



Doris Lessing

**On Not Winning
the Nobel Prize**

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Telephone Interview

Telephone interview with Doris Lessing following the announcement of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, 11 October 2007. The interviewer is Adam Smith, Editor-in-Chief of Nobelprize.org.

[Doris Lessing] – Hello.

[Adam Smith] – Good morning, may I speak to Doris Lessing please?

[DL] – Who is that?

[AS] – This is Adam Smith from the Nobel Foundation's website. We have a tradition of recording very short interviews on the telephone with new Laureates for our archives, and I was hoping that we might speak for just a very few minutes?

[DL] – OK, well let's go ahead then.

[AS] – Thank you very much indeed. Congratulations, of course.

[DL] – Thank you.

[AS] – I wonder, have you had a chance to see the citation from the Swedish Academy?

[DL] – No, not really, I haven't seen it. You know, I was coming back at midday from taking my son to the hospital. I've never seen anything written, or ... I did talk to the chap who runs the Nobel Committee.

[AS] – So you've spoken to Horace Engdahl?

[DL] – Yes.

[AS] – They describe you, in their citation, as ‘that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny’. Do you think that goes some way towards capturing the mission with which you write?

[DL] – Well I don't really know what they had in mind when they wrote it, you see. I mean they were faced with a quite astonishing number and range of writing. To sum it all up must have been quite formidable, don't you think?

[AS] – Yes, indeed.

[DL] – Not easy at all.

[AS] – Well over 50 books and a combination of styles of writing which defies description. Quite so. Do you think of yourself as having a mission when you write though, more than to tell stories?

[DL] – Absolutely not. No, because don't forget that I was a communist once, and we had very, very nasty examples of the writer as engineer of the human soul. It's enough to make any of us scared. You know, I was of that generation.

[AS] – So you leave it to the reader to decide what mission they find in your writing?

[DL] – Well you know the reader does anyway. The reader makes up his or her mind and the writer goes along with it. There's

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nothing you can do, really, if they get something that you've written absolutely wrong. You're not then going to issue a sort of statement saying 'Oh dear, that's not right at all. What I really meant was something else.' No, no, you write, and then they make what they want of it.

[AS] – And so, for those who...on past experience the award of the Nobel Prize will encourage millions to come to your writing who haven't been there before. For those who haven't experienced your writing, would you suggest a starting place for them?

[DL] – Well I'm going to suggest something that might surprise you, simply because I know the young people like it. It's *The Fifth Child*. Much to my surprise, I found out that the adolescents like it very much. So they could begin with that, and see how they did. I've written an adventure story called *Mara and Dan*, which I know young people like, about the... Then my very first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, is still very much alive. They might like to try that.

[AS] – Your productivity is of course phenomenal, and I suppose some people may wonder just how you manage to produce so much literature. Is it that you have an unstoppable workaholic tendency? Do you just have so many stories to tell? What drives it?

[DL] – Well, it's certainly true that I have a, I'm driven myself, about writing. But you know I don't do anything else. I don't have much of a social life, and I've been very circumscribed by other circumstances in my life which keep me writing. You know, if I hadn't (I am a naturally social person) I think I would have frittered away my life having fun, which I'm quite good at.

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[AS] – So is this a self-imposed exile, or is it just that writing always presented itself as a better possibility?

[DL] – Well it's what I do. I naturally turn to it, always. I always, I'm usually thinking about what I'm writing now. But you know I don't have a great range of other interests, let's put it like that. For one reason or another.

[AS] – And seeing the televised coverage of your reaction to the news yesterday, one might guess the answer to this question, but how does the prospect of the increased attention that the prize will focus on you, um, grab you?

[DL] – Oh I don't think ... you know, people are going to lose all interest in a month or two. They can't spend all their time wanting interviews. And I haven't got time you know. I haven't got time for all that. So the problem will solve itself.

[AS] – One other question I wanted to ask is about the range of styles you write in. You've tackled almost everything, except perhaps poetry. Is that a conscious choice to try and expand your repertoire, or are these just the forms that you need to use to express yourself?

[DL] – No, once I have an idea, a story, or something, in my mind, then it has to find the right expression. You know, I don't say 'Oh, now I'm going to write a, I don't know what, a realistic book of 50,000 words'. What happens is that the book, the story dictates how I'm going to have to do it. The story dictates the means of telling it. So I have written a lot of different styles, if you want to call it that, because I've written a lot of different stories. It's not at all a question of wanting to try out this or try out that. I mean when I started to write the Shikasta series, which covers millions of years, that fact in itself dictates a style. You

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can't start that by saying, 'Oh well, Joe Bloggs sat in his kitchen and drank a cup of Typhoo tea, and wrote a letter to his sister-in-law'. You have to have a different way of doing it. So that's how that comes about.

