



Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography--1949-1962

Doris Lessing

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The second volume of Doris Lessing's extraordinary autobiography covers the years 1949-62, from her arrival in war-weary London with her son, Peter, and the manuscript for her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, under her arm to the publication of her most famous work of fiction, *The Golden Notebook*. She describes how communism dominated the intellectual life of the 1950s and how she, like nearly all communists, became disillusioned with extreme and rhetorical politics and left communism behind. Evoking the bohemian days of a young writer and single mother, Lessing speaks openly about her writing process, her friends and lovers, her involvement in the theater, and her political activities. *Walking in the Shade* is an invaluable social history as well as Doris Lessing's *Sentimental Education*.

Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography--1949-1962 Details

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Judy says

Fascinating background to 'The Golden Notebook', as it covers the same period. If anything, I probably preferred the autobiography to the novel.

Schopflin says

Lessing writes so clearly and observantly that her autobiographies are brilliant, even if she does not come across as likeable. The discovery of Sufism at the end of this one is where it veers off into self-indulgence.

Deea says

What a wonderful sharp mind Doring Lessing had!

Ricardo Santos says

Doris Lessing mostra neste livro as dificuldades que enfrentou para se tornar uma escritora respeitada e uma mulher independente. Desafiando convenções, ela deixou para trás, no final dos anos 1940, na África, um casamento infeliz e dois filhos pequenos. Ela chega a uma Londres se recuperando da 2ª Guerra Mundial, com o filho do segundo casamento e o manuscrito do seu primeiro romance. Teve de se virar como mãe solteira e aspirante a escritora em vários empregos. Passou por maus bocados. Mas ela também nos conta sobre sua vida boêmia, o contato com gente famosa e figuras históricas, e os desafios das lutas políticas. Mesmo preferindo a tranquilidade da solidão do escritor, Lessing se tornou, nos anos 50, uma personalidade marcante, influente, uma celebridade, que chegou a ser monitorada pelo serviço secreto britânico. Mas a própria faz uma avaliação bastante crítica de suas experiências no Partido Comunista e junto aos amigos e conhecidos de esquerda. Tem um pouco de tudo em suas conclusões: lucidez, cinismo, conservadorismo. Ela sempre se recusou a rotular-se. Não se considerava feminista, mas sabia muito bem o que as mulheres aguentavam dentro e fora de casa. Passou a desconfiar da política em geral, seja de direita ou de esquerda. Amava os homens, mas não sem dizer tudo o que estava de errado com eles. Em *Andando na Sombra*, há passagens cheias de insights sobre vários temas, como a rotina de escritora, os sucessos e fracassos comerciais e artísticos dos seus livros, influências literárias, ficção científica. Além de "causos" deliciosos ou assustadores. Os trechos enfadonhos, sobre a vida doméstica ou familiar, não comprometem o todo. *Andando na Sombra* é o testemunho de uma mente afiada. Lessing ganhou o prêmio Nobel em 2007 e morreu em 2013.

Steffi says

Man merkt dem zweiten Teil von Lessings Autobiografie leider an, dass hier in einem ebenso dicken Band wie dem ersten statt 30 nur 13 Jahre beschrieben werde. Die politischen Zwistigkeiten unter den Kommunisten, ihre eigene Unentschlossenheit in Bezug darauf, werden extrem breitgewalzt. Auch ihre Gedanken zu Frauen und Feminismus sind oft etwas platt, scheinbar nur auf der Tatsache beruhend, dass sie nie Angst hatte Opfer von Vergewaltigung zu werden und sie sich nie sexuell bedroht fühlte. Das Interessanteste an dem Buch sind vielleicht die Beschreibungen ihrer Beziehung zum Theaterleben. Sie schrieb selbst Stücke, war Teil des Umfelds des Royal Court Theatres und beteiligte sich an der Gründung eines neuen, politschen Theaters.

Sally Edsall says

I love biography. I never thought I would abandon a biography unfinished and feel no desire to pick it up and continue.

I found this dull, self-serving and boring.

Lessing seems to be busy making excuses and justifications for her 'fellow travelling' with Communists in 1950s London. Oh, pleeeeze! So what? Heaps of people were members of the party or fellow travellers. many have also renounced or reassessed their former positions, but they don't feel the need to go into tortuous self-denial as Lessing does.

