



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

By 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.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

"What is better than a really good biography? Not many novels," says Lessing in her first chapter of what is destined to be one of the best autobiographies of our time. Although Lessing has incorporated her life into nearly all of her novels, most notably the Martha Quest series, and has published some short autobiographical sketches, this is her first full-length autobiography, with a second volume projected to cover 1950 onward. From her childhood in the wilds of what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) through her young married life in Salisbury to her Communist years during World War II, Lessing is able both to capture the immediacy of her youthful feelings and to comment on her past self with both compassion and the distance that maturity brings. This is a wonderfully vivid memoir that reveals the origins of a remarkable writer. It also gives the reader a direct connection to the physical and emotional experiences of childhood and youth that are universal and timeless. For all collections.

Shelley Cox, Southern Illinois Univ. Lib., Carbondale

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From [Booklist](#)

With the same combination of burning intimacy and social commentary that made *The Golden Notebook* (1962) a classic of our times, Lessing writes about her childhood and coming-of-age in southern Africa. This is a sprawling autobiography--she admits that her fiction "makes a better job of the truth"--yet scenes and sentences hit you with a flash of recognition, articulating what you didn't know you felt. The best parts are about childhood, the intense physicality of it, "all the din and stink and smother." She didn't fit in. Beneath her jolly, competent public persona, she raged against her disappointed mother who wanted a well-brought-up little English girl. Two things saved Lessing and helped make her a writer: she read and read and read; and she roamed free in the wild bush around the farm. Yet always she was waiting to leave. At home, at boarding school, through two disastrous marriages and several casual affairs, the door was slammed shut. She hated the savage myths of "white civilization"; looking back now, she also evokes the absurdity of her Communist fervor. The fragments are unified by one thought: "Soon (but when?) I'll be out of here." Book-of-the-Month Club selection. *Hazel Rochman*

From Kirkus Reviews

As is to be expected from Lessing (*The Real Thing*, 1992, etc.), whose clear and always intelligent non-nonsense writing has explored subjects that transcend the commonplace, this first volume of her autobiography reflects all her remarkable strengths. The year of her birth, 1919, was auspicious neither for her parents in particular nor for the world in general. The ill-matched Taylers had married not out of love but out of a mutual need to expunge the horror of the recently ended world war, which had maimed Lessing's father both physically and mentally--he'd lost a leg in battle, but more important, he was embittered by what he considered Britain's poor treatment of her soldiers. Her mother, an able nurse, had lost a fianc., and marriage now seemed to offer only the consolation of children. These disappointments, exacerbated by the harsh life in rural Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), where her family settled after a stint in Persia, would indelibly shape Lessing. She quarreled frequently with her mother, whose well-meaning strictures she resented; observed her father's despair and his failures as a settler-farmer; and resolved that she would not live like them--"I will not, I will not!"--even if it meant defying convention. Which she did, as she left her first husband and their two children for another man--Gottfried Lessing; joined the local Communist Party in the midst of WW II "because of the spirit of the times, because of the Zeitgeist"; and then moved in 1949 permanently to London. Like so many bright and alienated provincials, Lessing found an escape in voracious

reading. Though determined to be a writer, the consuming distractions of motherhood, wartime society, and political activities frustrated this ambition for a long time. Refreshingly, not a self-indulgent mea culpa, but a brutally frank examination of how Lessing became what she is--a distinguished writer, a woman who has lived life to the full, and a constant critic of cant. (Book-of-the-Month Club selection) -- *Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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