[AS] – Yes. It has perhaps contributed to the length of time that the Swedish Academy has taken to make the decision to award you the Nobel Prize that you've adopted styles that are perhaps non-traditional.

[DL] – I think that, probably, the Nobel people didn't like what they call 'Science Fiction'. I mean I think it's a very mistaken label that they use, but they probably were put off by, I mean *Memoirs of a Survivor* for example, or *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. These are hardly easy to categorize. It probably was difficult for them.

[AS] – Well there seem to be a lot of people who are delighted by the choice. There was an enormous cheer went up when Horace Engdahl announced your name yesterday.

[DL] – Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[AS] – Well thank you very much for speaking to us and when you come to Stockholm in December to receive the award I think Horace Engdahl is going to interview you at greater length. So we look forward to seeing you then.

[DL] – See you then. OK, thank you.

[AS] – Thank you very much indeed.

[DL] – Bye.

[AS] – Bye, bye.

Presentation Speech

Per Wästberg

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Esteemed Nobel Laureates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Doris Lessing is part of both the history of literature and living literature. She has contributed to changing the way we see the world. In all probability, no other Laureates has accumulated such a volume of work. We stroll through the great library of her work, where all sections are unmarked and all genre classification pointless. There is life and movement behind the broad or narrow spines of the books, resisting categorisation and the imposition of order.

Lessing links to the great narrative tradition of the 19th century but equally we may use her works as textbooks in 20th-century behavioural patterns, not least to discover the way many thought – or thought wrongly – during one of history's most turbulent periods as war succeeded war, colonialism was unmasked and communism in Europe conquered.

She has revealed the totalitarian temptations and shown us the strength of undogmatic humanism. She has displayed an almost limitless empathy with odd lives and a freedom from prejudice regarding every form of human behaviour. She was early in flagging global environmental threats and poverty and corruption in the Third World. She has given voice to the silent and to the refugees and homeless of our century – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. And as few others have done, she personified the woman's role in the 20th century.

She makes us exclaim: "How could she know?" since she was often first to speak about what no one else did. For her, nothing was too unimportant or insignificant. Which is why she batters at our hearts. But although she resembles a continent that initially defies exploration, she has never subscribed to the idea that the

world is too complicated for clarification.

Undeterred, she peers under mossy stones and mouldy linoleum flooring, shying from nothing, and therefore becoming help and support for innumerable people. Like Frances in *The Sweetest Dream*, she takes care of everyone, a hospitable earth mother – later compiling perspicacious case studies of her visitors.

Doris Lessing writes as she breathes – to approach closer the trials and revelations of our existence. Eschewing protective gloves, she grasps our reality like a grubby root vegetable, uncovering experiences we did not realise we could access. Via thousands of intimate details and in lower-case letters – dare we call them feminine? – she phrases the eternal questions of how and why we live.

Her autobiographical novels were succeeded by memoirs from Rhodesia and London: *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*. They vibrate with sensuous life and manage unusually sharp focus in a telescopic rearview mirror, pitilessly probing social critique and a fearless ability to look inward. Lessing struggles with her parents, especially her mother, up to an advanced age, providing us with merciless images of motherhood. From the beginning, ideas, movements and feelings were swirling through the girl, making her a relentless witness of her time, and an authority-antagonist for whom the emperor is always naked.

Walking in the Shade ends in 1962 when *The Golden Notebook* became an epiphany for an entire generation of women. In this, Lessing's most experimental novel, battle is joined between the will to create and the desire to love. Obstacles are mapped for a woman seeking both independence and intimacy, since her freedom is paradoxically incomplete without the love that in turn undermines it. Lessing shows how conventions and other pitfalls along the way impede sensitive and passionate women from living authentically and fully, from glimpsing into the fifth, golden notebook.

Emotions blind and lead astray Lessing's heroines and endanger their free will. *Children of Violence* is the collective name for the five books about Martha Quest, Lessing's alter ego, who, in moving from a colonial existence to the British class hierarchy, is swept away by her dreams and primary instincts.

Chiefly female readers identified with Martha Quest's longing for freedom and disgust at hypocrisy and mendacity. A poor person in a rich society, a woman among men, a white among blacks, Doris Lessing worked to become the independent intellectual she was. She unveils the temptation of devotion to a utopia and absorption in a collective, and she illustrates how a triumphant ideology can deceive us with false redemption. She became a cartographer of disillusionment, drawing dystopias and catastrophes with frightening clarity.

Lessing has the ability to freely move into and away from herself, to barge in and become an invisible lodger. She often begins by observing her characters from within and then moving outside them, to strip them of their illusions from an objective distance. We can follow this eerie process in *The Summer before the Dark*; in the allegorical psycho-thriller about a monster child, *The Fifth Child*; and in *The Good Terrorist*, an in-depth account of the extreme leftwing squatting culture that sponges off female self-sacrifice.

