

Doris Lessing

“ [O]ne of the half-dozen most interesting minds to have chosen to write fiction in English in this century.”

John Leonard, *New York Times Book Review*, 2/7/82

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Doris Lessing defies categorization. One of the most widely regarded 20th-century novelists, Lessing has been called an African writer, a political writer, a space fiction writer, a mystic writer, and a feminist writer. “I’ve been stereotyped differently at different times. I can’t remember them all,” she said (*The New York Times*, 9/22/85). Despite her wide literary scope, her interest in placing the individual against history to universalize the human experience ties together her more than 40 novels and collections of short stories and essays. Writing in simple, eloquent prose, Lessing frames women’s psychology, domestic relations, and personal transformations with the violence of colonialism, racism, social upheaval, and planetary warfare. Much of her work, which has been influenced by ideologies including communism, radical psychiatry, and Sufism, mirrors the trajectory of her life. She relived World War I through her father and experienced colonialism, World War II, the nuclear era and Cold War, and the collapse of the British Empire—and foresees World War III. “Nothing in history suggests that we may expect anything but wars, tyrants, sickness, bad times, calamities,” she notes in her autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994).

Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in Persia (now Iran) in 1919 to British parents. Her father worked for the Imperial Bank; her mother

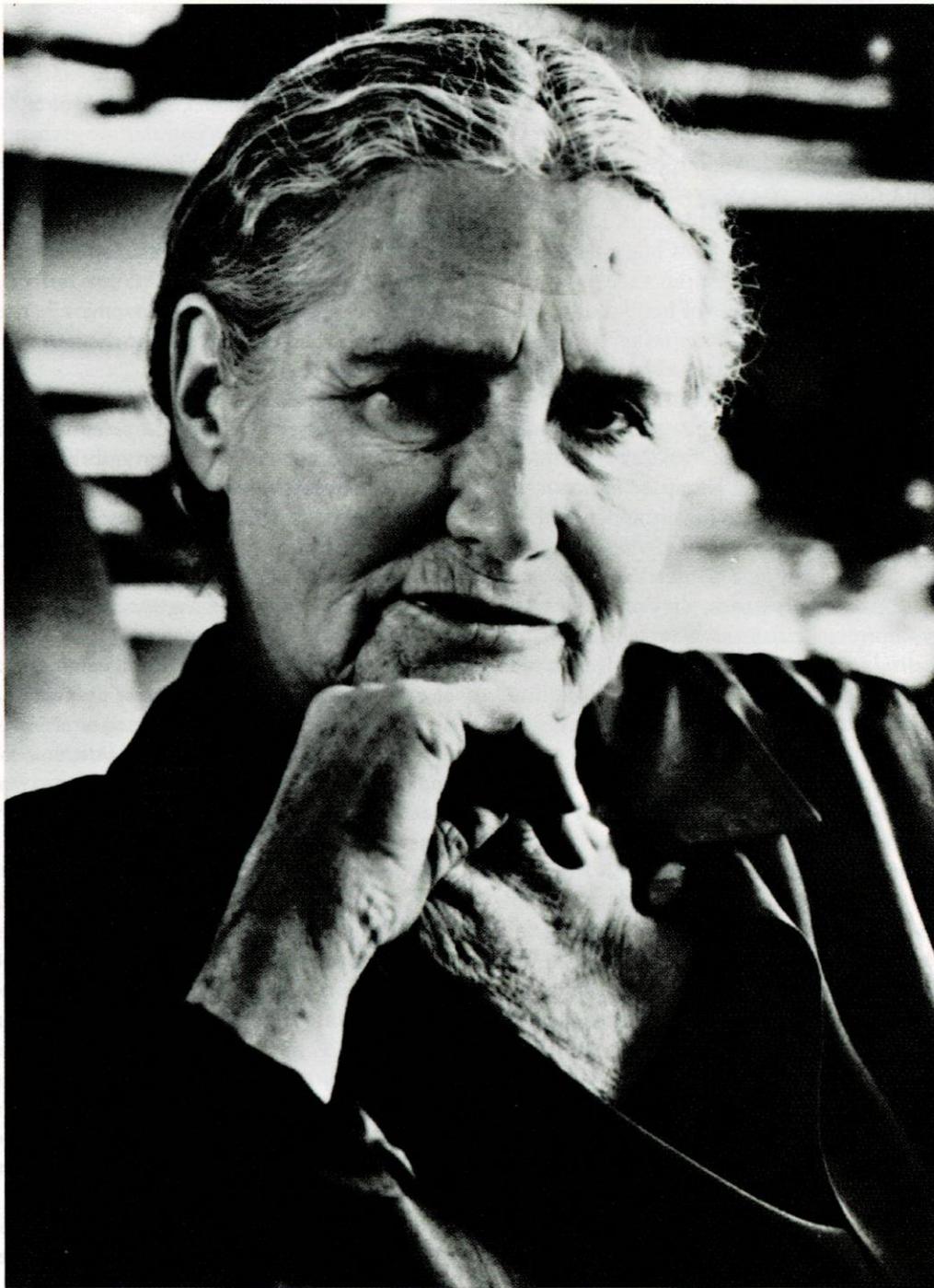
was a nurse. She spent a lonely childhood in colonial southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where her father unsuccessfully farmed maize. Although her parents sent her to school in Salisbury, she dropped out at age 14, ending her formal education. She then left home to work as a nursemaid and started writing. At age 19 she married and soon had two children. Feeling trapped by colonial and domestic life, she joined the Communist Party, abandoned her young family, and met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing, with whom she had a son. After they divorced in 1949, she took their son to London. There she abandoned Communism—“rubbish [that] had absolutely nothing to do with what was going on in the world” (*Salon*, 11/11/97). She also finished her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, in 1950, and began her semi-autobiographical *Children of Violence* series. Her critique of Africa’s racial politics made her suspect in the eyes of the

