preservation, and Kenya's fertility rate continued to drop. (p. 276)

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