



# Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949

*Doris Lessing*

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"I was born with skins too few. Or they were scrubbed off me by...robust and efficient hands."

The experiences absorbed through these "skins too few" are evoked in this memoir of Doris Lessing's childhood and youth as the daughter of a British colonial family in Persia and Southern Rhodesia. Honestly and with overwhelming immediacy, Lessing maps the growth of her consciousness, her sexuality, and her politics, offering a rare opportunity to get under her skin and discover the forces that made her one of the most distinguished writers of our time.

## **Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949 Details**

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## **From Reader Review Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949 for online ebook**

### **Eleanor says**

She sees herself and others so clearly and is so honest about herself, that it is hard to see much point in someone writing her biography. Early in the book she discusses the problems of telling the truth about other people in her life:

"I have known not a few of the famous, and even one or two of the great, but I do not believe it is the duty of friends, lovers, comrades, to tell all. The older I get the more secrets I have, never to be revealed and this, I know, is a common condition of people my age."

I enjoyed the book very much and look forward to reading the second volume. She has lived a rich, complex, creative and fulfilling life, which is fascinating for itself, and also for how she wove her experiences into her novels.

And beside all that, I just liked Doris Lessing so much!

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### **Deea says**

"I dreamed every night about the sea, washing in and out of my sleep in sad slow tides of nostalgia, of longing."

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### **Päivi Metsäniemi says**

Mielenkiintoinen, vyöryvä, toisenlainen - Doris Lessingin elämä todella on ollut jotakin aivan muuta kuin meidän keskiluokkaiset turvalliset nykyelämämme. Vähemmän kuin selityksiä, elämäkerran ensimmäinen osa tarjoaa näköaloja ja vuoristoratamaista etenemistä. Kyydissä on vaikea pysyä mutta onneksi se ei ole tarpeenkaan, vaikutelmat, tunnelmat, ajatukset, mielipiteet, ajankuvat ja ihmiskuvaukset ovat aivan riittävästi.

Nykyfeministille ja omistautuneelle äidille kirja on myös vaikeaa luettavaa. Käsitys feminismistä ja käsitys äitiydestä on niin kaukainen ja perustelut niin hataria ja höttöisiä tai puuttuvia että väillä tekee mieli ravistella - miksi teet noin? Miksi hylkäät lapsesi? Mitä nyt oikein ajattelit? Samoin suhteet miehiin, miksi ne olivat noin tärkeitä ja toisaalta noin yhdentekeviä?

Odotan jatkoa mutta en taida jaksaa tarttua siihen aivan heti. Tässä on sulattamista pitkäksi aikaa.

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### **Scott says**

After Lessing won her Nobel, I began reading her work, as well as whatever interviews and videos were

available. I loved the straightforward way she told her stories, I liked the intelligence she put into them, and I appreciated the scope and breadth of her oeuvre. When I learned that she had a two-volume autobiography published I pick it up immediately. It is as frank and enjoyable as you would ever hope it to be. It was fascinating for me to read the story of a proper young girl who would later grow up to be a world-renowned author and Nobel laureate. Lessing always tells her story with honesty and candor, sparing no details and taking no victims. I haven't started on her second volume yet, but after the first one I feel like I know her quite well, and have infinite respect for her as an artist. She writes with a non-nonsense intellectualism that stands out in world literature. Read her.

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### **Steffi says**

Doris Lessing erscheint als selbstbewusste (und sich ihrer Reize stets bewusste), kluge, selbstständige Frau, die gleichzeitig ein unglaubliches Bedürfnis nach Babys hat – was manche Konstellationen in den Romanen, die ich gelesen habe (Das Fünfte Kind, Und wieder die Liebe) erklärt. Manchmal hat es mich verärgert, dass sie auf ihre frühen Romane verweist, wenn man Näheres über eine bestimmte Lebensphase erfahren will. Hatte dann immer das Gefühl jetzt enthält sie mir innerhalb der Autobiographie etwas vor. Ihre Beschreibungen der politischen Verhältnisse in Rhodesien sind immer auch für den Laien gut verständlich, aber irgendwie auch ein wenig oberflächlich. Gut gefallen hat mir dagegen, wie sie die Wahrhaftigkeit ihrer Autobiografie, die sich wandelnde Sichtweise auf Ereignisse ihres Lebens zu verschiedenen Zeitpunkten, reflektiert. Auch der lebenslange Konflikt mit ihrer Mutter, den sie gleichzeitig zu beschreiben und zu analysieren versucht, hat mich gefesselt. Freue mich drauf, den zweiten Band zu lesen.

