
In 1994 Doris Lessing published the first volume of her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, covering her first thirty years, ending with her arrival in London in 1949. The second volume, published in 1997, dealt with the next thirteen years or so of her life in London. Volume three is yet to come.

However, these books were not Lessing’s first foray into autobiographical writing. Although we cannot assume absolute equivalence, much of the subjective experience of Martha Quest in the first four novels in the *Children of Violence* series, written between 1952 and 1965, can be attributed to the author. She often expresses annoyance when asked about what aspects of her books are autobiographical – “in a sense, everything has to be autobiographical, of course; but on the other hand, you can also say that it isn’t autobiographical at all, because as soon as you begin writing it changes into something else”¹ – and believes it is not important for the reader to distinguish autobiography from fiction. Nevertheless, Eve Bertelsen observed in her 1986 interview that she would ask a question about Martha Quest, and Lessing would respond by talking about herself,² which seems to betray a strong autobiographical identification. And when writing *Under My Skin* she reread *The Golden Notebook*, published in 1962, and commented on its correspondence with a passage she had just written: “This period … a time with its own flavour and

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¹ Tomalin, 173.
² Bertelsen, 143.
taste, went to make up the Mashopi parts of *The Golden Notebook* ... There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth.”

So when *Memoirs of a Survivor* was first published in 1974, with its subtitle *An Attempt at Autobiography*, as an autobiographical project it was by no means a new venture. It is the second of what Lessing has described as her “unrealistic stories”. The first was the even more enigmatic *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. The “unrealism” of this novel resides mainly in its elastic use of time, and in the ability of the narrator to enter, at certain times, another world beyond her living-room wall. The “real” setting of the novel is an unnamed English city, at a time when for some unexplained reason civilization is crumbling. Gangs or tribes of people are moving through the city, heading for the north-west where they believe, on scanty evidence, life will be better. The narrator is an unnamed single middle-aged woman about whose occupation and family circumstances we learn nothing: she exists in a pure narratorial present with the most generic of childhood memories. She is mysteriously put in charge of a young girl, Emily. Emily has for a pet a hybrid cat/dog, Hugo, an animal who comes to embody the old-fashioned virtues of loyalty and honor when they are largely abandoned by humans. Beyond the wall of her flat, the narrator finds herself in a large house whose rooms are at first shabby and over-furnished but the condition of which changes constantly. This is the “impersonal” world; however, shortly after Emily’s arrival, the narrator begins to be subjected, beyond the wall, to a child’s-eye view of an oppressive nursery where “personal” scenes from the childhood of Emily and her baby brother are played out. Meanwhile, in the “real” world, Emily passes rapidly through the stages of

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4 Tan et al., 201.
adolescence, becoming the lover and helpmate (the old-fashioned word is quite appropriate here) of Gerald, the leader of one of the gangs gathering in the streets outside. As conditions worsen and the danger increases, Gerald tries to civilize a gang of children who have never known family life, and who are without loyalty, friendship, memory or even much language. In the same way that Harriet’s refusal to exclude Ben from the family in *The Fifth Child* destroyed her family, this crusade of Gerald’s breaks up his former gang, which had set up a community in an abandoned house. Cannibalism and violence are common among these children, and the narrator and Emily, and eventually Gerald, are besieged in the flat until the wall finally opens and admits them to a new world.

Lessing complains that “no one noticed” the subtitle of *Memoirs*, “as if that precision was embarrassing.”[^5] This is not strictly true: of a sample of ten contemporary reviews, only half do not mention the autobiographical element, and of the other five, four quote the subtitle and discuss it in some detail. Victoria Glendinning comments that “it is a very devious piece of self-revelation, and it reads like a novel.”[^6] With the insight Lessing has now provided into her childhood with Volume One of her (more literal) autobiography, *Under My Skin*, it is obvious that Emily’s childhood beyond the wall is indeed a vivid re-creation of her own early years in Persia; and the adolescent Emily in the “real” world of the novel is recognizable as the clever, polite, uncommunicative teenager who would spend the day with neighboring farming families in Southern Rhodesia, who would read and eat, like Emily,

[^5]: Rousseau, 148.
[^6]: Glendinning, 1405.
“ingest[ing] images through [her] eyes, calories by mouth,”\textsuperscript{7} and enjoyed her competence at practical, homely skills: “doing these things I was truly happy.”\textsuperscript{8} But without this external information, not available when \textit{Memoirs} was published, it is unreasonable for her to expect all her readers to identify and focus on the autobiography in a work which has so many other elements – fantasy, dreams, prophecy, social comment, psychological study, fable, utopia; one reviewer even called it “a ghost story of the future”.\textsuperscript{9} Also, it seems unfair for her to complain when readers fail to notice the autobiography in this work, since she so often criticizes readers for seeing too much autobiography in her other fiction.