colonial government, which banished her from South Africa and Rhodesia in 1956. (She reunited with her daughter and grandchildren in South Africa 40 years later.)

In 1962, the publication of *The Golden Notebook* made Lessing a worldwide feminist icon. Yet Lessing denies time and time again the messages critics and readers find in *The Golden Notebook* and other works. “I don’t think writers should have missions,” she said. Still, she humbly

Where to Start

Although not conceived as such by Lessing, **THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK** is a feminist classic. **MARTHA QUEST** introduces readers to a youth spent in colonial Southern Africa. **THE GOOD TERRORIST** portrays Lessing’s disillusion with the Communist movement that guided her earlier beliefs. Finally, **THE FIFTH CHILD** is a chilling exploration of humanity’s fragility.



believes that her work might have “a limited effect on a small number of people”—which is why she continues to write (PBS interview with Bill Moyers, 1/24/03).

On Cosmic Evolution, Inner-Space Fiction, and Sufism

Lessing started her career by writing realist fiction. Her *Children of Violence* series features Martha Quest, a girl whose transitions mirror her creator’s personal politics and growth. *The Golden Notebook*’s Anna Wulf similarly reflects Lessing’s—and women’s—multiple, often conflicting identities and responsibilities. In these novels, said critic Irving Howe, Lessing was “the archaeologist of human relations.”

The Sufis, which Lessing read in 1964, altered her vision of the world. The teachings of Idries Shah and Sufism, a mystic

philosophy that stresses universal harmony with an Absolute Being while privileging people’s role in guiding society’s fate and evolving into higher beings, fulfilled Lessing’s quest for understanding in a way that Communism never had. In the 1970s and 1980s, Lessing shocked loyal followers by turning to the quasi-mysticism that Anna finds by the end of *The Golden Notebook* and embracing “inner-space fiction.” *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) set psychologically driven characters in cosmic dreamscapes. Sufist philosophy also inspired the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-1983) series, which explored human history from extraterrestrial perspectives.

