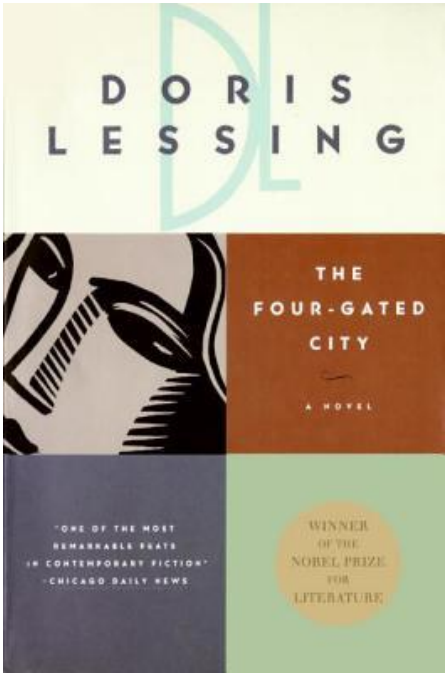

The Four-Gated City

Doris Lessing

The Four-Gated City

Doris Lessing

The Four-Gated City Doris Lessing
The 1993 edition of this ISBN can be found here

Dorris Lessing's classic series of autobiographical novels is the fictional counterpart to Under My Skin. In these five novels, first published in the 1950's and 60s, Doris Lessing transformed her fascinating life into fiction, creating her most complex and compelling character, Martha Quest.

The Four-Gated City Details

Date	:	Published September 1st 1995 by Harper Perennial (first published 1969)
ISBN	:	9780060976675
Author	:	Doris Lessing
Format	:	Paperback 672 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Science Fiction, Cultural, Africa, Literature, Womens, Novels

From Reader Review The Four-Gated City for online ebook

Erika says

I am ready to kill Martha Quest.

Zanna says

So ends Lessing's Bildungsroman par excellance. This near-700 page breeze block of a book takes Martha from her early 30s to old age, and is set in post-war London. Lessing compelled my attention before even beginning, with a dervish teaching story and a quote from The Edge of the Sea Each of the Parts the book is divided into has one or several such juicy snippets from diverse sources, making me feel that Martha herself, in her habit of reading into a topic to educate herself, is also Doris (although there is a severe reprimand in this book of seeing autobiography in every novel, a fault I have been never more guilty of than in my reading of *The Children of Violence* series). If the quotations seem a little oblique until later, they are both intriguing and beautiful, surprisingly so when they come from school text books. A quote from Idries Shah on the beliefs of the Sufis reminded me of this quote that has haunted me since I stumbled on it somewhere at 17, from Hazrat Inayat Khan: *The world is evolving from imperfection towards perfection; it needs all love and sympathy; great tenderness and watchfulness is required from each one of us.* And I felt that bridges were being built in me like the mangrove roots. I remembered books I'd read more than ten years ago on astrology, philosophy and history, as well as science fiction and other novels. The whole last half of this book was unexpected, as Lessing writes on epic, visionary scales as in The Memoirs of a Survivor and Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta

Some readers might have felt the shift incongruous, but on the contrary it seemed to me utterly appropriate, since watching Martha move through states in herself and grow as a person from adolescence on has afforded so much insight, self-reflection that every step of her progress and learning is satisfying. She is appealingly ordinary yet completely unique, in a way that makes it clear this is true of everyone if only a five volume epic could be devoted to their psychological development! The depths and heights of self-discovery she reaches in this final novel are made breathtaking by the scope and stretch of Lessing's genius. Really, how many times do we have to say that the personal is political? The arc of Martha's experience is on the only scale we can truly feel, yet Lessing measures a world with it, as we measure our world by living in consciousness.

I was struck by the evocation of grim, poverty-stricken post-war London, standing partly ruined, grimy, miserable, with blackout fabric still around the windows, no food worth eating or clothes anyone would want to wear in the shops. The slow slow coming of the '60s is like a change from Winter to Spring, although Martha arrives in summer. London seems to be full of people who want Martha to work for them in some capacity, and each of the encounters she negotiates makes space for a different quality of insight – the Maynard's relative, Henry, allows fresh and incisive view on the English class system. Incisive particularly because I was desperate for Martha to take the job even as I exulted in her refusal, because I didn't want her to be destitute. I envied her courage. She is also wanted by a young man, Jack, whose simply decorated room is the first place apart from gardens that Martha describes appreciatively. He is a kind of medium for Martha, allowing her to access a certain transcendent state. Finally she begins working as a kind of assistant to Mark, managing his troubled family in an increasingly fractious and oppressive political atmosphere. In this role it's particularly obvious how different this wise and restrained Martha is from her impulsive younger self. The

quality of her consciousness, as of her conversations, is much deeper

For example, she is so acute in speaking to psychoanalyst Dr Lamb, posing the question of why parent-child relationships are so awful, so destructive. We see that this is not a permissible question in the field, which is ahistorical. He tells her 'you need an historian, or a sociologist'. Martha is demanding responsibility. This tasty slice is just grazing the iceberg of what Martha eventually comes to understand about mental illness and the medical approach to it, with the help of Mark's wife Lynda, who has been the victim of aggressive and damaging psychological 'therapy'. Martha's mother's abusive, apparently unconscious monologue relatedly helps her towards understanding, though very painfully.