Lessing explained her methods and intentions at length in a 1985 interview:

For years I had the project of writing an autobiography originating from dreams. I had to give it up because it was impossible to organize the dreams into a coherent sequence without making the whole work extremely artificial. In \textit{Memoirs of a Survivor}, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator’s past.\textsuperscript{10} Four of the ten reviewers pick up the suggestion that the world behind the wall

\textsuperscript{7} Lessing, Under My Skin, 110.
\textsuperscript{8} Lessing, Under My Skin, 103.
\textsuperscript{9} Maddocks, 58.
\textsuperscript{10} Rousseau, 147-8.
is a dream world. Another calls it a “looking-glass land”. Lessing boasts of the fact “that the word ‘dreams’ is never used from start to finish” in Memoirs. At one point she describes the present “reality” as “remarkable and dreamlike” (114), but she might indeed have avoided the actual word “dreams”, though it is not clear quite why this should be such a matter for pride in a book structured around dreaming.

Dreams have always been important to Lessing and have featured in all her novels to some extent. She relates in Volume Two of her autobiography her psychiatrist’s pleasure in the fact that she dreamt Jungian rather than Freudian dreams, which are “altogether more personal and petty”, despite her own unease with these labels as well as others. But the “dreams” in Memoirs are apparently her own life, part of the “attempt at autobiography”; so the small girl who experiences the “prison” of the “personal” scenes is both the narrator and Emily, this oppressive childhood being meant somehow to represent a universal experience. A baby heard crying disconsolately, even from the other side of the wall, when eventually found is not Emily but her mother – “the finding had about it, had in its quintessence, the banality, the tedium, the smallness, the restriction of that ‘personal’ dimension” (134).

Another of Lessing’s common themes is the iniquity of the childhood discipline. The narrator of Memoirs tries to explain this to Emily, who is having trouble achieving the democratic household she and Gerald aspire to without being bossy towards the younger children: “It’s all false, it’s got to do with

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11 Interestingly, the reviewer for the periodical Psychology Today (Ornstein) does not even mention the world behind the wall, surely a fertile source of psychological speculation.
12 Ackroyd, 797.
13 Dean, 93.
14 Lessing, Memoirs of a Survivor, 114. Subsequent references to this novel are given as page numbers in parentheses.
nothing real, but we are all in it all our lives – you’re a good little girl, you’re a bad little girl. ‘Do as I tell you and I’ll tell you you are good.’ It’s a trap and we are all in it” (118). It seems not to occur to Lessing that it is precisely this kind of discipline which is missing from the lives of the irredeemable underground children who have never known parents or discipline of any kind, or, as she calls it, “the softening of the family” (154). (It is also interesting to compare her attitude to childhood discipline with her authoritarian impulse to control readers’ interpretations of her books, with interviews, prefaces, author’s notes and so on, often published years later.)

One of Lessing’s more stable beliefs is in the universality of personal experience. She uses it to justify writing about “petty personal problems” because “nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own ... growing up is after all only the understanding that one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.”16 So the “dreams” and the elastic time-world of the novel do not need to be rationalized, even though the little girl Emily would in “real” time be nearer the narrator’s age, given the very particular nature of that nursery – the furniture, the clothes and the practices being those of European culture in the late Victorian or Edwardian period – and given that the main action of the novel is evidently set in the late twentieth century. Emily, the narrator, and Emily’s mother are all merged into one continuous being. The choice of name has its own significance, too; Lessing’s mother was christened Emily, named after her own mother, who died young. And the character Emily, at times at least, is everywoman, a victim of “the emotional hurts which are common, are the human condition, part of everyone’s