In her later works, Lessing demolishes a long list of basic values. Left are the networks of family and friends, cats of course, and the foremothers and midwives in every sense who take responsibility, and always too much responsibility. And in this year's novel, *The Cleft*, she accords us a parable from the dawn of mankind – before the invention of love. Which is where she seems happiest, among hunters and gatherers, far from a contemporary culture that presages disorder and collapse.

Doris Lessing's epic landscapes shift from honest realism to symbolic fable, from the psychology of self-realisation to saga and myth. Using the lens of intuition, she has charted the changes

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from the decline of the empire through to a future earth ravaged by atomic warfare. Mara and Dann in the eco-fable of the same name flee from a new Ice Age to an uncertain foothold in what used to be Africa. In her massive *Canopus in Argos* suite she lets observers from another solar system report on our civilisation's ultimate phase. She moves freely across the plains of fantasy without raising her voice; she declines the rhetoric of doomsday preachers.

Ever since her African debut in 1950 with the tragic novel *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing has disregarded boundaries: moral, gender or of habit. Solitude and social ostracism remain her thematic glue.

But when she occasionally draws a parallel between love and politics, it is because both stand for the hope we must try to sustain if living is to be worthwhile.

Dear Doris Lessing,

Age is no issue in literature. You are forever young and wise, old and rebellious. You are the least ingratiating of novelists. Your bout with destiny and reality is heavyweight-class; nothing has induced you to leave the ring. Throughout the world over the last 58 years, people have been warmed, provoked and led hand-in-hand by your books. You have helped us cope with some of our time's important concerns and you have created a document for the future to carry forward the flavour of an age, its prejudices and survival strategies, its everyday trifles and delights.

Your lifework and your great pioneering effort are today not fulfilled but crowned with a prize you have long deserved. The Swedish Academy sends you its warmest congratulations.

Presentation Speech by Per Wästberg, Writer, Member of the Swedish Academy, Chairman of the Nobel Committee for Literature, 10 December 2007.

Doris Lessing – Nobel Lecture

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I am standing in a doorway looking through clouds of blowing dust to where I am told there is still uncut forest. Yesterday I drove through miles of stumps, and charred remains of fires where in '56 was the most wonderful forest I have ever seen, all destroyed. People have to eat. They have to get fuel for fires.

This is north west Zimbabwe early in the eighties, and I am visiting a friend who was a teacher in a school in London. He is here 'to help Africa' as we put it. He is a gently idealistic soul and what he found here in this school shocked him into a depression, from which it was hard to recover. This school is like all the schools built after Independence. It consists of four large brick rooms side by side, put straight into the dust, one two three four, with a half room at one end, which is the library. In these classrooms are blackboards, but my friend keeps the chalks in his pocket, as otherwise they would be stolen. There is no atlas, or globe in the school, no textbooks, no exercise books, or biros, in the library are no books of the kind the pupils would like to read: they are tomes from American universities, hard even to lift, rejects from white libraries, detective stories, or with titles like 'Weekend in Paris' or 'Felicity Finds Love'.

There is a goat trying to find sustenance in some aged grass. The headmaster has embezzled the school funds and is suspended, arousing the question familiar to all of us but usually in more august contexts: How is it these people behave like this when they must know everyone is watching them?

My friend doesn't have any money because everyone, pupils and teachers, borrow from him when he is paid and will probably never pay it back. The pupils range from six to twenty-six, because some who did not get schooling earlier are here to make it up. Some pupils walk every morning many miles, rain or shine

and across rivers. They cannot do homework because there is no electricity in the villages, and you can't study easily by the light of a burning log. The girls have to fetch water and cook when they get home from school and before they set off for school.

As I sit with my friend in his room, people drop shyly in, and all, everyone begs for books. 'Please send us books when you get back to London'. One man said, 'They taught us to read but we have no books'. Everybody I met, everyone, begged for books.

I was there some days. The dust blew past, water was short because the pumps had broken and the women were getting water from the river again.

Another idealistic teacher from England was rather ill after seeing what this 'school' was like.

On the last day, it was end of term and they slaughtered the goat, and it was cut into mounds of bits and cooked in a great tin. This was the much looked forward to end of term feast, boiled goat and porridge. I drove away while it was going on, back through the charred remains and stumps of the forest.

I do not think many of the pupils of this school will get prizes.

Next day I am at a school in North London, a very good school, whose name we all know. It is a school for boys. Good buildings, and gardens.

These pupils have a visit from some well known person every week, and it is in the nature of things that these may be fathers, relatives, even mothers of the pupils. A visit from a celebrity is no big deal for them.