Discussion of literary genres takes place in a context that makes it serious, even urgent. The 'Ivory Tower' as a mood of political reaction, the humble, outsider status of sci-fi and the revulsion and ridicule of any challenge the the rationalist orthodoxy in the form of esoteric knowledge, occultism or mysticism are both vital issues here. There is also much continuation of the political insight of the earlier volumes, here focusing especially on the mood and political atmosphere among young people in post-war London. The observation of young people at an anti-nuclear march is especially striking

Ultimately what most sets Lessing apart from other writers is her courage to go further than the time she was living in, to extrapolate the trends she perceived. Big business' rising political power is perhaps her most acute prediction, and though the Cold War anxiety about nuclear apocalypse has been out of mind for a few decades, so that the shadow it has cast over my generation, for instance, has been penumbral compared to back then, that threat has been replaced by climate change, presently having relatively minor effects on the privileged nations of the global North who caused it, but increasingly devastating less wealthy regions. “Another preventable horror' as Martha would say. Lessing's consciousness of the environment is always in evidence. Here Martha shares a thought I have very often as I decend into the guts of the underground every day: the soil under the London streets looks dead, has been killed, lifeless for hundreds of years. It's not that we should dig over the city and return it to our bacterial brethren, but that such moments of consciousness remind us of the urgent need to live on this fragile crust of mud in this flimsy sea of gases in balance and reverence. Our soils are in crisis, depleted of minerals and microorganisms, rapidly being washed away mainly because of deforestation, livestock grazing and now misguided biomass farming. This novel is of its time, but it speaks loudly in this one too.

Cathal says

In this book, the last in a sequence of five novels (which can all be read and enjoyed independently of one another), Lessing charts the life of heroine Martha Quest from her arrival in post-WW2 London onwards as she becomes housekeeper, nanny and secretary to an upper class family dealing with their own crises as she tries to find a place for herself in a world careering towards a violent clash. Beginning in the fifties, it recreates the Cold War period, and various political and social movements in Britain, spanning decades to an imagined future in the early 2000s (the novel was published in 1969).

Like any, this novel has its ups and downs. It starts off slow, with Martha wandering around the streets of London, and patience is required for the reader to get to the point where she becomes involved with the Coleridge family in all their complexities. Her relationships with the members of this family form the thrust of the narrative. I use the word "narrative" loosely: there is no real plot to speak of. This is sometimes problematice considering the length of the novel (650 pages). The structure is highly episodic, and the episodes will be of varying interest depending on the individual reader. For me, the early middle secion in

which the Coleridge family comes under attack from the media when one of their members flees to communist Russia was one of the more interesting and enjoyable parts.

The book is very well written with Lessing's characteristic impassioned detachment and the characterisations are complex and deeply satisfying- every character is given space in the narrative to grow and develop, focus honing in on one character, then another, at intervals. Unfortunately, because there are so many characters, each with their own dignity and richness, it can become slightly overwhelming for the reader (at least it did for me). Martha herself also gets somewhat lost in the mix at times, though the book is ostensibly about her.

Lessing doesn't so much break with realist conventions as disregard them entirely. I won't spoil anything, but an appendix containing letters written by the novel's younger characters (though at the time of writing they are much older) details the lives of the cast after an unspecified Catastrophe, which may be nuclear (Cold War, remember!). I will risk hyperbole by saying that this final section of the novel blew my mind, and was incredibly moving as well as scarily realistic. The fact that the quasi-apocalyptic scenario depicted did not come to pass in real life doesn't lessen its implact.

I haven't really communicated that overall, I really loved this novel and am very glad I read it. I look forward to multiple re-readings in the future and definitely recommend it for anyone willing to expend a little effort.

Peter says

After five books and almost twenty years, Doris Lessing wrapped up the "Children of Violence" series with a notice from a post-apocalyptic bureaucrat. The series followed Martha Quest (based on the author) from her girlhood in settler Rhodesia to her middle years in London in the 1960s, and in a long "appendix," to the years after a variety of wars and environmental catastrophes kill much of humanity.