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### **O.R. Melling says**

Brilliant, as to be expected from such a writer. I was enthralled by her childhood, her battles with her mother, her tragic memories of her father and WWI, her general statements on life et al. Like others who have commented here, I found the least interesting part to be her political activities with the Communist Party in south Africa. What a basically useless group of intellectuals, doing so little to protest apartheid itself and thinking they were of importance! And no mention of black radicalism or leaders. Pretty shocked by her abandonment of her first two children, but not surprising given her own emotionally fraught beginnings. It's interesting that the kind of people who would have castigated her brutally for this are able to accept men doing the same thing with much less if any criticism. In many ways, she behaved like a man throughout her life, fighting to be true to herself as opposed to giving in to the demands of others. Daughters, wives and mothers are under constant pressure to put their own needs second. She battled that inequity from start to finish. A life well lived.

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### **Rachel Hirstwood says**

This autobiography feels very honest by the Nobel Laureate author, Doris Lessing. I have only read one book by Lessing before - the Golden Notebook - which I absolutely loved. And I remember as I read that, I thought, I bet this woman has had a life that is really interesting. It seems my prediction was right.

I am amazed how often I read something that made me think - that's just how I felt as a child, as a teenager and as a young adult. While my life is in no way especially similar to Lessing's, I really identified with her. I

wish I could sit down and have a really long chat with her, as she wishes she could chat with Granny Fisher (not sure I've got the name right).

A couple of lines really rang out loud and clear to me: "Is there such a thing as a gene for the condition, being born with a skin too few" (p30). A few times she mentions how thin skinned she was/is; she even has a counter personality for public consumption who she refers to as Tigger. I totally know that feeling! And almost at the end of the book she talks of how life would have been different if she had been alone in London's Soho: ""I can too easily see myself, again drinking too much, as I had hardly done at all since 1942 and the end of my first marriage. And then I would be in love with one of those painters and poets. Not because they were glamorous, but because they were lost souls. Irresistable." (p410) I read that and felt like Lessing had been rooting around in my head finding source material!

I recommend this for anyone interested in the post WW1 period, in Africa's history, communism in the forties or who has been impressed by Lessing's work and status as Nobel Laureate. And everyone else may find something in there too :)

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### **Dierdre Milin says**

Doris Lessing is brutally honest and tells her story with anger, pride, and great wit. I have loved her writings for so long and was taken aback at the decisions she has made in her life. I was almost disappointed in her but years after reading the book can look back and think wow what a courageous woman for telling her tale.

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### **J. Watson (aka umberto) says**

Reading this 21-chapter autobiography, "Under My Skin," by Doris Lessing was inspiringly and interestingly enjoyable to me. One of the reasons is that she's been destined to be a literary titan since around 64-65 years ago when she arrived in London with "the typescript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, in her suitcase" (back cover); moreover, she won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. Therefore, I found it formidable to write on her memoir since I've been one of her readers living in another country who read it as my first encounter, in other words, time flies so I would like to say something to share with my Goodreads friends.

Her narratives are unexpectedly inspiring because she's included some ideas we might have never read or heard before. For instance, she simply wrote, "I read, I read, I read. I was reading to save my life." (p. 399) Comparatively, as for her first sentence, it seemingly reminds us of the famous one by Caesar: I came, I saw, I conquered. We would leave it at that for some readers to reflect and focus on the next one which looks simple. However, we could not help wondering how with a possible gesture of doubt or disbelief. Thus, we should have a look at what and how she read from this excerpt:

... I was reading poetry, chanting – silently as it were under my breath – lines of Eliot, of Yeats, like mantra. I read Proust, who sustained me because his world was so utterly unlike anything around me. ... Proust describes, in an eleven-volumes-long irony, how the aristocratic Guermantes at last absorbed people they had despised so much they would not even meet them. ... (pp. 399-400)

As for us common readers, I think, we could read to survive by means of how we should keep going on with

the daily life, safe and sound. Reading could be our consolation to the mind from those who know, that is, they keep encouraging us calmly without any harsh word or tone. Whenever we become tired of reading, we naturally leave it anywhere we want and continue as soon as we wish.