The school in the blowing dust of northwest Zimbabwe is in my mind, and I look at those mildly expectant faces and try to tell them about what I have seen in the last week. Classrooms without books, without text books, or an atlas, or even a map pinned up on a wall. A school where the teachers beg to be sent books to tell them how to teach, they being only eighteen or nineteen themselves, they beg for books. I tell these boys that everybody, everyone begs for books: 'Please send us books'. I

am sure that everyone here, making a speech will know that moment when the faces you are looking at are blank. Your listeners cannot hear what you are saying: there are no images in their minds to match what you are telling them. In this case, of a school standing in dust clouds, where water is short, and where, at the end of term, a just killed goat cooked in a great pot is the end of term treat.

Is it really so impossible for them to imagine such bare poverty?

I do my best. They are polite.

I'm pretty sure of this lot there will be some who will win prizes.

Then, it is over, and I with the teachers, ask as always, how the library is, and if the pupils read. And here, in this privileged school, I hear what I always hear when I go to schools and even universities.

'You know how it is. A lot of the boys have never read at all, and the library is only half used.'

'You know how it is.' Yes, we indeed do know how it is. All of us.

We are in a fragmenting culture, where our certainties of even a few decades ago are questioned and where it is common for young men and women who have had years of education, to know nothing about the world, to have read nothing, knowing only some speciality or other, for instance, computers.

What has happened to us is an amazing invention, computers and the internet and TV, a revolution. This is not the first revolution we, the human race, has dealt with. The printing revolution, which did not take place in a matter of a few decades, but took much longer, changed our minds and ways of thinking. A foolhardy lot, we accepted it all, as we always do, never asked 'What is going to happen to us now, with this invention of print?' And just as we never once stopped to ask, How are we, our minds, going to change with the new internet, which has seduced

a whole generation into its inanities so that even quite reasonable people will confess that once they are hooked, it is hard to cut free, and they may find a whole day has passed in blogging and blugging etc.

Very recently, anyone even mildly educated would respect learning, education, and owe respect to our great store of literature. Of course we all know that when this happy state was with us, people would pretend to read, would pretend respect for learning, but it is on record that working men and women longed for books, and this is evidenced by the working men's libraries, institutes, colleges of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Reading, books, used to be part of a general education.

Older people, talking to young ones, must understand just how much of an education it was, reading, because the young ones know so much less. And if children cannot read, it is because they have not read.

But we all know this sad story.

But we do not know the end of it.

We think of the old adage, 'Reading maketh a full man' – and forgetting about jokes to do with over-eating – reading makes a woman and a man full of information, of history, of all kinds of knowledge.

But we are not the only people in the world. Not long ago I was telephoned by a friend who said she had been in Zimbabwe, in a village where they had not eaten for three days, but they were talking about books and how to get them, about education.

I belong to a little organisation which started out with the intention of getting books into the villages. There was a group of people who in another connection had travelled Zimbabwe at its grass roots. They reported that the villages, unlike what people reported, are full of intelligent people, teachers retired, teachers on leave, children on holidays, old people. I myself paid for a little survey, of what people wanted to read, and found the results were the same as a Swedish survey, that I had not known about. People wanted to read what

people in Europe want to read, if they read at all – novels of all kinds, science fiction, poetry, detective fiction, plays, Shakespeare, and the do-it-yourself books, like how to open a bank account, were low in the list. All of Shakespeare: they knew the name. A problem with finding books for villagers is that they don't know what is available, so a school set book, like the Mayor of Casterbridge, becomes popular because they know it is there. Animal Farm, for obvious reasons is the most popular of all novels.

Our little organisation got books from where we could, but remember that a good paperback from England cost a months wages: that was before Mugabe's reign of terror. Now with inflation, it would cost several years wages. But having taken a box of books out to a village – and remember there is a terrible shortage of petrol, the box will be greeted with tears. The library may be a plank under a tree on bricks. And within a week there will be literacy classes – people who can read teaching those who can't, citizenship class – and in one remote village, since there were no novels in Tonga, a couple of lads sat down to write novels in Tonga. There are six or so main languages in Zimbabwe and there are novels in all of them, violent, incestuous, full of crime and murder.

Our little organisation was supported from the very start by Norway, and then by Sweden. But without this kind of support our supplies of books would have dried up. Novels published in Zimbabwe, and, too, do-it-yourself books are sent out to people who thirst for them.

It is said that a people gets the government it deserves, but I do not think it is true of Zimbabwe. And we must remember that this respect and hunger for books comes, not from Mugabe's regime, but from the one before it, the whites. It is an astonishing phenomenon, this hunger for books, and it can be seen everywhere from Kenya down to the Cape of Good Hope.