The book follows Martha's life in London, which she comes to from Rhodesia in her late 20s, shortly after the end of WWII, through the paranoid Cold War 1950s and eventually the thaw and revival of consumer prosperity that leads to "swinging London" of the later 1960s. The first third or so is Martha exploring immediate postwar London, which in many respects prefigures the post-apocalypse the book ends with- bomb-damaged, lingering under austerity, seemingly with no way to get better. Eventually, Martha becomes resident-secretary-cum-coparent for a writer and gets involved with his family, the Coldridges, a big, rich, high-profile public progressive clan riven internally by resentment and other emotional issues. A central part of the incompletely-drawn apocalypse Lessing posits occurring in the mid-1970s is rapid human mutation in response to environmental strain. In the end of the book, this entails telepathy and other strange powers. But it's prefigured by the terrarium of difficult over-educated Brits Martha has access to in the Coldridge house, many of whom are maladapted by any meaningful definition -- there's a Jane Eyre-esque madwoman in the attic who becomes a friend of hers, one of the kids is a kleptomaniac, etc -- but which prove helpful to the unsettled lives they (and more and more people) are made to live. Martha herself experiences a breakdown -- in many respects a break with reality -- and this is what allows her to see the coming of the end and survive it while helping others- at least for a while. It doesn't make for a happy life, being a mutant in Lessing's world, but little enough does.

Lessing wrote her magnum opus, "The Golden Notebook," in the midst of writing the "Children of Violence" series. In many respects, "The Golden Notebook" is a shorter, somewhat more elegant version of the series, which does in one book what the series does in five. You get much of the same stuff: girlhood in settler Africa, falling in and out of love with various people and causes, move to London, and a breakdown

surrounding the central issue of maintaining a sense of self when both society and personal life tend to fracture the self, and a recovery of sorts. I'm not sure how much the apocalypse adds. She makes it fit reasonably well, and it prefigures her move into scifi, which I look forward to digging into (and which I'm pretty sure was highly influential on later generations of scifi writers, especially feminist scifi). It was also pretty prescient, especially about mass computer-based surveillance and the way groups would try to buy their way out of catastrophes. But it's also literally an appendix, and much of it isn't from Martha's perspective. It's a little jarring, where "The Golden Notebook" manages its transitions perfectly.

I have a little theory that part of the reason behind Lessing ending the series with an apocalypse is that she might have seen it as a false start, a prolonged draft for "The Golden Notebook." Stuck with the series after she already said what it was supposed to say, she spikes it, and its entire world. That's probably not really true- if nothing else, at over 600 pages, "The Four-Gated City" is a serious work in its own right. There's little like Lessing given the chance to depict a group of people over a long term, the evolutions of their relations, the various ways they repeat patterns while imagining themselves having broken free and recreated themselves. Lessing is a maestra of disappointment, which makes it all the more poignant when something good does happen, and someone can break away. So even if "The Golden Notebook" is tighter than "Children of Violence," the longer form suits her well. *****

https://toomuchberard.wordpress.com/2...

Jonathan says

There are some vivid and thought provoking parts to this book but after an engaging opening there ceases to be any real storyline to get hold of. Most of the book is centred around Martha and her stay with the a contemporary writer and the relationships between him, his family, friends and Martha. Unforunately save for some occassionally stimulating passages and streams of consciousness this is the least interesting part of the book and is rather dull.

There are a number of different themes throughout the book which do serve to provide a common thread to the story. One relates to how madness is understood and defined. Linked to this is an attempt to reflect on the stifling nature of the scientific method and how the medical profession can serve to promote conformity. However the underlying messages related to these felt too garbled to pack any real punch. However, the aspects of the book which deal with the political sphere and particularly the effect of the Cold War are far more coherent and interesting and these are interspersed throughout.

The concluding part of the book is dystopian and dramatic but it seems entirely detached from what went before and is presented in snippets rather than as part of the main body of the book. The overall feel is of a sprawling incoherence which intrigues in fits and bursts but too often is rather heavy going.

Steele Wotkyns says

It takes awhile to get back into the main character (Martha's) life; but, once the reader does it seems you are peeking into her very soul, as close as a reader can get to a character. Then the author immerses us in the drab, stingy, grey streets of post-WWII London. There's a fascinating, revealing, eye-opening exploration of

sex and relations between the sexes: how men and women see sex and themselves and use sex in some of its myriad, oftentimes super confusing meanings. Lessing also explores the conflict of freedom (via artistic expression or seemingly aimless explorations) vs. needing to find work, hold a job, feel "useful" particularly as seen by others. The protagonist's world shifts to a London house (a theme Doris Lessing explores in another of her fine books, The Sweetest Dream). The main character, Martha, feels trapped, stuck by her pathos and circumstances (including those circumstances of other well-developed characters around her). Then there's Martha's ongoing fraught relationship with her mother, Mrs. Quest, the latter who takes overbearing to new, unprecedented lows. Lessing delivers an insightful, in-depth glimpse into psychotherapy through the eyes and experiences of several main characters. This is a hard book too, a tough, tragic novel as seen through the experiences of some of the kids, the children of violence. The author's literary device at the end is brilliant -- however, this reader wishes that that end portion of the novel might have been longer. The Four-Gated City is a marvel, a must-read; this novel is the triumphant conclusion to an extraordinary series.