Initial acclaim for the first in the *Canopus* series, *Shikasta*, turned to increasing perplexity as the novels continued to lift what Lessing called “the petty fates of planets, let alone individuals” into the realm of cosmic evolution (*New York Times*

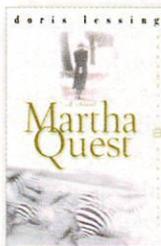
Book Review, 7/25/82). Critics decried this shift away from traditional realism to space fiction, while Lessing defended its relevance to global events. In 1984, she wrote that, "What is happening in the world is so fantastic that it needs fantasy. ... I think that one writer can contain two worlds—the realistic and the fantastic—sometimes in the same story" (*New York Times Book Review*, 4/22/84). Indeed, Lessing called *Canopus* "a new world for myself." While creating universal oversouls and galactic empires, the novels also drew from Lessing's own life. She spent most of her childhood on a large farm, with few friends. She and her father would stare at the night sky over the open Rhodesian veld and wonder, "there are so many worlds up there, wouldn't really matter if we did blow ourselves up—plenty more where we came from" (*New York Times Book Review*, 7/25/82).

Despite the overall popularity that her space fiction eventually gained, most of Lessing's followers applauded her return to Earth with *Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983, published under the pseudonym Jane Somers) and *The Fifth Child* (1988). In her most recent works, she continues to examine humanity's universal traumas. As novelist Margaret Drabble noted, Lessing is "one of the very few novelists who have refused to believe that the world is too complicated to understand" (*New York Times Book Review*, 7/25/82).

MAJOR WORKS

Martha Quest (1952)

Book 1: The Children of Violence series



Martha Quest, the first in the *Children of Violence* series, fictionalizes Lessing's childhood and early adulthood, during which time she left Southern Africa, rejected a traditional domestic lifestyle, and embraced communism.

THE STORY: As a young girl grows up on an African farm, she rebels against her parents and comes to terms with her adolescence. She then embraces the Communist Party, deserts her husband and child for a charismatic movement leader, moves to London, and loses faith in her marriage and the Party.

"An extraordinarily impressive piece of fiction—as a study both of the development of a young woman and of a changing colonial community." WALTER ALLEN, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*,

11/15/64

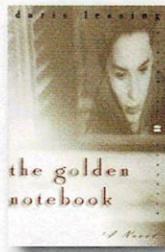
"Although the South African milieu and the colonial sense of isolation are brilliantly conveyed, the overall effect is one of turgid intellectualizing. Readers who enjoyed *The Golden Notebook* will doubtless find *Martha's* vicissitudes sufficiently compelling." ROSEMARY NEISWENDER, *LIBRARY JOURNAL*,

12/15/64.

THE BOTTOM LINE: All of Lessing's trademark themes in one book.

The Golden Notebook (1962)

★ PRIX MÉDICIS (FRANCE)



This novel, translated into 18 languages, remains popular more than 40 years after its initial publication. It drew attention to issues of feminism, freedom, bondage, and questioning of realism. As Lessing said, "I tried to write a book that was a kind of map of the human mind" (*New York Times Book Review*, 4/22/84). Today, she sees the novel as "an albatross around [her] neck" for the feminist moniker it gave her (*Salon*, 11/11/97).

THE STORY: As divorced English novelist Anna Wulf leaves the Communist Party and addresses domestic crises, she pens her thoughts about her African upbringing, politics, a diary, and a novel titled *Free Women*. Presented to readers in alternating order until the finale, when Anna realizes her "wholeness," these notebooks offer insight not only into postwar London, but also into the "hazards and chances of being a 'free woman'" in a changing society.

"Though her dissection of British communism, which is part of each of her characters' past or present, is clear-headed and most thorough, certain passages of lumpen-politics are soggy and undigested. That aside, one can only salute and marvel at the staggering fecundity of idea and insight that turns almost every remaining paragraph into a hive of constellated meaning." ERNEST BUCKLER, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*,

7/1/62.

"Few general readers will want to subject themselves to the demands of this huge, complex, and ugly book, but anyone seriously interested in contemporary writing should know of its existence." RODERICK NORDELL, *CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*, 7/5/62.