This links up improbably with a fact: I was brought up in what was virtually a mud hut, thatched. This house has been built

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always, everywhere, where there are reeds or grass, suitable mud, poles for walls. Saxon England for example. The one I was brought up in had four rooms, one beside another, not one, and, the point is, it was full of books. Not only did my parents take books from England to Africa, but my mother ordered books from England for her children, books in great brown paper parcels which were the joy of my young life. A mud hut, but full of books.

And sometimes I get letters from people living in a village that might not have electricity or running water (just like our family in our elongated mud hut), 'I shall be a writer too, because I've the same kind of house you were in.'

But here is the difficulty. No.

Writing, writers, do not come out of houses without books.

There is the gap. There is the difficulty.

I have been looking at the speeches by some of your recent prizewinners. Take the magnificent Pamuk. He said his father had 1 500 books. His talent did not come out of the air, he was connected with the great tradition.

Take V.S. Naipaul. He mentions that the Indian Vedas were close behind the memory of his family. His father encouraged him to write. And when he got to England by right he used the British Library. So he was close to the great tradition.

Let us take John Coetzee. He was not only close to the great tradition, he was the tradition: he taught literature in Cape Town. And how sorry I am that I was never in one of his classes: taught by that wonderfully brave bold mind.

In order to write, in order to make literature, there must be a close connection with libraries, books, the Tradition.

I have a friend from Zimbabwe. A writer. Black – and that is to the point. He taught himself to read from the labels on jam jars, the labels on preserved fruit cans. He was brought up in an area I have driven through, an area for rural blacks. The earth is grit and gravel, there are low sparse bushes. The huts are poor, nothing

like the good cared-for huts of the better off. A school – but like one I have described. He found a discarded children's encyclopaedia on a rubbish heap and learned from it.

On Independence in 1980 there was a group of good writers in Zimbabwe, truly a nest of singing birds. They were bred in old Southern Rhodesia, under the whites – the mission schools, the better schools. Writers are not made in Zimbabwe. Not easily, not under Mugabe.

All the writers had a difficult road to literacy, let alone being writers. I would say print on jam tins and discarded encyclopaedias were not uncommon. And we are talking about people hungering for standards of education they were a long way from. A hut or huts with many children – an overworked mother, a fight for food and clothing.

Yet despite these difficulties, writers came into being, and there is another thing we should remember. This was Zimbabwe, physically conquered less than a hundred years before. The grandfathers and grandmothers of these people might have been storytellers for their clan. The oral tradition. In one generation – two, the transition from stories remembered and passed on, to print, to books. What an achievement.

Books, literally wrested from rubbish heaps and the detritus of the white man's world. But you may have a sheaf of paper (not typescript – that is a book – but it has to find a publisher, who will then pay you, remain solvent, distribute the books. I have had several accounts sent to me of the publishing scene for Africa. Even in more privileged places like North Africa, with its different tradition, to talk of a publishing scene is a dream of possibilities.

Here I am talking about books never written, writers that could not make it because the publishers are not there. Voices unheard. It is not possible to estimate this great waste of talent, of potential. But even before that stage of a book's creation which demands a publisher, an advance, encouragement, there is something else lacking.

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Writers are often asked, How do you write? With a processor? an electric typewriter? a quill? longhand? But the essential question is, 'Have you found a space, that empty space, which should surround you when you write? Into that space, which is like a form of listening, of attention, will come the words, the words your characters will speak, ideas – inspiration.

If this writer cannot find this space, then poems and stories may be stillborn.

When writers talk to each other, what they ask each other is always to do with this space, this other time. 'Have you found it? Are you holding it fast?'

Let us jump to an apparently very different scene. We are in London, one of the big cities. There is a new writer. We, cynically enquire, How are her boobs? Is she good-looking? If this is a man, Charismatic? Handsome? We joke but it is not a joke.

This new find is acclaimed, possibly given a lot of money. The buzzing of paparazzi begins in their poor ears. They are feted, lauded, whisked about the world. Us old ones, who have seen it all, are sorry for this neophyte, who has no idea of what is really happening.

He, she is flattered, pleased.

But ask in a year's time what he or she is thinking: I've heard them: 'This is the worst thing that could have happened to me.

Some much publicised new writers haven't written again, or haven't written what they wanted to, meant to.

And we, the old ones, want to whisper into those innocent ears. 'Have you still got your space? Your sole, your own and necessary place where your own voices may speak to you, you alone, where you may dream. Oh, hold onto it, don't let it go.'

There must be some kind of education.

My mind is full of splendid memories of Africa which I can revive and look at when I want. How about those sunsets, gold and purple and orange, spreading across the sky at evening. How

about butterflies and moths and bees on the aromatic bushes of the Kalahari? Or, sitting on the banks of the Zambesi, where it rolls between pale grassy banks, it being the dry season, dark-green and glossy, with all the birds of Africa around its banks. Yes, elephants, giraffes, lions and the rest, there were plenty of those, but how about the sky at night, still unpolluted, black and wonderful, full of restless stars.