John says

I rather enjoyed the first 4 volumes in this *Children of Violence* series, but this final volume where Martha has finally arrived in London has left me cold. In this volume, unlike the others, Ms. Lessing engages in so much description of thoughts and feelings of her subjects that I became bored. As boredom increased, I thought, why should I plow through this when there are other more interesting books I could be reading? Consequently I set *The Four-Gated City* aside, something I rarely do with a book. This means the value of this short review is compromised and should be treated with caution since perhaps things pick up later in the book. But for me the sacrifice required to get though the first part of the book is more that I'm willing to make. My loss, since now I will never know (unless someone more stoic than myself finishes the book and reveals it to me in a comment) whether Martha finally recognizes the folly of embracing communism and abandons it as did Ms. Lessing.

Janice says

Why did it take so long for Doris Lessing to get the Nobel Prize?

I kept asking myself that as I continued through the 710 pages that make up the concluding Volume 5 of the "Children of Violence" series: The Four-Gated City. Although the publisher claims that the five books can be read as stand-alone novels—and it is true that they can—the observant, thoughtful reader will find a greater reward in absorbing them in sequence. Together they make up (as the author wrote in her end-note) a Bildungsroman. And more than that—forty-five years after publication, the text can be read as a renewed journey through momentous events treated as more than incidents. History is written and deliberated on a personal level.

One needs the first four books, the Martha Quest books set in fictional Zambesia, in part because characters already introduced return--as foils or in passing--to fully understand the fifth, set in post-war four-gated London, swinging London. How did we get from WW II to here—here being the age of Wikileaks, Edward Snowden, chemical warfare in Syria, internet surveillance and collection of information from private persons by corporations for handing over to governments.

It helps understanding of The Four-Gated City if the reader has lived through the described world events that

give fodder to Martha's thought, can follow along in her mental processes, in her pursuit of trying to make sense of the world she lives in. It helps if one remembers, or is at least intellectually informed about (on a higher level than a quick Wiki-look): the rebuilding of postwar England and the disintegration of the Empire, the Tories and Labour, the Aldermaston Marches, the Cambridge Five, the Mau Mau, mental health reforms and fiascoes, the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction on both sides of the Cold War lineup.

She gives us sobering perspectives and evaluations. I will always hereafter compare the number of marchers in any protest with the seating capacity of sports stadiums. I will always hereafter—when I hear someone say "Obamacare is socialism/communism"—remember this passage:

Martha and other had warned us not to let them use the word 'Communism'. In the seventies the word was as loaded as it had been in the fifties, but loaded vaguely. In the fifties it had meant, quite simply, the Soviet Union, and had associations of treachery and espionage. Twenty years later it meant anything that wasn't good—a kind of portmanteau word of unpleasant and frightening associations that were never defined. Well, after that, we were stuck with the word.

It isn't that Doris Lessing gives answers—she gives questions, more correctly, she suggests a way of looking at the world around us in terms of our individual and personal lives. The attentive reader of today will be attuned to the worldwide imbalance of money, global pollution (another word that has lost its alarming meaning), mental hospitals and pharmaceuticals, corporate gathering of information on citizens and its sharing with governments, the role of the media and its minions, public awareness (or lack of it), the absence of bees, personal sexuality and the sex industry, and much more. She sees all of these and foresees their coming escalation. Different readers will find different points of interest.

Of course, I say to myself, of course, she did not want to be pigeonholed (or claimed as) a feminist. Her works transcend that compartmentalizing. Some will be put off by her experiments with (drug-free) mental excursions into her inner space, but I couldn't help recalling the men and women of various eras and religions given sainthood (or its equivalent), for similar explorations, including cave artists, shamans and priests; also Aldous Huxley comes to mind, but he (and others) traveled inward with the help of mind-altering drugs whereas she grapples with herself.

It is also notable that the series, not least The Four-gated City is a return to all the books she previously wrote and contains seeds to all she would write thereafter: the African stories, the science fiction novels, dystopias, memoir and semiautobiography, the societal roles and presence of children, the explorations of inner space, mental space.

Strangely, The Four-Gated City is never found on the lists of her "best".

Having finished the book and closed it, I couldn't help mentally replaying the indelible scene when she was notified of the Nobel Prize. Remember? Her getting out of the taxi, besieged by journalists waiting at her home: a cadre for she had little or no respect and none of whom likely had read any of her work but saw only the news value of an old lady suddenly catapulted to millionaire status. No wonder she looked annoyed and said simply: Oh, Christ!

Sandy says

The Four-Gated City closes Doris Lessing's Children of Violence series. It is a marvelous finale to Martha Quest's story. Born after World War I to settlers in South Africa, Martha is the daughter of a veteran who had fought for the British (and never got over it) and a woman whose great love died for the same cause. The child of settlers who are never quite at home in their world and who have settled for less than happiness, Martha spends her life actively addressing the questions of who exactly she is and where she belongs. Her sense of herself as living on the fringes of her own life and her keen and clear sense of the pretenses that feed a false sense of identity for the people around her make her an exasperating character. So often, I just wanted Martha to settle, to take what was offered and run with it. I wanted Martha to be me. But she wasn't inasmuch as she pushed the question of identity--and value and worth--to the very end, where there is no happiness but there is the disconcerting truth that we are children of violence, and we are undoing our world left and right by failing to own up to this truth and undo it. It's a brilliant, painful story.

