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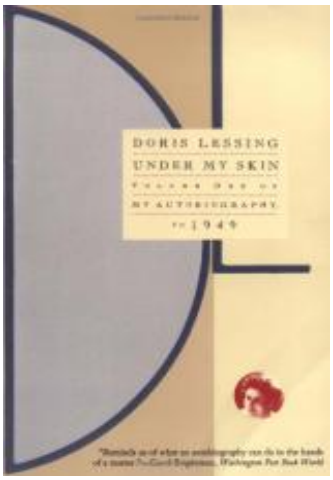
Under My Skin

by Doris Lessing



About the Book

> "My first memory is before I was two, and it is of an enormous dangerous horse towering up, up, and on it my father still higher, his head and shoulders somewhere in the sky. There he sits with his wooden leg always under his trousers, a big hard slippery hidden thing. I am trying not to cry, while being lifted up in tight squeezing hands, and put in front of my father's body, told to grip the front of the saddle, a hard jutting edge I must stretch my fingers to hold. I am inside the heat of horse, the smell of horse, the smell of my father, all pungent smells. When the horse moves, it is a jerking , jolting motion, and I lean back my head and shoulders into my father's stomach and feel there the hard straps of the wooden-leg harness. My stomach is reeling because of the swoop up from the ground now is so far below me. Now, that is a real memory, violent, smelly--physical."
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> --CHAPTER 3, **Under My Skin**

1995 James Tait Black Memorial Book Prize,University of Edinburgh
1995 Los Angeles Times Book Prize

Under My Skin recounts the first thirty years of its author's life, from her birth in Persia in 1919, through her childhood and young adulthood in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), to her depature, in 1949, for London, where she would make her career as a writer. And yet, in Doris Lessing's telling, the tenor of her life was set even before she was born-- in the devestating impact of the First World War on her parents. Alfred Cook Taylor, Lessing's hapless father, lost a leg in the trenches and married the determined nurse who tended to him; already thirty-five, she herself had lost her lover in the war. To this union of sad circumstances, redolent with disappointment and sacrifice, Lessing traces her own feelings of loneliness and the "struggling panicky need to escape" that caused her to flee from the life of marriage and babies that her upbringing and culture had mapped out for her. Lessing is unsentimental about her past, and advises the reader that "it is a mistake to exclaim over past wrong-thinking before at least wondering how our present thinking will see to

posterity." She describes how her mother loved her younger brother, Harry, but not her; how she was not in love with her first husband, nor he with her, "though such were the intoxications of the time it was easy to think so"; how she left him with their two young children, intent on making the world a better place for them ("I was absolutely sincere. There isn't much to be said for sincerity, in itself");how she then married the repressed and coldly logical Gottfried Lessing, a German refugee and comrade, "but only because in those days people could not have affairs, let alone live together." Vividly, she evokes the world which, in her view, made her. We see her as a young girl, growing up in the bush, knowing how to look after chickens, worm dogs and cats, and pan for gold. Lessing also describes the political scene of wartime Salisbury, where she joined a group of Communists, peddling their newspaper, The Guardian, to locals. Interwoven throughout is a portait of the developing writer, in love with books, and recognizing in British colonial Africa a subject worthy of writing about, that "here life is matching her natural disposition--her talents."

Discussion Guide

1. The title refers to the popular Cole Porter song "I've Got You Under My Skin." Critics point to the lyric, "I've got you under my skin...I've tried so not to give in," as evidence that the title signifies Lessing's troubled relationship with her mother. Other critics suggest that the line evokes Lessing's feelings about Africa. Which interpretation is most compelling and why? What are other possible interpretations?

2. In the first chapter, Lessing recounts the history of her family. She ends the chapter with the line: "I used to joke that it was the war that had given birth to me, as a defense when weary with the talk about the war that went on - and on - and on. But it was no joke." What is the purpose of this genealogical and historical tour? What is significant about Lessing's insistence that the war had given birth to her?

3.Throughout the book, Lessing comments on, and struggles with, the demands of the genre, autobiography. Given that much of Lessing's fiction derives from real-life experience, the need to justify writing an autobiography seems warranted. What are the various reasons she cites for writing her memoirs?

4. Although Lessing presents the events of her childhood through her early adulthood in Southern Rhodesia in chronological order, she frequently breaks the illusion of the past with commentary about the present or more recent past. What purpose does this narrative interruption serve? How does the interjection of her present voice affect the re-telling of her past experience?

5. Much of Lessing's autobiography can be read as a meditation on the functions and limitations of memory. What does she say about memory? Lessing claims that children tend to remember unpleasant events more than enjoyable ones. Is this true? How does this claim relate to her insistence that unhappy childhood characterize most writers' experience?

6. In describing her mother, Lessing notes the Hostess personality--"bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected"--that her mother employed in pursuit of middle-class respectability. How does Lessing's explicitly constructed persona, Tigger, replicate the Hostess? Courtesy of HarperCollins, Inc.

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.

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Publication Date: September 1, 1995
Paperback: 448 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060926643
ISBN-13: 9780060926649