But there are other memories. A young man, eighteen perhaps, is in tears, standing in his 'library.' A visiting American seeing a library without books, sent a crate, but this young man took each one out, reverently, and wrapped them in plastic. 'But,' we say, 'these books were sent to be read, surely?' and he replied, 'No, they will get dirty, and where will I get anymore?'

He wants us to send him books from England to teach him to teach. 'I only did four years in the senior school' he begs, 'But they never taught me to teach.'

I have seen a Teacher in a school where there was no textbooks, not even a bit of chalk for the blackboard – it was stolen – teach his class of six to eighteen year olds by moving stones in the dust, chanting 'Two times two is.....' and so on. I have seen a girl, perhaps not more than twenty, similarly lacking textbooks, exercise books, biros – anything, teach the A, B, C in the dust with a stick, while the sun beat down and the dust swirled.

We are seeing here that great hunger for education in Africa, anywhere in the Third World, or whatever we call parts of the world where parents long to get an education for their children which will take them from poverty, to the advantage of an education.

Our education which is so threatened now.

I would like you to imagine yourselves, somewhere in Southern Africa, standing in an Indian store, in a poor area, in a time of bad drought. There is a line of people, mostly women, with every kind of container for water. This store gets a bowser

of water every afternoon from the town and the people are waiting for this precious water.

The Indian is standing with the heels of his hands pressed down on the counter, and he is watching a black woman, who is bending over a wadge of paper that looks as if it has been torn out of a book. She is reading *Anna Karenin*.

She is reading slowly, mouthing the words. It looks a difficult book. This is a young woman with two little children clutching at her legs. She is pregnant. The Indian is distressed, because the young woman's headscarf, which should be white, is yellow with dust. Dust lies between her breasts and on her arms. This man is distressed because of the lines of people, all thirsty, but he doesn't have enough water for them. He is angry because he knows there are people dying out there, beyond the dust clouds. His brother, older, had been here holding the fort, but he had said he needed a break, had gone into town, really rather ill, because of the drought.

This man is curious. He says to the young woman. 'What are you reading?'

'It is about Russia,' says the girl.

'Do you know where Russia is?' He hardly knows himself.

The young woman looks straight at him, full of dignity though her eyes are red from dust, 'I was best in the class. My teacher said, I was best.'

The young woman resumes her reading: she wants to get to the end of the paragraph.

The Indian looks at the two little children and reaches for some Fanta, but the mother says 'Fanta makes them thirsty.'

The Indian knows he shouldn't do this but he reaches down to a great plastic container beside him, behind the counter and pours out two plastic mugs of water, which he hands to the children. He watches while the girl looks at her children drinking, her mouth moving. He gives her a mug of water. It hurts him to see her drinking it, so painfully thirsty is she.

Now she hands over to him a plastic water container, which he fills. The young woman and the children, watch him closely so that he doesn't spill any.

She is bending again over the book. She reads slowly but the paragraph fascinates her and she reads it again.

'Varenka, with her white kerchief over her black hair, surrounded by the children and gaily and good-humouredly busy with them, and at the same visibly excited at the possibility of an offer of marriage from a man she cared for, looked very attractive. Koznyshev walked by her side and kept casting admiring glances at her. Looking at her, he recalled all the delightful things he had heard from her lips, all the good he knew about her, and became more and more conscious that the feeling he had for her was something rare, something he had felt but once before, long, long ago, in his early youth. The joy of being near her increased step by step, and at last reached such a point that, as he put a huge birch mushroom with a slender stalk and up-curling top into her basket, he looked into her eyes and, noting the flush of glad and frightened agitation that suffused her face, he was confused himself, and in silence gave her a smile that said too much.'

This lump of print is lying on the counter, together with some old copies of magazines, some pages of newspapers, girls in bikinis.

It is time for her to leave the haven of the Indian store, and set off back along the four miles to her village. It is time... outside the lines of waiting women clamour and complain. But still the Indian lingers. He knows what it will cost this girl – going back home, with the two clinging children. He would give her the piece of prose that so fascinates her, but he cannot really believe this splinter of a girl with her great belly can really understand it.

Why is perhaps a third of *Anna Karenin* stuck here on this counter in a remote Indian store? It is like this.

A certain high official, United Nations, as it happens, bought a

copy of this novel in the bookshop when he set out on his journeys to cross several oceans and seas. On the plane, settled in his business class seat, he tore the book into three parts. He looks around at his fellow passengers as he does this, knowing he will see looks of shock, curiosity, but some of amusement. When he was settled, his seat belt tight, he said aloud to whoever could hear, 'I always do this when I've a long trip. You don't want to have to hold up some heavy great book.' The novel was a paperback, but, true, it is a long book. This man is well used to people listening when he spoke. 'I always do this, travelling,' he confided. 'Travelling at all these days, is hard enough.' And as soon as people were settling down, he opened his part of *Anna Karenin*, and read. When people looked his way, curiously or not, he confided in them. 'No, it is really the only way to travel.' He knew the novel, liked it, and this original mode of reading did add spice to what was after all a well known book.