Manny says

There are several different schools of thought when it comes to writing about sex. At one end of the spectrum, there's *Mamma Mia*: Dot, Dot, Dot. Well, at least that satisfactorily ducks the issue altogether. And at the other end, if we insist on staying Swedish, there's IKEA assembly instructions: insert rod A into hole B, making sure that X stays in contact with Y as you do so. This also has its merits, though once again you feel something's missing. In between, there are various types of poetic metaphor that people like to use; but here, too, I'm often in some doubt. What, if anything, do these metaphors actually refer to? All too often, you fear the author's just cut and pasted them from somewhere else.

Every now and then, however, you find an author who's actually got something new to say about sex, as opposed to a better way to put a coffee table together or a novel twist on a dubious metaphor. It's surprising how rare these people are. Jan Kjærstad is one of them, as you'll discover if you read *Forføreren* and the rest of the trilogy. And Doris Lessing is another; I think *The Four-Gated City* is the clearest example.

I wonder if she actually experienced sex this way? It's hard for me to imagine she didn't. Well Doris, I'd like to thank you for what you did: both for telling us about the strange and wonderful places you were able to get to, and for finding words that made them at least partially comprehensible. You must have been such an extraordinary person to have as a lover.

Marika Oksa says

Viimeiset 150 sivua "luin" silmäilemällä - Marthan tarinan päätös on nyt taputeltu minun osaltani. Puuh, olipas kirja ja sarja. Tämän päätösosan aikana ei ilmeisesti olisi pitänyt antaa itselle lupaa lukea välillä kevyempiä kirjoja. Niiden jälkeen oli aina vain vaikeampaa palata Marthan sielun syvyyksiin.

Jenn McCollum says

Finally, I have read my first Doris Lessing novel. I admit, it may not have been the best one to wet my feet.

The Four-Gated City is the final book of a five-book series called the "Children of Violence." I didn't read

the first four but only the last. I felt as if I was doing what I told myself I would never do anymore when I was fifteen: like I was reading the last pages of the novel before beginning it.

Lessing is touted as a major British writer for a reason. I see that clearly. Her exploration of Martha Quest's psychology is intricately bound to a complex critique of the political climate in post-World War II Britain. Not having read the earlier novels of the series, I was pleased to find that I could jump onto the caravan and understand the story.

Firstly, The Four-Gated City is a novel about ways of being -- and of knowing oneself. Quest is a receptor ("recording instrument") for other characters' personas as she struggles to locate exactly who (what) she is. She used to be a "communist" but isn't anymore. So what is she now? Now she is a middle-aged woman in the 1950s coming to terms with her ravaged past: a shady childhood, a failed marriage, a dead second husband (apparently), a lost daughter. This past coincides with the past of her nations of South Africa and Britain (this "country where people could not communicate across the dark that separated them"). Like these nations she is without a clear identity or direction. As she meets people she drifts into new (or old) ways of being. At one moment she may assume the pesona of "Matty" (who she created "as an act of survival"), at another she is Phyllis Jones, at another she is the "Watcher," an anonymous body used for sex, or a corporeal "machine."

She maintains a sense of dislocation until a house finds her.

Martha Quest is a woman who has been on the run and has finally settled down in a house that seems to hold her hostage. Mark's house is, like Quest, an empty space filled with ways of being. Like the unfathomable house in The House of Leaves, Mark's space eats memory and consumes identity. Yet, it also reveals the darkest secrets, locates the hidden fears, and pushes the boundaries of human capacity. For Quest this means that she, by plugging into the space and into the many people who inhabit it, is closer to understanding who "Martha Quest" is. She is no one. Like her nations, like every nation, she is devoid of meaning.

So secondly The Four-Gated City is a story about madness because when any character gets close to a Nietzchian perspective about self-identity then insanity is on the table. Lynda, Mark's estranged wife who lives alternately in asylums and in the basement of the house, is the alter-ego of Martha (but then, so is every character). Like Martha's mother and Marth herself, Lynda is the "madwoman in the basement," which is altogether different than the "madwoman in the attic" that Gilbert and Gubar applied to Victorian prototypes.

Not that Lessing has wandered very far from the "Victorian," mind you.