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15 Lessing, Walking in the Shade, 36.
16 Lessing, Golden Notebook, 13.
infancy.” When her friend June leaves the city without a word of farewell, Emily cries “as a woman weeps, which is to say as if the earth were bleeding” (151). The narrator can do nothing: “I sat there, I went on sitting, watching Emily the eternal woman at her task of weeping ... I had to listen. To grief, to the expression of the intolerable” (151). The narrator’s helplessness is, as it were, wired into the story. She is observing her own past – observing “a young self grow up” – and she has to watch without participating, since she cannot change what has already happened. This impotence carries over into the dream world behind the wall. The only intervention she makes in the “personal” world there is when she finds the baby who is Emily’s mother crying and takes her up to comfort her: “A pretty, fair little girl, at last finding comfort in my arms” (134). After this, the impersonal world behind the wall begins to disintegrate into anarchy – “or perhaps it was only that I was seeing what went on there more clearly” (140) – which is at its height when instead, moving beyond the wall, she finds gardens, layers of gardens under “a fresh delightful sky ... that I knew was the sky of another world, not ours” (141), and

though it was hard to maintain a knowledge of that other world with its scent and running waters and its many plants while I sat here in this dull, shabby daytime room, the pavements outside seething as usual with its tribal life – I did hold it. ... Towards the end it was so; intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in “ordinary” life, as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it.

(143)

17 Lessing, Under, 25.
18 Lessing, Under My Skin, 28.
Perhaps the achievement of intervention with Emily’s mother is what enables this breakthrough to the simultaneous knowledge of both worlds, which presumably allows the escape from the helplessness of the “real” world at the end of the novel.

The autobiographical element extends beyond the narrator’s experience of “ridiculous impatience, the helplessness, of the adult who watches a young thing growing” (84-85), which is helplessness not only because she cannot change her own past which is repeated in Emily’s present, but because “the biological demands of her [Emily’s] age took a precise and predictable and clock-like stake on her life” (85). The disintegrating society of the city, in which the narrator, once again, takes little part and acts principally as an observer, represents, according to Lessing,

a general worsening of conditions ... as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past – represented by gangs of young and anarchic people – go by, and vanish. These are the wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse.¹⁹

This is an interpretation of the novel none of the ten reviewers made. They all saw the disintegration of civilization and the lawless gangs as a projection into the near future, rather than a metaphor for what has already happened in the twentieth century.

Another element of the novel which sits rather oddly with its apocalyptic vision of the collapse of civilization is the strange appearance of small-scale utopias, always in direct contrast with the civilisation which Lessing so

¹⁹ Lessing, Under My Skin, 28-9.
despises. Her description of the Ryan family, for example: a large family existing in a filthy house on nothing, feckless and uneducable, with a drunken, violent, Irish father, eating nothing but junk food, is peppered with statements like: “the lucky Ryans, whose minute-by-hour life, communal and hugger-mugger, seemed all enjoyment and sensation: they liked being together. They liked each other” (111). The brutal father has faded out of the picture and the poverty has become romance. And as civilisation fails, people learn to barter, to grow their own food and make do without cars and electricity. The glow of this happy achievement sometimes overcomes the grim picture Lessing is trying to paint of a lawless world descending into tribal violence and cannibalism, and seems fairly distantly related to the twentieth-century cataclysms she says inspired her.

“To me,” Lessing says, “nothing seems more simple than the plan of this novel.”20 This simplicity is not, however, readily apparent, and she must have expected, after twenty-five years of writing for publication, that her readers would not all interpret the book exactly as she intended. The reviewers who picked up the autobiographical hint could see that it was Emily who represented the narrator’s childhood. One added, “perhaps also Lessing’s own child, Peter”21 – and if Peter, why not the two older children left behind in Southern Rhodesia? But to take the child Emily as the universal child, representative of “the human condition,” ignores the other child behind the wall, the adored little brother. What happens to the cosseted and indulged child, while the ignored one grows up too fast? One example appears in Lessing’s 1995 novel, Love, Again, where the protagonist, Sarah, has a younger brother, Hal (Lessing’s own brother’s

