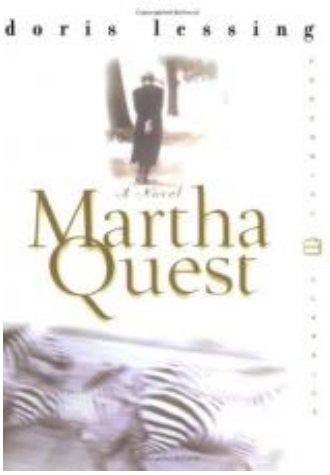
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Martha Quest

by Doris Lessing



About the Book

Intelligent, sensitive, and fiercely passionate, Martha Quest is a young woman living on a farm in Africa, feeling her way through the torments of adolescence and early womanhood. She is a romantic idealistic in revolt against the puritan snobbery of her parents, trying to live to the full with every nerve, emotion, and instinct laid bare to experience. For her, this is a time of solitary reading daydreams, dancing -- and the first disturbing encounters with sex. The first of Doris Lessing's timeless *Children of Violence* novels, **Martha Quest** is an endearing masterpiece.

Discussion Guide

1. Martha Quest examines the conflicts that occur between mothers and daughters. What kinds of issues do Martha and her mother differ on? To what extent are these differences generational, and to what extent are they personal?

2. Compare the scenes that take place in nature, on the farm and veldt, with those set in town. How does Lessing's writing-its language, its focus, its rhythms-change from one setting to the next? What does this reveal about Martha-and about Lessing herself?

3. Looking at a gathering of people on the steps of the Socrates' veranda, Martha remembers "with shame the brash and easy way she had said to Joss that she repudiated race prejudice; for the fact was, she could not remember a time when she had not thought of people in terms of groups, nations, or color of skin first, and as people afterwards." (p. 67) Does this way of thinking make Martha a racist?

4. Compare Martha's relationships with the men she meets in town with those she knows from the farm. How and why is Martha different with both sets of men?

5. What do you think of her reactions to sex, and of the way she felt and acted after she and Adolph first made love?

6. What kind of marriage do Mr. and Mrs. Quest have, and what kind of model does it give Martha for her own future relationships?

7. When Martha declares that she will not be like the wives of the Left Book Club do you believe her? What does the Club reveal about men and women's roles, even in a "liberal" society?

8. What does the Sports Club represent in Martha's life, and what does it represent in the town?

9. How do Martha's experiences compare with your own adolescence and young adulthood. Has Lessing accurately captured teenaged life?

10. Is Martha's story political or personal? How is she a product of her place and time, and of its social and sexual mores?

11. **Martha Quest** was written nearly half a century ago. How do you think the novel has aged?

Author Bio

Winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing was one of the most celebrated and distinguished writers of our time, the recipient of a host of international awards, including the Somerset Maugham Award, the David Cohen Memorial Prize for British Literature, the James Tait Black Prize for best biography, Spain's Prince of Asturias Prize and Prix Catalunya, and the S. T. Dupont Golden PEN Award for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature.

Lessing was born of British parents in Persia on October 22, 1919, and moved with her family to Southern Rhodesia when she was five years old. She went to England in 1949, where she published her first book, THE GRASS IS SINGING, and began her career as a professional writer. In 1962, she broke new ground with her novel THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK. She wrote more than 30 books, among them the novels MARTHA'S QUEST, THE FIFTH CHILD, and her last work ALFRED AND EMILY; stories, reportage, poems and plays; and several nonfiction works, including books about cats, and two volumes of autobiography, WALKING IN THE SHADE and UNDER MY SKIN. She died on November 17, 2013. Her portrait hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.

Critical Praise

"There are many notable descriptions of adolescent boys and young men in our fiction. There are very few, in the same deep and radical sense, of young women. Mrs. Lessing's study of Martha Quest is one of them. "

Martha Quest

by Doris Lessing

Publication Date: January 23, 2001
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics
ISBN-10: 006095969X
ISBN-13: 9780060959692