"One can say that Mrs. Lessing is extending the boundaries of the novel or one can say that she is really giving us the raw materials for a novel rather than the novel itself. ... The book is chaotic, difficult to read, sometimes puzzling."

SATURDAY REVIEW, 6/30/62.

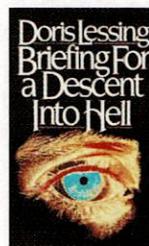
"The most absorbing and exciting piece of new fiction I have read in decades ..." IRVING HOWE, *NEW REPUBLIC*.

"*The Golden Notebook* is Doris Lessing's most important work and has left its mark upon the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of women." ELIZABETH HARDWICK, *NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 2002.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic work of feminist fiction.

Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971)

★ SHORTLISTED FOR BOOKER PRIZE FOR FICTION, 1971



In this work of "inner-space fiction," Lessing delves inside a patient's mind to comment on society's treatment of the mentally ill—as well as some universal truths that we deny. In stream-of-consciousness prose that touches on cosmology, science, and religion, Lessing suggests that imagination and emotion form core aspects of our quest for personal meaning.

THE STORY: Professor Charles Watkins, 50, a patient at Central Intake Hospital, suffers a mental breakdown. As doctors try to subdue his mind, he embarks on adventures that range from spinning on a raft to participating in bloody rituals in a forest and, finally, spiraling into outer space. Is Watkins insane... or becoming more sane?

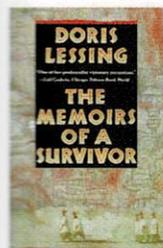
"Throughout [the] long vision the writing is firm and absorbed, controlled in a way that makes us know here what home is, know that the voyager is at the end of his vision but also before it." ROGER SALE, *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*, 5/6/71.

"The novel is a brilliant and untamed image of the possibilities that Miss Lessing dreams, rather than believes, may still constitute man's destiny... To the point of abstraction she has willed herself into a universe of absolutes where nihilism and revelation, madness and sanity become the same thing." MELVIN MADDOCKS, *TIME*, 3/8/71.

"Readers will not find this a soothing trip, but Mrs. Lessing is not trying to soothe: her intention, as I see it, is to reveal the elastic inventiveness at the heart of our being. ... There are some engrossing, vivid passages that, merely through being together in the same book, bring more of space, time and Nature into enigmatic mental collision than I have seen outside of Italo Calvino's cosmicomic fables or Gabriel García Márquez's jungle panoramas." PAUL WEST, *BOOK WORLD*, 2/28/71.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A provoking study on the meaning of madness, sanity, and human existence.

The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974)



Lessing called this deceptively simple story "an attempt at autobiography" in its close look at infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Set in the near future in a dystopic place that evokes England, its themes resemble those in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and presage others in *The Fifth Child*.

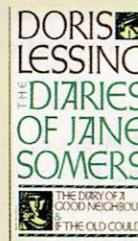
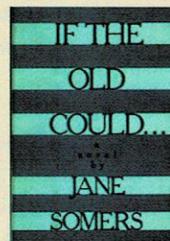
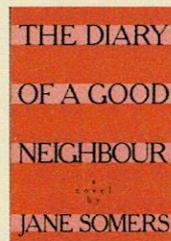
THE STORY: As apocalypse approaches, people gather in tribes to survive in a besieged city. From her window the middle-aged narrator observes the decay around her and evaluates her own life. She also watches over an abandoned child, Emily, who says of a street gang, "Apart from eating people, they are very nice, I think."

"... a brilliant fable, quite unlike any of her previous novels yet dependent on them, a restatement of her major themes." MAUREEN HOWARD, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, 6/8/75.

"The whole book is visionary or prophetic, and it lacks, for the most part, the sharp observation of manners that helped to distinguish her earlier work. ... It projects the feelings that some of us have after reading the daily papers, and it contains some sharply imagined scenes." MALCOLM COWLEY, *SATURDAY REVIEW*, 6/28/75.