I find her cold as a person - that's fine, one doesn't have to LIKE the subject of a biog/autobiog to be interested in them. But her writing is cold and detatched as a cold-water flat in misty wintry London!

Cynthia F Davidson says

'Nothing is easier than malice,' Doris Lessing writes. 'Once, to be malicious was considered a fault; now it's applauded... dishing the dirt says more about us than we ought to like: it is diagnostic of our nasty time .' Fending off the malice of her biographers, you could say, Lessing wrote her autobiography because she understood so well how the tendency towards malice would distort her life & work, if she didn't explain it herself.

I thoroughly enjoyed this second volume of her autobiography. It is very different from the first, which took place largely in Africa, while England is the setting here, where she must also struggle with 'outsider' colonial status in class conscious England, where she did not grow up. Expatriates of all kinds will resonate with much of her experience.

Autobiographies differ from memoirs, which are currently so popular & Lessing was a product of her times, not ours, so she discusses her era in her way.

That said, it is imperative that writers this important, who've earned the Nobel Literature prize, give an accounting of their thought processes, so readers present & future, can truly appreciate where & how 'thinking' & behavior emerges from.

Her frank assessment of Communism, & her & her peers attraction to it alone, is worth the price of the book.

Very few authors have the stomach for going back over their mistakes with such equanimity! She made me feel the heartbreak of betrayal, for millions, & warns us all about enthralment to 'isms' of all stripes.

'Evidently it was a variety of mass lunacy, mass psychosis,' she writes. (pg 262).

And with our irresponsible leaders & mass media, mass lunacy is an ever present problem today too.

'...bitter disillusionment & loss of respect for ones own government (post WW1 & WW2)' she writes, were prime contributors to the mindset which encouraged young people to put their faith elsewhere...in Communism & USSR which came to such tragic results.

These conditions are upon us again, & young people have no trust in the Establishment, which leaves them ripe for exploitation by yet another 'ism.' If you care about how intelligent people reason things out, & can still be wrong & yet see the light eventually, you should read this book.

Sera says

I was expecting more details of her writing process than her political memoirs. It is good to see the political background and social atmosphere of those years and Lessing has a great eye to depict them; however, this second volume lacks of an emotional integrity. Instead, we see too much details of her political life and never-ending series of people involved in her life than herself as an author.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

Reading this second volume assuredly requires your stamina, familiarity and sense of humor since its scope/plot is a bit different from its predecessor in which it's divided into normal numerical chapters while this one divided into four main road/street themes, each with its seemingly never-ending length of narrations, dialogs, episodes, etc. it's a pity there's no contents section in this book so the following tentative contents may help you see what I mean:

Denbigh Road W11 (pp. 1-16)

Church Street, Kensington W8 (pp. 17-134)

Warwick Road SW5 (pp. 135-251)

Langham Street W1 (pp. 253-369)

I would like to say something from my notes on reading this sequel from page 160 onwards because I finished reading its first portion some years ago and my reflection was fragmentary, it's impossible for me to recall some key points worth mentioning and sharing with my Goodreads friends. I'm sure those Doris Lessing scholars teaching or doing research in the universities worldwide would have something literarily professional to say more than this review.

First, I think we should achieve our appropriate reading stamina after finishing reading Volume One, thus we have no choice but keep going with this Volume Two. Basically, nearly all episodes were on how she became acquainted with innumerable celebrities such as Bertrand Russell (p. 265 if you're curious how he

greeted her; she had never met him before), Henry Kissinger, Joshua Nkomo, etc. and involved as a communist members but she announced, "By 1954 I was no longer a Communist, ..." (Volume One, p. 397) I found reading the first three-fourths of this book quite tedious because it's like a labyrinthine journey. However, from around page 290, it's more readable and related to her works, for example, how she got feedback on her "The Golden Notebook".

Second, when we are familiar with her narrations, her readers would definitely found reading her words or sentences touching, I don't mean everywhere, rather I mean when we read carefully, for instance, I noticed her use of 'likeable' interesting such as "... He was a very large, likeable man, ..." (p. 283) vs. the opposite, "That incident of the unlikeable young women presaged more than I could know. ..." (p. 365) Then, we would run into some rare good words like: 'companionableness' (p. 348), 'gentrification' (p. 359), 'housemother' (p. 368), etc. Eventually, we couldn't help heaving a sigh and asking ourselves why we simply couldn't have written such a fantastic sentence like this before, "... I felt permanently guilty because I didn't do this: ..." (p. 365) Once in a while, we can observe and cherish how she's written masterly with unique grammar, for example, "Her thighs were black and blue because her veins bruised easy." (p. 362) and I think this is a kind of parallelism application. One of the reasons is that, of course, she is one of the awe-inspiring world-class writers in the 20th century.