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20 Lessing, Under My Skin, 28.
21 Rubenstein, 21-22.
name was Harry). Her memories of their childhood follow the same pattern as that of Emily and her baby brother, and of the young Doris and her brother Harry which is described in Under My Skin. Harry Tayler is a background figure in the two volumes of autobiography published so far, distancing himself from his unhappy mother’s nagging and attention-seeking by becoming “polite, cool; [he] appeared to listen but took no notice”;\textsuperscript{22} “Harry, as it would now be put, was not a man in touch with his emotions.”\textsuperscript{23} So the real person became self-sufficient in the extreme, and shut off his emotions. The man in Love, Again, though, is an overgrown child, making outrageous demands of other people, a “big babyish man, with his little tummy, his little double chin, his self-absorbed mouth”\textsuperscript{24} even in his sixties, by which age the real Harry, described in African Laughter, has become “a cautious man, slow to react, but not cut off by silence from what he saw around him,”\textsuperscript{25} not only because of his new hearing aid, but from a more receptive attitude to his sister.

There is no little brother in the “real” world of Memoirs. Glendinning points out, “this is a woman-centred book,”\textsuperscript{26} although Lessing claims otherwise: “A middle-aged person – the sex does not matter – observes a young self grow up.”\textsuperscript{27} However, if it were depicting a male narrator watching a young boy grow to maturity, the novel would be unrecognizably different. Specifically female aspects are fundamental – Emily’s “woman’s tears,” the frustration and cruelty of Emily’s mother, Emily’s choosing to be Gerald’s assistant, “the leader of the commune’s woman” (99), rather than “a chieftainess, a leader on her own

\textsuperscript{22} Lessing, Under My Skin, 158.
\textsuperscript{23} Lessing, Under My Skin, 371.
\textsuperscript{24} Lessing, Love, Again, 332.
\textsuperscript{25} Doris Lessing, African Laughter, 35.
\textsuperscript{26} Glendinning 1405.
\textsuperscript{27} Lessing, Under My Skin, 28.
account” (98) because she is in love. The narrator insists that this state of affairs is realistic, in spite of Emily's “capacities and talents” (98); “This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one” (99).

There is a conflict between this insistence on the truth of this portrait of an individual with a specific history, and the claim that she represents everyone. The belief that all experiences are universal, which Lessing has used to justify writing about the personal, sits awkwardly with a statement she makes in her 1985 book Prisons We Choose to Live Inside: “Everything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own way of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures.”

Memoirs of a Survivor gives little clue as to how this individual is formed, “the individual, in the long run, who will set the tone, provide the real development in a society,” unless it is by being the excluded one, the unloved, the exile in one’s family and society. By implication, these are the people, like Lessing, like her narrator in Memoirs, like Martha Quest and a long line of protagonists through to Mara in Mara and Dann, who have the critical eye needed to view their society with detachment and who can “stand out against group thinking,” while the secure, integrated people who have been happy in childhood fit easily into society and unthinkingly conform to its rules. These are the people who would seem to be described by another of the narrator’s absolute statements:

How else do things work always unless by imitation bred of the passion to be like? All the processes of society are based on it, all individual development. … There was some sort of conspiracy of belief that

28 Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, 83.
29 Lessing, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, 82.
people – children, adults, everyone – grew by an acquisition of unconnected habits, of isolated bits of knowledge, like choosing things off a counter. … But in fact people develop for good or for bad by swallowing whole other people, atmospheres, events, places – develop by admiration. (51-52)

She is talking about Emily the adolescent here, but Emily, along with many of her characters – most of the protagonists of her novels – have been formed by the opposite of admiration; by a reaction against emulation of others, a resistance to conformity. In Under My Skin, she recalls “the unforgiving clarity of the adolescent, sharpened by fear that this might be your fate too. “I will not, I will not,” I kept repeating to myself, like a mantra.”

Sometimes in The Golden Notebook, The Four Gated City and particularly in Briefing for a Descent into Hell she implies that madness itself is the path to enlightenment, and that society’s attempts to cure the insane are really an attack on these people’s connection with reality and truth. But in Walking in the Shade, Lessing discusses this at some length, and insists “I do not believe that ultimate truths come from being crazy. I’ve seen too much of craziness.” She sees her propensity to write about madness as a pattern in her own mind, which “has to be in other people’s minds, must be, for we are not sufficient to ourselves.”