Incidentally, I came across and liked some unique sentences she wrote and, as far as I could recall, it was my first time to read them happily; I thought such sentences could be the outcome of her reflective/intuitive thinking, for instance: "Words indeed have wings." (p. 109), "The flying dreams, so enjoyable, were grounding me in anxiety, ..." (p. 297), "..., Kurt because it was written in English: he agreed with Joseph Conrad that it is a language unsuitable for novels, and only French has the necessary clarity." (p. 336), etc.

These sentences are quite rarely heard or read anywhere, we can accept them for granted, at face value, and think they look simple with their own meanings. However, I don't think that is the point because each sentence needs its interpretation according to its context and our experience for application in everyday life. Therefore, reading for some unique sentences or even words would be satisfactorily sufficient for those who love reading.

Arranged chronologically, there are twelve pages of thirty black-and-white photographs in which, I think, its readers would not help admiring them since each of them could rightly and aptly supplement her narratives with our understanding and imagination. Moreover, I liked each chapter's length which helps one's reading conveniently manageable because each one is not too brief or lengthy, for example: we read 9.5 pages in Chapter 1, 6 pages +7 lines in Chapter 2, 21 pages + 10 lines, etc. Of course, the length varies, more or less, in each chapter; presumably, it depends on the writer's plan and scope related to the preceding chapters.

In sum, this book is worth reading to our hearts' content if we admire her writing expertise and unique character that have long shaped her formidable works till the Oslo Committee awarded her the prestigious Nobel Prize in her 90's, her literary stature was at last deservedly recognized with her jubilation and the joys of her admirers and the writing world remain with her for ever.

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### **Keith says**

a very long book, but knowing nothing of colonial southern Africa, i found it pretty interesting. also, the portrait of a woman who so easily shrugged off her own children was a little odd. but if men can do it, why not women.

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### **Guillermo says**

La parte de la infancia es interesante por las cuestiones geográficas.

Pero mejor es cuando se va de su casa y se hace comunista, se casa, y tiene hijos mientras termina la guerra y empieza la posguerra.

Cuenta y trata de entender las razones y sinrazones, las suyas y las de los demás.

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## **Will says**

It's indicative of how over-stuffed and self-indulgent this book is that chapter nine, page 155, begins: "My fourteenth was a make or break year." *My fourteenth!* And yet Doris Lessing is always interesting, never boring, though she certainly takes her time remembering everything she ever did or said over her entire childhood.

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## **Bryan Murphy says**

It was a happy chance that this came into my hands, [thanks again to the splendid municipal libraries of Turin, Italy], for I am rarely tempted by autobiographies (or biographies). Usually, the single subject gets boring. Lessing is different: there is not a dull moment in this book. She breathes life not only into her former self/selves but into everyone and every place she encountered. For anybody who has lived in post-colonial Africa, her portrayal of colonial Africa is a revelation: an evocation of a lost world that will make you both sick and sympathetic (to the people, not to their pretensions). The book is marvellously written; it offers a stream of insights into life, the universe(s) and everyone; but it suffers from a flaw built into the medium of autobiography: the writer acts as judge, jury and presenter of all the evidence. Lessing attempts a brutal frankness; at times she seems too harsh on her young self for not having had the hindsight and maturity of the grown woman. But when she explains how she abandoned her first two children in a vain search for freedom and her self, and when she states that she later deliberately got pregnant again to pass the time before divorcing her second husband, you cannot but wonder about the judgements you have been endorsing with a kind of delight for hundreds of pages. Nevertheless, this is a book that anyone who lived in the mid-20th century, or is curious about it, will be glad to have read.

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## **Vi says**

One of the best biographies I've ever read. Lessing is not only one of the great writers in English of the 20th century, she is certainly also one of the most vivid. Highly recommended, and especially if you don't usually read autobiographies.

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## **Laura says**

Sometimes I have to read everything by a writer--everything--before I can be satisfied (Laura Ingalls Wilder, L.M. Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, Alice Munro). I've been in a Doris Lessing state of mind since fall 2007, and thankfully I have plenty of work still ahead of me. Now that I no longer have my law school mentor to guide & inspire me on a daily basis, I find myself increasingly dependent on Doris Lessing's wisdom, anger and common sense. I read her out loud to Andy. And I wrestle with the decisions she made in her young life in Southern Rhodesia; abandoning her two young children to join the Communist Party, blithely entering into another loveless marriage, having a child with that man while continuing to have affairs, and then leaving with that child for Britain. I fear that she had to do those things to escape a society that was intellectually barren and oppressively racist. And what does that say about the choices we must make now?