The "madwoman in the basement" is at the bottom -- not the top -- of the household hierarchy. She is the foundation, the stability, in a weird way. For example, I thought at first that Lynda was a wrecker. She hates to be touched by her husband (and he pines pathetically for her), she is incapable of being a proper mother to her son Frances, she even seems to desire her bouts of "insanity" to a certain extent. These characteristics seem, on the surface, to wreak havoc on the home. Then I came to understand that she is, in fact, the glue that holds the family -- the "self," if you're Martha Quest -- together. Maybe she's doing a shabby job. After all, the "family" is not what anyone would call functional. Yet, its disfunction is precisely the thing that dymystifies the "haunted" house. Lynda's madness is, really, the only functional thing. It is so functional that Quest adopts it -- uses it -- in order to find her way out of psychological imprisonment. The story ends and she leaves the house. True, she may be the only one (Paul and Frances may have moved to new homes but they are the same as Mark's), but Quest has finally found a way out.

When Quest's quest ends, one thing seems clear. There are no children.

Thirdly, The Four-Gated City is about the absence of children. This is strange, because children populate the plot. There's Frances, the son of Mark and Lynda who eventually marries Phoebe's daugther and has children with her -- and raises her two children from other relations -- before she leaves him for a new lover. There's Paul whose mother has killed herself and whose father has fled the country and remarried to have children in Russia. Lessing takes time to tell the stories of these children and all of their friends. Children plague the pages of the novel. Yet, she is quick to acknowledge that "England was no longer a place to bring children up." The earliest scene of the novel finds Quest noting the proliferation of signs that read "Danger: No Children." Children are restricted from the nation, yet they overun the pages of the novel.

Lessing's series is called the "Children of Violence" but The Four-Gated City frames children whose violence dwindles to a barely audible meow by the end. The lack of violence screams almost as loudly as the lack of children. At the end, the children are gone. At the end, the nation is sick. At the end, there is an Appendix in which Lessing has included letters from grown children to grown children.

The novel is a hodge-podge that sometimes is brilliant. Are children the nation? Is the nation violent? Lessing suggests that the answer to both questions is yes. Martha Quest has no identity. She ends by maintaining that. She also has no children.

Gustavo says

I´ll write a little bit about the other books from the series:

Part 1 - Martha Quest. I read this one way way back in 2008. It tells the story of a young female, Martha, living in a colonized African state in the 30's. It doesn't say much about Africans, very few mentions about them, but mainly about the life in the white part of the country. I have enjoyed it. It's a beautiful book.

Part 2 - A Proper Marriage. At the time I wrote: "Even better than the first one of the "Children of Violence" series. A wise and beautiful view of many problems - wars, marriage, pregnancy, comunism, colonialism, mother-and-daughter problems, you have them all." My favorite of the series.

Part 3 - A Ripple from the Storm. At the time I wrote: "After two magnificient books, the third in the Children of Violence series is very low-down. While the others deal with a broad range of questions, this one is very politically-oriented. It deals mostly with the problems of a small communist party on the fictional country of South Rodesia that is, to be frank, not even remotely efficient and from which the character of Martha Quest is just a small part. On the plus side, you have a very rich account of colonization and the communist mind before the cold war."

Part 4 - Landlocked. I haven't written anything at the time, but I remember it was a great improvement from the last number. The scope is wider again, but the book is not so engrossing as Part 1 or 2. But it was satisfactory.

Part 5 - The Four-Gated City. Although the first four books deal with large questions that anybody can understand, the characters in the fifth book are too strange and peculiar to grab a hold in me. The worst, I believe, is that Martha disappears throughout the book - she became a secondary character. There are, by the way, 20+ characters in the book, and by the end you just don't care about the 21st or 22nd.

I can say this book seems like a threshold between Lessing realistic books and her crazy stuff. Four Gated

City makes you see where she was trying to get in the Canopus in Argus series.

Sometimes I wonder if this book would be better if read alone. In fact, for me books 1-4 completes the series. This one seems like an afterthought, "let's finish it". What bothers me most is - it's Lessing highest rating book in goodread, and when she won the Nobel, Horace Engdahl said it was her "greatest masterpiece". That's crazy talk... It's dated and not very coherent.

Anyway, in order of preference:

A Proper Marriage (2)
Martha Quest (1)
Landlocked (4)
The Four-Gated City (5)
A Ripple from the Storm (3)

Colin says

Ambitious, far-reaching, prophetic and terrifying; but also bloated, rambling and ultimately disappointing.

The four-gated city flirts with several themes but never really decides on one. The main characters are difficult to find any sympathy with: they're supported by myriad crudely sketched extras who come in and out inconsequentially, so that you neither notice nor care that they've been missing for a few hundred pages. Most die - I'm not too concerned.

A lot of the interesting ideas are contained in the appendices - disjointed infodumps contrasting the flowing ramblings of the book itself. I'd have liked to see them developed but really by that point I was more than ready for the end.

This book took uncharacteristic months to read - a real slog through chapters of relentless mundanity. Throughout, it promised much, but it never really delivered.

Laura says

It's the only one of The Children of Violence that I didn't complete - it's really, really big. I got bored, somehow at the end, the last 4/5 chapters. Either she ran out of steam, or she was moving onto a new project. A good editor would have picked out the shift in her dynamic.