"... a ghost story of the future. ... [It] is an extraordinary and compelling meditation about the enduring need for loyalty,

The Publishing Hoax

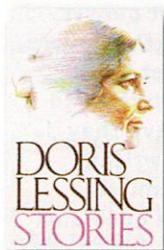


In the early 1980s, Lessing played a trick on her reviewers in order to show the difficulty unknown writers experience in the publishing world. "I wanted to highlight that whole dreadful process in book publishing that 'nothing succeeds like success,'" she said. In the early 1980s she finished *Diary of a Good Neighbour*, but realized if it came out in her name, her reputation would have ensured the novel's immediate success. So she took the pseudonym Jane Somers and told her American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, and Michael Joseph, her British publisher, her plan. She then sent the first novel to British publishers Jonathan Cape and Granada, who both rejected it. Joseph eventually published both novels in England, but promoted them as he would have promoted other unknown writers. As Lessing expected, the books sold fewer than 5,000 copies and received almost no reviews. Lessing concluded that, "the experience of starting again as a first novelist had been very enjoyable"—but it had also confirmed her hunch that an author's reputation, more than the work itself, influenced publishers and reviewers. In 1984, Lessing combined *Diary of a Good Neighbor* and *If the Old Could*, her second experiment, into one volume, *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, and published it under her own name (*New York Times*, 9/23/84).

love and responsibility in an unprecedented time that places unbearable demands upon people." MELVIN MADDOCKS, *TIME*, 6/16/75.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A part realist, part SF glimpse into an apocalyptic future.

Stories (1978)



This collection, which contains all of Lessing's stories other than those set in Africa, draws from previous short fiction collections: *A Man and Two Women*, *The Habit of Loving*, *The Temptation of Jack Orkney*, and *Five*.

THE STORIES: These 35 stories take place in London, the English countryside, Paris, and the south of France. The characters range from an elderly gentleman to a journalist, diamond cutter, television producer, and diverse sets of couples. Lessing's trademark themes of love, obsession, self-knowledge, and fate unify their lives. Highlights include the novellas *The Other Woman* and *The Temptation of Jack Orkney*, in which an aging socialist faces his radical son.

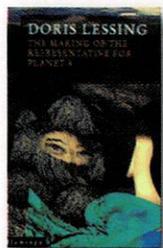
"Her best work here bears comparison with the great, neglected stories and short novels of D.H. Lawrence, who strongly influenced her and whose keen grasp of sexuality as a power struggle she shares. ... This volume may be the happiest introduction to her work." WALTER CLEMONS, *NEWSWEEK*, 5/22/78.

"It is not Mrs. Lessing's fault that, among the many secrets she knows, her knowledge of women's anger and aggression, even more than of their sexuality, took people by surprise and categorized her. ... But this new collection of all her short fiction should repair any misunderstanding of her timelessness, the breadth of her sympathy and range of her interests and, above all, the pleasures of reading her." DIANE JOHNSON, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 6/4/78.

"All [characters] possess a riveting presence, shaded by stoicism, hysteria, fortitude and a range of human responses; each is captured and illuminated in her supple, evocative prose." *TIME*, 6/19/78.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A "best of" collection that demonstrates Lessing's breadth and versatility.

The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 (1982)



The fourth in the five-book *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series features the galactic, extra-terrestrial empire, Canopus, an entity initially inspired by Lessing's interest in Sufism.

THE STORY: When a glacier hits the paradisiacal Planet 8, its people, who had known only "the infinite greens of the foliage" and the "dazzle of water and of sun," must somehow adapt. As the sun disappears and the ice extinguishes all life, the inhabitants of Planet 8 accept their deaths and evolve into a collective universal soul.

On Literature's Power

MOYERS: We keep having wars despite the fact that great novelists tell us the truth about wars.

