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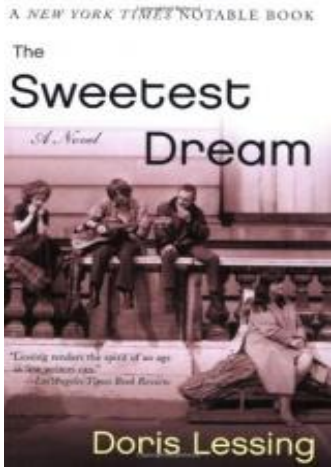
The Sweetest Dream: A Novel

by Doris Lessing



About the Book

Frances Lennox ladles out dinner every night to the motley, exuberant, youthful crew assembled around her hospitable tableher two sons and their friends, girlfriends, ex-friends, and ftesh-off-the-street friends. It's the early 1960s and certainly "everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Except financial circumstances demand that Frances and her sons Eve with her proper ex-mother-in-law. And her ex-husband, Comrade Johnny, has just dumped his second wife's problem child at Frances's feet. And the world's political landscape has suddenly become surreal beyond imagination....

Set against the backdrop of the decade that changed the world forever, **The Sweetest Dream** is a riveting look at a group of people who dared to dream-and faced the inevitable cleanup afterward -- from one of the greatest writers of our time.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you characterize the relationship between Julia and Frances Lennox? Were there any elements of their living arrangements that surprised you? How did you react when Sylvia came to stay in the Lennox house? Were Julia and Frances's reactions to her arrival typical in any way?

2. When Julia discusses the children's problems with Frances, she argues: "It's a good expression, that: *screwed up*. I know why they are...They're all war children, that is why. Two terrible wars and this is the result." (138) To what extent do you agree with her analysis? Do you think Julia has a special bias when it comes to the effects of war?

3. What role does Comrade Johnny play in the course of the book? Did you understand his political agenda? What were your impressions of his relationships with his children, Colin and Andrew; his wives, Phyllida and Frances, and his mother? How was his personality articulated?

4. What did you think of the hodgepodge of characters assembled around the Lennox kitchen table? In what ways are their complaints typical of teenagers? Did they express any adult concerns that you found noteworthy? Discuss your thoughts on Sophie's relationships with Andrew, Roland, and Colin.

5. During her liaison with Harold Holman, Frances confronts his idealistic vision of her former husband, Johnny: "And so they lay side by side, and if he was letting go dreams, such dreams, such sweet sweet dreams, she was thinking, Obviously I'm a very selfish person, just as Johnny always said." (120) To what do you think the title, **The Sweetest Dream** refers? Does this scene offer any clues?

6. How would you describe the scene that takes place at the dinner celebrating the publication of Colin's book? Are the actions and reactions of Frances, Johnny, Colin, and Andrew what you expected, based on their defined roles in the family?

7. Rose Trimble, the former Lennox houseguest turned journalist, attacks Colin, Julia, and Silvia in the course of her career, accusing them of Nazi affiliations. How does this turn of events affect Julia? How does it affect Silvia? Is Rose's behavior anticipated by her treatment of the Lennox family when she lives with them?

8. What did you think of Sylvia's transformation from a fragile, needy young girl to a courageous doctor in Zimlia? Are there aspects of her work that you found especially interesting, in light of her childhood? What are they?

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

"[Lessing's] acute political and artistic awareness makes her vision of our time rich and almost always freshly perceptive."

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