Third, I liked her sense of humor as written in this excerpt:

... Apart from a couple of sketches written for the New Yorker, I had not written for money . . . No, the truth compels me to state: twice an impecunious friend and I had attempted frankly commercial film scripts, but you cannot write successfully for money with your tongue in your cheek, and these dishonest ventures had come to nothing. Serves me right, I had thought. Now I was secretly seeing myself as a fallen soul, yet there was nothing wrong with what I wrote for television. ... (p. 356)

Before this, I admired her brave declaration I had never read or heard before, that is, "My job in this world is to write, ..." (p. 285) Some unique and good points like these, I think, would be something wonderfully interesting, worth reading after we had found reading this volume quite tedious, or nearly all for some readers. However, from page 297 on, we would enjoy reading her narrations on how she worked, wrote, lived in an apartment; her mention on Buddhism and Hinduism (p. 320) is also interesting.

In sum, this Volume Two is supplementary to Volume One, therefore, we should read it to learn how she has thought, worked and written till she was/is awarded nearly all literary prizes in Europe and possibly in the world.

H.A. Leuschel says

This was a fascinating read from a fascinating writer who not only lived to be 94 but seemed to have lived each of her years with passion and an open-minded spirit, a sense of deep self-questioning and also an attempt to never give up. This is the second of Lessing's autobiographies that begins in 1949 on her arrival from Africa, taking the reader through the different stages of her struggles to make a living in post-war London and then carve her path towards international recognition as an author. 'Writing these memories, I learned a good deal about memory's little tricks, most of all how it simplifies, tidies up, makes sharp

contrasts of light and shade.' She muses about the difficulties to give an account of her life as honestly and as fearlessly as possible yet with the knowledge that her recollections may and would clash with those of her contemporaries. With that idea in mind, I found the book to be very interesting, especially her stories about the writing process and how she managed to face the difficulties as a single mother. 'Writing any book changes you: this has to be so, if you think about it', she writes at some point, commenting on the impact the creation of some of her novels has had on her life (especially 'The Golden Notebook') which makes me want to revisit some of her work again, especially her earlier short stories and her very first novel 'Martha Quest'. This lady certainly had determination and grit!

Callie says

Again, a lot about her political life. I love Doris Lessing because she is trying to give you an idea of what Britain was like in the 1950s (mostly that decade). Some portions of this book are absolutely riveting, for me, the description of her search for meaning through Eastern religions. She is very coy, I think, about her relationships, not going into much detail but offering tantalizing tidbits. I have a whole bunch of quotes I will add later.

"I was again in an atmosphere that made every encounter, every conversation, important, because if you were a communist, then the future of the world depended on you--"

"The pressure on writers--and artists--to do something other than write, paint, make music, because those are nothing but bourgeois indulgences, continued strong, and continues now, though the ideologies are different, and will continue, because it has roots in envy, and the envious ones do not know they suffer from a disease, know only that they are in the right."

"Belief--that's the word. This was religious set of mind, identical with that of passionate religious True Believers. . . What communism inherited was not merely the fervours but a landscape of goodies and baddies, the saved and the unredeemed. We inherited the mental framework of Christianity. Hell: capitalism; all bad. A Redeemer, all good--Lenin, Stalin, Mao. Purgatory: you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs (lagers, concentration camps, and the rest). Then paradise. . . then heaven. . . then Utopia.

"Good books are published, good writers survive, but all the pressures are against the small, or rare, or special books."

"The need to belong to an elite is surely one of the most basic needs of all. Aristocracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Garrick club, secret societies--it is all the same."

"When people accepted the real situation in the Soviet Union, something deeply out of sight was confirmed, a knowledge of horror, of betrayal. A high price has to be paid: and with that knowledge goes a dark and greedy need for pain. The root of communism--a love of revolution--is, I believe, masochism, pleasure in pain, satisfaction in suffering, identification with the redeeming blood. The Cross, in fact. To leave the Party was to give up the greater truth, give up being an initiate into understanding the real processes of life."