Somehow, there must be a way of accommodating these conflicting beliefs in individuality and universality. In the preface to The Golden Notebook, she says

Nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains,

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30 Lessing, Under My Skin. 157.
31 Lessing, Walking in the Shade, 244.
pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas –
can’t be yours alone.

So far, this denies uniqueness, but makes no claim for universality. But the
paragraph ends, “one’s unique and incredible experience is what everyone
shares.”³² Everyone? She frequently uses hyperbole – she says “no one” noticed
Memoirs was an autobiography, meaning many people did not; and in this case
she perhaps means many people share one’s experiences when she actually says
“everyone” does. Can it make sense to say, though, that experiences can be both
unique to individuals and universal? Lessing obviously feels that she is a unique
person, but it is an intellectual discipline for her to insist that other people have
the same experiences and feelings, and therefore, of course, the same rights. It is
in this sense a political belief. But it excludes the possibility, which is of vital
interest to most novelists, that other people might be profoundly different to
oneself, and that recognizing that difference and allowing for it can also be a
worthwhile intellectual discipline. This belief in universal experience, while
allowing her to see the tyranny of the zeitgeist over her own life and those of
others, and providing her insight into the behavior of young people because she
can see in them her own remembered youth, places a damaging restriction on
her perceptions which carries over into her novels, where her characters are too
often blurred and dulled into similarity. It carries little conviction when the
narrator of Memoirs claims that the amoral children of the underground “were
ourselves. We knew it” (160). This is, incidentally, chiefly a problem in her
novels: in her non-fiction and short stories characters are more sharply observed

³² Lessing, Golden Notebook, 13.
and idiosyncratic, often described with more humour and less of the oppressive irony so ubiquitous in her novels.

Often what one critic or reader finds convincing or effective will fail to please another, of course. The Jungian and Freudian symbolism of the events beyond the wall, particularly the hackneyed Jungian archetypes, irritates several reviewers. Lessing is, of course, quite conscious that her symbolism is not original: “I always use these old, hoary symbols, as they strike the unconscious.”33 And the virtues of her style are also a point of dispute. Most would agree with Rubenstein that “it is not gracefulness of style that has held Doris Lessing’s growing audience, but rather, a steadily high level of intellectual energy and provocative ideas, embodied in and through her characters.”34

And this is what Lessing is trying to achieve, particularly in her novels. Her “provocative ideas,” which she might call “a series of queries – to myself, to other people”35 are, as she keeps warning us, not dogma. When Christopher Bigsby tackled her in 1980 on the determinism which her beliefs in universality seem to inject into her fiction, she replied,

I don’t think like this. I find it very difficult. ... You see it as either/or. While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present.36

33 Tomalin, 174.
34 Rubenstein 21.
35 Bikman, 61.
36 Bigsby, 76.
For her, autobiography is not a simple matter of recounting life events. She is the kind of writer, she says, “who uses the process of writing to find out what you think, and even who you are”\(^{37}\) and “the aim of a novel is always ... to comment on things in motion,”\(^{38}\) although you rarely find, in a Doris Lessing novel, a surprising turn of events among the tyranny of “the banality, the tedium, the smallness, the restriction, of that “personal” dimension” (134) found not only behind the wall in *Memoirs* but between the covers of her novels.

Earnest and heavily ironic, Lessing’s fiction continues to set forth unresolved dilemmas like the individual versus the universal, and determinism versus free will. These conflicts might constantly cloud the water, but the search for solutions has kept the penetrating mind of the writer seeking clarification in the murky depths well into her eighties, and is surely the impetus behind her attaining the highest honour available to a writer, the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2007.

**Bibliography**

*N.B. Dates in brackets indicate original date of publication if applicable.*

*Published interviews with Doris Lessing are a major source of information for this article. Accordingly, to avoid confusion, bibliographical style has been adapted to the extent that the interviewer is treated as the author of each interview, rather than the interviewee.*

*Ten reviews of Memoirs of a Survivor were surveyed for this article. They are listed separately at the end of the Bibliography.*


\(^{38}\) Rousseau 153.


**Reviews of Memoirs of a Survivor**