When he reached the end of a section of the book, he called the airhostess, and sent it back to his secretary, travelling in the cheaper seats. This caused much interest, condemnation, certainly curiosity, every time a section of the great Russian novel arrived, mutilated, but readable, in the back part of the plane. Altogether, this clever way of reading *Anna Karenin* makes an impression, and probably no one there would forget it.

Meanwhile down in the Indian store, the young woman is holding onto the counter, her little children clinging to her skirts. She wears jeans, since she is a modern woman, but over them she had put on the heavy woollen skirt, part of traditional garb of her people: her children can easily cling onto it, the thick folds.

She sent a thankful look at the Indian, whom she knew liked her and was sorry for her, and she stepped out into the blowing clouds.

The children had gone past crying, and their throats were full of dust anyway.

This was hard, oh yes, it was hard, this stepping, one foot

after another, through the dust that lay in soft deceiving mounds under her feet. Hard, hard – but she was used to hardship, was she not? Her mind was on the story she had been reading. She was thinking, ‘She is just like me, in her white headscarf, and she is looking after children, too. I could be her, that Russian girl. And the man there, he loves her and will ask her to marry him. (She had not finished more than that one paragraph) Yes, and a man will come for me, and take me away from all this, take me and the children, yes, he will love me and look after me.’

She steps on. The can of water is heavy on her shoulders. On she goes. The children can hear the water slop in the can. Half way she stops, sets down the can. Her children are whimpering and touching the can. She thinks that she cannot open it, because dust would blow in. There is no way she can open the can until she gets home.

‘Wait’ she tells her children, ‘Wait’

She has to pull herself together and go on.

She thinks. My teacher said there was a library there, bigger than the supermarket, a big building and it is full of books. The young woman is smiling as she moves on, the dust blowing in her face. I am clever, she thinks. Teacher said I am clever. The cleverest in the school – she said I was. My children will be clever, like me. I will take them to the library, the place full of books, and they will go to school, and they will be teachers – my teacher told me I could be a teacher. They will be far from here, earning money. They will live near the big library and live a good life.

You may ask how that piece of the Russian novel ever ended up on that counter in the Indian store?

It would make a pretty story. Perhaps someone will tell it.

On goes that poor girl, held upright by thoughts of the water she would give her children once home, and drink a little herself. On she goes ... through the dreaded dusts of an African drought.

We are a jaded lot, we in our world – our threatened world. We

On Not Winning the Nobel Prize

are good for irony and even cynicism. Some words and ideas we hardly use, so worn out have they become. But we may want to restore some words that have lost their potency.

We have a treasure-house – a treasure – of literature, going back to the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans. It is all there, this wealth of literature, to be discovered again and again by whoever is lucky enough to come on it. A treasure. Suppose it did not exist. How impoverished, how empty we would be.

We own a legacy of languages, poems, histories, and it is not one that will ever be exhausted. It is there, always.

We have a bequest of stories, tales from the old storytellers, some of whose names we know, but some not. The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.

Ask any modern storyteller, and they will say there is always a moment when they are touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, fire, ice and the great winds that shaped us and our world.

The storyteller is deep inside everyone of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is attacked by war, by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise ... but the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories, the storyteller, that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, what we are at our best, when we are our most creative.

That poor girl trudging through the dust, dreaming of an education for her children, do we think that we are better than she is – we, stuffed full of food, our cupboards full of clothes, stifling in our superfluities?

The Nobel Lecture

I think it is that girl and the women who were talking about books and an education when they had not eaten for three days, that may yet define us.

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Biography

Doris Lessing was born on 22 October 1919 to British parents in Kermanshah in what was then known as Persia (now Iran) as Doris May Taylor. Her father, Alfred Cook Taylor, formerly a captain in the British army during the First World War, was a bank official. Her mother, Emily Maude Taylor, had been a nurse. In 1925 the family moved to a farm in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) hoping to improve their income. Lessing described her childhood on the farm in the first part of her autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994). At the age of seven, she was sent to a convent boarding school but later moved to a girls' school in Salisbury. When 14 she independently ended her formal schooling. In the following years she worked as a young nanny, telephonist, office worker, stenographer and journalist and had several short stories published. In 1939 she married Frank Charles Wisdom with whom she had a son, John, and a daughter, Jean. The couple divorced in 1943. In 1945 Doris married Gottfried Lessing, a German-Jewish immigrant she had met in a Marxist group mainly concerned with the race issue. She became involved with the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party. She and Gottfried had a son, Peter. When the couple divorced in 1949, she took Peter and moved to London, quickly establishing herself as a writer. Between 1952 and 1956 she was a member of the British Communist Party and was active in the campaign against nuclear weapons. Because of her criticism of the South African regime, she was prohibited entry to that country between 1956 and 1995. After a brief visit to Southern Rhodesia in 1956, she was banned there as well for the same reason. In *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992) she described going back in 1982 to the country where she had grown up. She now lives in London.