James F says

The final and longest book of the Children of Violence series, twice the length of any of the others and with a very different outlook and "feel", and to some extent a different style of writing. Martha moves to England, and becomes involved with the Colridge family. The novel covers the late fifties (the Witch hunt, less extreme than in the U.S. but still terrible) and the sixties; it's helpful, but not really essential, to have some knowledge of British history/politics in that era. The political and personal themes are gradually

subordinated to a new theme concerned with mental illness and parapsychology; in the end the two themes are combined in a sort of science fiction. This was written in 1969, after *The Golden Notebook* but just before *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and her science fiction writings, and shares in the concerns of that period, very different from the earlier and later books. It is very interesting, as with all her writings, but resonates less with me personally than the earlier volumes. (And I don't share her very sixties counterculture views on mental illness; the mentally ill people I have met were ill, not tuning in to a higher reality.) The ending is somewhat disappointing, not so much because it describes a world disaster in the 1970s which obviously didn't occur -- actually much of what she describes has in fact occurred, more gradually and locally -- but because the telepathy theme seems somewhat like a "cop-out", a fantasy solution to real problems that she previously treated realistically. In short, this really seems like a separate novel (as I wish it had been) than a real continuation of the earlier books, even though many of the characters from the earlier books other than Martha make "cameo" appearances. I can't help wondering how much of this book was planned when she wrote the earlier ones; there are one or two passages in the earlier works I can think of which may "foreshadow" the turn, but on the whole they seem unconnected.

Ed says

Three whole novels of non-story later (I assume they are non-story considering the nature of several flashback/updates present in this installment), we find Martha Quest newly arrived in London in the 50's as England slowly rebuilds.

700 more pages of non-story and we arrive at the end of the Children of Violence series and in a post-apocalyptic world in which humans are scattered around the globe in huddling terrified poisoned tribes of mutant scavengers and some have adapted by evolution into telepaths.

Helluva way to turn the corner from a fem-/socialist-lit author into a science fiction author, but I suppose that depending on how you look at it the leap is not so far.

I'm being unnecessarily snarky. There are major things about this book that I really, really liked, and I didn't just finish it because I'm obsessive compulsive and HAD to, though that's always in play.

Lessing continues many threads that I can only assume were continuous throughout this series--questions about social organization, politics and anti-politics, gender issues, group-think, hatred, violence; then questions about family, sex, sanity and insanity, perception, education and indoctrination...and her observations on all of these topics are exceedingly interesting and insightful, whether the characters through which she presents them are particularly credible or not.

At the end of the day, I like her voice, I like her perspective, and even in areas of political and social theory where it's clear she and I basically already agree, she provokes thought in directions I never considered before. Not too shabby.

Meanwhile she provides a unique picture of dynamics at work in British society through a period of upheaval in the 50's and 60's which for obvious reasons I associate normally only with the United States and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Europe. She examines British modern historical phenomena of which I have heard but with which I am not terribly familiar, for example: the anti-gay clamor of the 50's and the counter-movement it spawned; the twilight of empire and the incredibly fraught independence movements in Africa; widespread fear of the Soviet nuclear threat heavily laden with shadowy stories of spying and treason and the

concomitant McCarthy-style social repression, accompanied nonetheless by a head-shaking dismay at the unenlightened way the Americans were dealing with the same stuff. Etcetera.

This is not to mention what seems to be one of the more central themes of the novel, which is the devastatingly inhumane way that the British (and they are not alone) treated and in many cases still do treat the mentally ill as a result of decades of quackery in the field of psychoanalysis.

A lot of ground to cover, clearly. But she brings all these threads to what I suppose is their only logical conclusion, which is the near-destruction of the world followed by chaos and darkness and fumbling attempts at renewal. There you have it!

Clearly I have mixed feelings. Hence the three.

A says

So finally I finished the Children of Violence series. I should be honest and admit that I was a bit disappointed that it came with no mounting crescendo. In Lessing's defense, this does not come without purpose, as one of her intents throughout the series seem to have been writing a story that would reflect the searching and unfinished quality of real life. None of the previous books are plot driven, nor does Martha ever reach some final, definite understanding of herself and the world around her (except, perhaps, in the conclusive, yet shifting way, we all interact with our memories).

The primary difference between this book and the previous books is that much of the story is focused on the drama and dysfunction of the Coldridge family, who Martha starts working for about a quarter of the way into the book, almost by accident. Her life becomes very much about maintaining the house, maintaining the family, just keeping everything from falling completely apart. If you've read the previous books, you can see the family very much as a mirror for all of Martha's previous experiences. There are definitely some parallels between the abandonment of her own child 10 years before, the abandonment of Paul by his father (and resulting suicide by his mother), and the emotional distance between Francis and his mother Lynda. When Paul and Francis and all the other children hit adolescence, get married, and so on, we see the inevitable echoes of the first two books. The politics as well echo some previous elements. While I would hardly reduce the story down merely to a repeat of what's happened before, since it is far more than that, this kind of element is inevitable when you've followed a character around for so long, and I believe Lessing does a good job of reflecting the passage of time and the impact of the previous world on the current one.