LESSING: Well, we don't have much effect, do we? Do you know when I first recognized that horrible truth, I was standing in Southern Rhodesia, I was very young. ... And—watching the night's bag of prisoners, the Africans who were being caught out without passes. Hand cuffed, walking down the street. With the—jailers, white, in front and back. And I looked at that and I thought—Right, well, this is described in Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and all the others. So what have they achieved is what I thought. Didn't stop me writing novels though. I—I think we might have—a limited effect on a small number of people. I hope a good one.

MOYERS: But you keep writing.

LESSING: Yes I do. I have to.

Excerpt from interview with Bill Moyers, BBC, 1/24/03

"The question: Why does Doris Lessing—one of the half-dozen most interesting minds to have chosen to write fiction in English in this century—insist on propagating books that confound and dismay her loyal readers? ... Unfortunately, the people on Planet 8—gray-faced from meat eating, stuporous from cold, estranged from 'congruity,' huddled half hibernating and half homicidal under the hides of behemoths—are less compelling than the weather." JOHN LEONARD, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 2/7/82.

"Lessing is into spaces, the inner and the outer ones, and the most compelling parts of [this] book are the journeys the Representatives take through the oppressive icy wastes. ... Though Doeg [one of the Representatives] does, mercifully, speak our language, he is not one of us, and it's difficult for the reader... to identify with this mystical collectivism." LINDA TAYLOR, *TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*, 4/2/82.

"... it is so grim, so relentless, so actually painful to read, that 122 pages is more than enough. ... Philosophically, it's a puzzler." A.K. TURNER, *NATION*, 3/6/82.

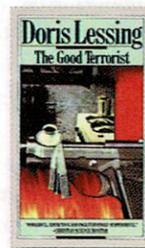
THE BOTTOM LINE: Lessing's controversial foray into space fiction and the Afterlife.

THE OPERA: 1988, libretto by Doris Lessing and Philip Glass, co-commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, English National Opera, Amsterdam Music Theatre, and Kiel Opera House.

The Good Terrorist (1985)

★ SHORTLISTED FOR BOOKER PRIZE FOR FICTION, 1985

★ W.H. SMITH LITERARY AWARD, 1985



In her return to social realism, Lessing focuses on a common character type, the "good terrorist." She drew inspiration for the novel from real events, including the IRA killing of Lord Mountbatten, the Harrods bombing, and her own disillusionment with Communism. "I thought how easy it would be for a kid, not really knowing what he or she was doing, to drift into a terrorist group," she said (*The New York Times*, 9/22/85). The novel, which portrays terrorism as pathological, criticizes totalitarian regimes.

THE STORY: When 36-year-old Alice ("poor baby") Mellings attracts a group of political revolutionaries living as squatters in London, the group determines to enact a communist lifestyle and form an English arm of the IRA. Though she never articulates her own views, Alice becomes embroiled in a terrorist act that extends far beyond her comprehension.

"*The Good Terrorist* is bound to give comfort to the middle classes, if only because their enemies, Alice and her friends, are so ludicrously inept. ... But she hasn't worked her imagination or played it to the point of deciding whether Alice and her friends are the salt of the earth or its scum." DENIS DONOGHUE, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 9/22/85.

"Lessing has succeeded in writing one of the best novels in English I have read about the terrorist mentality and the

inner life of a revolutionary group since [J.] Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. ... [But] the shadowy atmosphere of secrets and feints is gone; in *The Good Terrorist* we see everything in icy clarity, from the fading bunch of forsythia on the revolutionaries' kitchen table to the homemade bombs upstairs." ALISON LURIE, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 12/19/85.

"By making terrorism more ordinary, ubiquitous and casual, *The Good Terrorist* makes it more alarming." JOHN MELMOTH, TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, 9/13/85.

"... a lifeless account of radical squatters in present-day London. ... [Lessing] yearns to be authentic, but *The Good Terrorist* shows how much she still lacks a center of gravity that would allow her to know which persona fits—realist, fabulist, doomsayer, mystic, or perhaps just a disenchanting old radical." PEARL K. BELL, NEW REPUBLIC, 10/28/85.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A harsh, immediate critique of Communism.

