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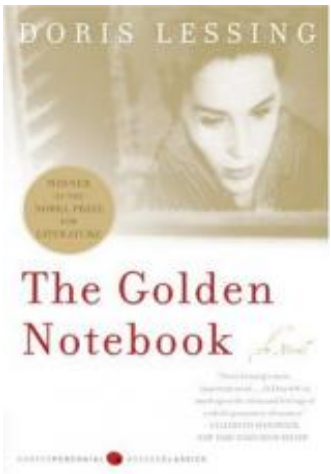
The Golden Notebook

by Doris Lessing



About the Book

"Knowing was an 'illumination.' During the last weeks of craziness and timelessness I've had these moments of 'knowing' one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet, these moments have been so powerful, like the rapid illuminations of a dream that remain with one waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die."
--*Anna Wulf in The Golden Notebook*

"The two women were alone in the London flat."

So begins Doris Lessing's most famous novel, published in 1962, and now considered one of the major works of twentieth-century literature. It is the story of Anna Wulf, a writer and single woman, who lives with her young daughter in a flat, occasionally renting out a room, less for the income than out of a reflex of social obligation. Laboring against a writing block, following the immense success of her autobiographical debut novel about a group of Communists in colonial Africa, Anna struggles to find a way to integrate the multiple selves that fragment her personality and make her life unbearably painful. Out of "fear of chaos, formlessness-- of breakdown," she decides to keep four notebooks, one for each component of her life--black for her experiences in Africa, red for current politics, yellow for a fictionalized version of herself, and blue for a diary. Although framed by a conventional novel called Free Women, the point of the novel, according to Lessing, is the "relation of its parts to each other." By viewing her life from these different angles, going over her experiences, gauging her responses, and carefully probing her intertwined layers of consciousness, Anna eventually manages to unify her identify in one notebook. As she does so, she comes to terms with her growing disillusionment with communism, the trauma of emotional rejection and sexual betrayal, professional anxieties, and the tensions of friendship and family.

Discussion Guide

1. Lessing has written that the central theme of **The Golden Notebook** is of '"breakdown', that sometimes when people 'crack up' it is a way of self-healing." In what ways does this theme find expression in the novel? How does Anna Wulf try to deal with her inner self-divisions? What part is played by each of Anna's four notebooks in her struggle to integrate her fragmented inner world and personality? What enables the notebooks to come together in the golden notebook at the end of the novel? How do her relationships to others, especially to Saul Green, contribute to her "crack-up" and "self-healing"?

2. By embedding Anna Wulf's psyche in the social and political movements of her time, Lessing suggests that the individual is inevitably shaped by history. In what ways is Anna Wulf a creation of the culture in which she lives-- personally, politically? Why does she become disillusioned with communism and revolutionary psychoanalysis? How is her life entangled with culturally endorsed ideas about romantic love? sex? family? friendship? normalcy?

3. Many women consider The Golden Notebook to be the founding novel of the women's movement. Yet the ironically titled novel-within-the novel, Free Women , seems to raise questions of "freedom." What do you feel the novel is saying about women's lives and desires? How do individual characters-- Anna, Molly, Marion--reflect various kinds of women's struggles? Does the novel offer any vision of freedom for women, and if so, what is it?

4. Why is Anna blocked as a writer? What are the inner and outer pressures that seem to inhibit her as an artist? How do her discussions with Mother Sugar and Saul Green illuminate her problem? How do her shifting feelings about the power of "naming" to alleviate psychic pain relate to her writing?

5. Do you think that the novel takes an unrelentingly bleak view of relations between the sexes? Or is there the suggestion of an alternative to the cruelty, betrayal, and emotional numbness that seem to characterize sexual relations in the novel? Do Anna's relationships with men change over the course of the novel (consider Willi, Michael, Saul, Milt)? Why does Molly decide to marry at the end? What do you think is suggested by the novel about Anna's future?

6. Anna, like her friend Molly, is a divorced mother, rasing a child on her own while struggling with other aspects of her life-- professional, political, sexual. How would you describe Anna's relationship with her daughter, Janet? How does she feel about herself as a mother? What is your reaction to Richard, and his criticism that Anna and Molly are "bad" mothers-- responsible, for one thing, for Tommy's attempted suicide? What does the character of Marion contribute to the novel's commentary on motherhood?

7. How does the form of the novel--the frame, the conventional short novel, Free Women , broken up by stages of Anna's four notebooks of different colors (black, red, yellow, and blue), and eventually unified in the golden notebook-- relate to some of the larger themes of the novel? What does the form suggest about an individual layers of consciousness? What is the significance and effect of filtering the world through a woman's point of view?

8. Do you agree with Victoria Brittain (quoted above) that The Golden Notebook is as illuminating today as it was when it appeared thirty years ago? Or do you find the the novel dated in any way?

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

"The most absorbing and exciting piece of new fiction I have read in a decades; it moves with the beat of our time, and it is true."

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