Doris Lessing made her debut as a novelist with *The Grass is Singing* (1950), which examines the relationship between a white

farmer's wife and her black servant. The book is both a tragedy based in love-hatred and a study of unbridgeable racial conflicts.

Even the semi-autobiographical *Children of Violence* series, usually called the Martha Quest series for its main character, is largely set in Africa. The series comprises *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). It describes Martha Quest's awakening to greater awareness on every level and was pioneering in its depiction of the mind and circumstances of the emancipated woman. With these books Lessing created a modern equivalent of the *Bildungsroman* of women writers of the 19th century. *The Children of Violence*, despite its emphatic liberation theme, is characterised by an almost fatalistic outlook. The story is told with the mild despair of someone seeing her younger self from the heavens of an afterlife, unable to intervene. The masterpiece is the final volume of the series, *The Four-Gated City*, a period frescoe apparently enveloping all of England – indeed our entire culture – illuminated by the author's empathy and incivility.

The Golden Notebook (1962) was Doris Lessing's real breakthrough. The burgeoning feminist movement saw it as a pioneering work and it belongs to the handful of books that informed the 20th-century view of the male-female relationship. It used a more complex narrative technique to reveal how political and emotion conflicts are intertwined. The style levels of differing documents and experiences mix: newspaper cuttings, news items, films, dreams and diaries. Anna Wulf, the main character, has five notebooks for her thoughts about Africa, politics and the communist party, her relationship to men and sex, Jungian analysis and dream interpretation. The disjointed form reflects that of the main character's mind. There is no single perspective from which to capture the entirety of her life experience.

Books published in the 1970s included *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), inspired by R. D. Laing. Lessing has

characterised her novel from this period as “inner-space fiction”: an attempt in the spirit of Romanticism to expand human knowledge to encompass regions beyond the control of reason and the ego.

In the novel series *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (vol. 1–5, 1979–1984) Lessing expanded the science fiction genre. The series studies the post-atomic war development of the human species. Lessing varies thoughts about colonialism, nuclear war and ecological disaster with observations on the opposition between female and male principles. Among inspirations for the work was the Idries Shah’s school of Sufism that she discovered in the 1960s. Doris Lessing revisited her interest in Sufism in the *Time Bites* (2004) collection of essays.

Lessing returned to realistic narrative in *The Good Terrorist* (1985), providing a satirical picture of the need of the contemporary left for total control and the female protagonist’s misdirected martyrdom and subjugation. Her analysis of the greenhouse for the terrorist mind in generation hatred and an *Übermensch* attitude retains currency.

The autobiographical *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997) represented a new peak in her writing. Lessing recalls not only her own life but the entire epoch: England in the last days of the empire. Her novel *The Sweetest Dream* (2001) is a stand-alone sequel in fictive form. Perhaps her unsparing view of the political antics of friends and lovers necessitated such discretion.

Her other important novels are *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *The Fifth Child* (1988). In the former, the reader at first infers a liberation motif: a woman finally about to fulfil her gift and sexual desires. After a first reading, the contours of the real novel take shape: a ruthless study of the collapse of values in middle age. *The Fifth Child* is a masterfully realised psychological thriller, where a woman’s repressed or denied aggression against family life is incarnated in a monstrous boy child.

The Nobel Lecture

The vision of global catastrophe forcing mankind to return to a more primitive life has had special appeal for Doris Lessing. It reappears in some of her books of recent years: the fantasy novel *Mara and Dann* (1999) and its sequel *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005). From collapse and chaos emerge the elementary qualities that allow Lessing to retain hope in humanity.

Literary Prizes: Somerset Maugham Award (1954), Prix Médicis étranger (1976), Österreichischer Staatspreis für Europäische Literatur (1981), Shakespeare-Preis der Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F. V. S., Hamburg (1982), W. H. Smith Literary Award (1986), Palermo Prize (1987), Premio Internazionale Mondello (1987), Premio Grinzane Cavour (1989), James Tait Black Memorial Book Prize (1995), Los Angeles Times Book Prize (1995), Premio Internacional Catalunya (1999), David Cohen British Literary Prize (2001), Companion of Honour from the Royal Society of Literature (2001), Premio Principe de Asturias (2001), S.T. Dupont Golden PEN Award (2002).

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