The Fifth Child (1988)



Lessing's 35th book explores our perceptions of humanity. To her chagrin, many readers "pigeonholed" it, as she said, as "being about the Palestinian problem, genetic research, feminism, anti-Semitism and so on" (*New York Times*, 6/26/92). As for writing this little piece of horror, Lessing admitted pain in destroying the attractive family she created.

"It's a sense of disaster. I know where it comes from—my upbringing. That damn First World War, which rode my entire childhood. ..." (*New York Times Book Review*, 6/14/88). Critics compared the novel's morality play to that of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

THE STORY: David and Harriet, an idyllic English couple living happily with their four children in the suburbs in the 1960s, unexpectedly give birth to a fifth child. Unlike his siblings, this one is barely human. As he grows older, he brutally starts to rend the fabric of family life. Can Harriet save him before he destroys the family?

"[I]f Ms. Lessing is a better writer than the teen-age Mary Shelley, she is fully the equal of the mature Orwell—than which there is no higher praise. ... Where a lesser writer would have presented page upon page of pseudo-scientific hokum to educate his readers on the workings of genetics that might account for such a throwback, Ms. Lessing simply presents the monster as a fact, and so taps into the fear familiar to all parents: that they are capable of producing something abnormal." CAROLYN KIZER, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 4/3/88.

"[It] can be read simply as a hair-raising tale; the struggle between the Lovatt household and the 'alien' who comes to live there is as full of twists and shocks as any page turner could desire. ... But Lessing suggests that these controls [over family and society], these apparently benign attempts

to make life secure and bearable, may in fact spawn the monstrous." PAUL GRAY, TIME, 3/14/88.

THE BOTTOM LINE: As Lessing put it, the novel "was sweating blood... it's a classic horror story" (*New York Times Book Review*, 6/14/88).

Under My Skin (1994)

Volume One of My Autobiography

- ★ JAMES TAIT BLACK PRIZE FOR BEST BIOGRAPHY, 1995
- ★ LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE, BIOGRAPHY, 1995



This first autobiographical volume, which reads like a novel, offers a glimpse into Lessing's personal life. "I was rejecting the human condition," she writes, "which is to be trapped by circumstance." Here, she delves into her own consciousness, family, politics, and the African landscape with clarity and compassion.

THE STORY: "I was born with skins too few," Lessing writes about the events that shaped her personality. Her autobiography, which covers the first 30 years of her life, takes readers from a lonely childhood in Southern Rhodesia through 1949, the year she departed for England with the manuscript for *The Grass Is Singing* in her hands.

"Mrs. Lessing is a writer for whom the idea that 'the personal is political' is neither sterile nor strident; for her, it is an integrated vision. ... Finally, it may be Mrs. Lessing's most significant contribution that she has lived and written not with an eye to transcendence or posterity but to experiencing her own time most fully." JANET BURROWAY, THE NEW YORK TIMES, 11/6/94.

"In their clarity of recall (or of imaginative construction—it makes no difference) and cleanness of articulation, these first five chapters belong among the great pieces of writing about childhood. ... Yet despite a determined attempt to appreciate her parents in their historical setting, this book repeats the pattern of blaming the mother, familiar from Lessing's earlier writings." J.M. COETZEE, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 12/22/94.

"In this immediate, vivid, beautifully paced memoir, Doris Lessing sets the individual against history, the personal against the general, and shows, by the example of her own life set down honestly, how biography and fiction mesh, how fiction transmutes the personal to the general, how the particular experience illuminates her universe." HILARY MANTEL, LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS, 12/22/94.

"[The book] is sprinkled with provocative, often contradictory, sides on topics from abortion, sexual attraction, and parent-child bonding, to race relations, left-wing zealots, and the colonial legacy. ... [Her] reluctance to ponder the implications of conflicting ideas seems based on a kind of impatience with the heavier demands of thought." MERLE RUBIN, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 11/17/94.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A "modern" autobiography that provides insight into Lessing's upbringing and beliefs.