Martha loses a bit of herself in this world and while the previous books are so defined by *her* searching for some authentic truth, this one is more focused on the searching of everyone else for those truths. This, I think, makes the book a bit of a struggle, as you're often left floundering (like the characters) for some kind of single focus that will direct you to the meaning. As I continued reading and realized that the story wasn't heading to a single sort of statement on Martha's (or anyone's) identity, I began to understand that this was the point. So while this approach doesn't make for the most satisfying reader, there was ultimately a kind of unity to it.

But aside from all this, what surprised and impressed me most was the subtle introduction of mystical/SF elements, with Martha becoming a kind of conduit for the thoughts and emotions of those around her and Lynda's mental illness being more than what it is. This is all subtly integrated into a contemporary realistic context in such a way that's not jarring or silly and certainly adds something in terms of understanding the

world at the time. This all leads to the appendix, which is mysterious and fascinating, ambiguously suggesting a future in which London is emptied or destroyed, and Martha and what remains of the family are struggling to make sense and put what they can back together. In a series defined by its struggle with issues of war, violence, and identity, I really can't think of a better addendum. That Lessing had the gumption to stick all this into a book and a series that is pretty much classic realism without having it seemed tacked on is all the more impressive. She even manages some meta-commentary on these elements by featuring a couple of characters who write SF.

All that and I still didn't manage to get to the sex, which she does indeed write well. There's so much going on in this book that it's hard to tackle everything in such limited space. Despite my struggle with bits of the story, I came away with continued respect for Lessing as an author. Overall, the Children of Violence series was a great introduction to her vision and highly recommended.

El says

I originally picked up this series because I had it in my mind somehow that these books were post-apocalyptic or dystopic, and please don't ask me where I got that. But as I read these books I realized that, whoops, that's not right, not right at all. There was a period of adjustment and once I got over the fact that I was completely wrong about that, I just enjoyed the books for what they were.

This fifth book is completely unlike the four that came before it. This isn't to say that this final book is better, or worse; it is just its own entity. It's a hefty book in comparison, clocking in at over 600 pages while I believe the other books all were in the 200 page range. It was almost as if Lessing realized suddenly she was on her last book of the series and she still had all these things she had to say. She managed to cram it all in here, impressively so. *Annoyingly* so, in some instances.

At times it felt like the book would never end, and I found myself frustrated with the directions the book would take. And there were so many directions. From Martha's constant growth and transition to the constant growth and transition of every other character in Martha's life to seemingly unimportant people that come back, and it's like every. single. thought. that Lessing ever had about sex and politics and philosophy. It's all here.

And then the last 20+ pages were the post-apocalyptic part. See, it exists! And it was disarming and totally jarring because by that point I was no longer looking for it. I'm not sure if it added anything to the series or not - in some ways I felt it was sort of shoddy, or maybe like Lessing wanted to take the story a different direction at the last minute but didn't have the balls to follow through with it.

This book is more like The Golden Notebook than the first four books, and I did enjoy that. I liked Lessing's philosophies in The Golden Notebook, and this seems to be the point in Lessing's life where she was really getting down and dirty with her politics and beliefs. It's like the pre-Golden Notebook. A little rough around the edges, certainly, but a good step in the right direction.

It's strange to be done with this series now, especially because I spent so much time with this last book - I feel like I really got to know Martha Quest/Knowles/Hesse in the end, while in the process really getting to know Doris Lessing as well.

My understanding is Lessing drew a lot from her own life and experiences in the writing of these books,

which makes me all the more excited to read her journals and letters. If this final book alone is any indication, Lessing had a wildly fascinating life.

Annette says

this is a book that it took me years to read. i was continually reading other books while reading it. one the whole, it is not an extremely interesting book, although it does have a somewhat more interesting content than the previous four books in the series, entitled Children of Violence. The strange thing about it was that when i finally finished it (because i am a tenacious reader, i will finish a book eventually), i read the epilogue. the epilogue seemed completely out of the blue and i felt that nothing in the book had hinted at this ending. the story had seemed a bit boring. a middle aged woman who had formerly been a communist taking a job as a live-in nanny of sorts. nothing in the story was at all connected to that epilogue, which was more like something i'd expect in a science fiction book. so i went back and re-read the book. i could see where there had been some small hints along the way, but it didn't add up. so i read the first four books in the Children of Violence series. there was even less there to indicate that this epilogue belonged in any way as the ending to the main character's life story. then i discovered that later in life doris lessing started to write science fiction and have some strange ideas about where humans were going and where they'd been. i have yet to read her later books. i've always wanted to to see just where she did go after that incongruous epilogue.