"Writing any book changes you: this has to be so, if you think about it. On the lowest level, if you are thinking hard about a subject, information and insights on that subject seem to come in from everywhere: books arrive in your life, you hear it on the radio, in conversations, and on television. This is a fact it is true, you can rely on it--and there is no 'scientific' explanation for it."

"It is a strange business, changing your mind about what you think--rather having your mind changed for you. You wake up one morning and think, Goodness, I used to think like that, didn't I? --but you hardly know how it happened. It is a process that goes on all the time. . ."

James F says

The second volume of her autobiography, from her move to London in 1949 to 1962. Definitely very interesting, if you can ignore the rhetorical passages. While from the first volume, I learned that the first four volumes of the *Children of Violence* were fairly autobiographical, here I learned (as I partly suspected, since the one thing I know about Lessing is that she is an author, and Martha isn't) that the last volume is much less so -- in fact, I wasn't prepared for how totally non-autobiographical, and even totally contrasted it was to her real life. And it is really a pity, because her real life was much more interesting than the novel.

In the novel, she lives in one house for almost the entire time in London, in a situation with a mentally ill woman; they are allies against the stupidity of the psychiatrists and the mental hospital, and Martha has a bad experience with a totally useless psychiatrist. In real life, she lived for four years with a psychiatrist from a mental hospital, and credits her analyst with saving her sanity. She moves from flat to flat, none of which resembles the House from the novel. Her experiences as a single mother before it was common would have made a great novel as well.

Her second lover was an American Trotskyist -- I would love to have read her take on that, before she decided that all left-wing politics from the French Revolution on was one big mistake (but what she says about Trotsky shows she is still viewing things through a Stalinist lens). Even in this book, though, there are passages which undercut her thesis, and show that she doesn't entirely believe what she is saying. One of the things I like about her fiction is the way she seems to be looking over her shoulder, with an ironical detachment from what she is writing, as if there is an unsaid, "Yes, this is true, but. . ." These passages are far less common in the autobiography. Instead, contradictory passages just stand next to each other, or a chapter apart, and never meet. She marvels that people accept government outrages, that they don't think, don't protest -- and then asserts that anyone who protests anything is naive, is egocentric, is romantic, in thinking that what they say, think, or do is of any importance . . . what are their credentials to change the world? All "heirs of Lenin", potential dictators. . .

I think the basic problem is that for all her anti-communism, she (like so many people who were in the Stalinist camp) never really broke from the central dogma: that Stalin was the legitimate heir of Marx and Lenin, that Marxism -- and all revolutionary ideas -- are identical with Stalinism, and Stalinism is identical with Marxism and revolution, that all the ideas and words misused by the Stalinists really mean what they meant to the Stalinists, whoever uses them, etc.

All this is not to deny that the book is very interesting, both about Lessing and about her times, the people she met, was friends or enemies with, not only in politics but in the publishing and theater world. She knew what was happening behind the scenes and describes it very well; only the value judgments are sometimes outrageous (and at other times seem very sane, when not about "the Left"). It is not a book I would recommend generally, but it will be fascinating to those who have thought about some of these issues.

Eleanor says

Totally absorbing. What a fascinating, intelligent and honest person she was. I feel envious of her friends.

I can see a lot of reading of other books by Doris Lessing in the not too distant future.

Brian Richards says

In depth, detailed biography of Doris Lessing. 1949-62.

Sally Flint says

This book was about to be withdrawn from our school library collection and I rescued it. it was a text I read a long time ago and I couldn't resist re-visiting it as I, amongst, a million other women am such a fan of Lessing's novels, especially, of course, The Golden Notebook. To be honest, though, the autobiography isn't particularly an easy or, for much of it, a fascinating read. Much of it is based on examining the party in the 50s and it explores some of the big names at the time and her wilting opinion of much that the party stood for. I think the thing I find the most hard is how little emphasis or interest she seems to show in motherhood. Her son, Peter, the child she did bring with her from Rhodesia to England seems to hardly get a mention other to hear how he was passed from pillar to post. The book did get interesting when she examines why The Golden Notebook is so popular, why her publishers didn't like it, and how it is viewed so differently by different groups of people. She also seems to in the last thirty or so pages slip in a ton of stuff about the different men in her life. As if we suddenly need more of the personal stuff. she does talk quite a bit about how her readers need to see autobiographical links everywhere, which she seems to dislike. Anyway, still a great writer. Arguably the best 20th Century novelist, but not my favourite piece of writing.
