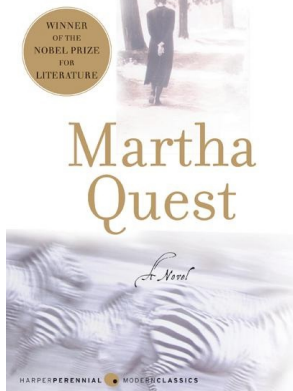


DORIS LESSING

## Martha Quest

By Doris Lessing  
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### Plot Summary

We first meet Martha Quest, the heroine of Doris Lessing's insightful, visionary novel, sitting on the veranda of her parents' farm, listening with irritation to a conversation between her mother and a neighbor. Martha's frown, the intensity of her annoyance, and the fact that she is reading—and bored with—a popular book about sex, set the stage for this extraordinary young woman's coming-of-age story. As Lessing's novel takes her away from her parents' home and into an independent life in the city, Martha will frown almost incessantly; feel irritated by the frivolous nature of her fellow citizens; contemplate deeply the world around her; and read voraciously. In many ways, Martha Quest is a typical teenaged girl. And yet, in so many other ways, she is not. Set in a particular time—the eve of World War II—and in a particular place—the British colony of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)—the novel offers countless opportunities for the reader to reflect on issues that continue to plague us today: racism and religious prejudice, gender roles and stereotypes, the dominance of one society over another, and the encroachment of modern thinking on established tradition. But it is Martha's own struggles with these issues that give the book its power and insight. Martha is, like many young people, trying to

make sense of the conflicts that are inevitable in a country simmering with social unrest, and in a world on the brink of war. She has developed most of her beliefs from books she has read—everything from fairy tales to sophisticated political tracts—but, living within the sheltered confines of her parent's colonial farm, has yet to apply these beliefs to real life.

When Martha does get the chance to put her principles to work, her experience is both heroic and woefully tragic. Like any young person striking out on her own for the first time, Martha is lured by the temptations of material goods, of being accepted by a popular crowd. Nor is she immune to the effects of alcohol or the mystery of sex. With immense compassion Lessing portrays Martha's struggle to balance her strong idealistic beliefs with the realities of adult life, and with the general apathy of her social group. Stunned into confused silence by the brutality she witnesses in her friends' treatment of the Africans and each other, Martha escapes to her rented room filled with remorse and self-loathing. Determined to change the world tomorrow, she throws herself into bed-only to find herself the next morning drawn back to a carefree life of dancing, drinking, and romance. Carried like a twig through the whirlpool and eddies of adult life, Martha ultimately ends up engaged to a man she barely knows. She is determined to be happy, yet she is nagged by an inner voice that tells her she is following in the footsteps of her mother's own unfulfilling marriage. What will happen to Martha Quest? Lessing leaves us wanting more—and does indeed give us more in subsequent novels about Martha. But even if we read only this first installment in the Children of Violence sequence, we have met an unforgettable character, one whose perceptions about and sensitivity to her changing world reflect the burgeoning consciousness of a passionate young woman.

### Questions for Discussion

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?

**About the Author:** Doris Lessing was born Doris May Taylor in Persia (now Iran) on October 22, 1919. Both of her parents were British: Her father, who had been crippled in World War I, was a clerk in the Imperial Bank of Persia; her mother had been a nurse. In 1925, lured by the promise of getting rich through maize farming, the family moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Her mother installed Doris in a covenant school, and then later in an all-girls high school in the capital of Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out. She was 13, and it was the end of her formal education.

Lessing's life has been a challenge to her belief that people cannot resist the currents of their time, as she fought against the cultural and biological imperatives that fated her to sink without a murmur into marriage and motherhood. Lessing believes that she was freer than most people because she became a writer. For her, writing is a process of "setting a distance," taking the "raw, the individual, the uncriticized, the unexamined, into the realm of the general."

Lessing's fiction is deeply autobiographical, much of it emerging out of her experiences in Africa. Drawing upon her childhood memories and her serious engagement with politics and social concerns, Lessing has written about the clash of cultures, the gross injustices of racial inequality, the struggle among opposing elements within an individual's own personality, and the conflict between the individual conscience and the collective good.

Over the years, Lessing has attempted to accommodate what she admires in the novels of the 19th century -- their "climate of ethical judgment" -- to the demands of 20th-century ideas about consciousness and time. After writing the Children of Violence series (1952-1959), a formally conventional *bildungsroman* (novel of education) about the growth in consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest, Lessing broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a daring narrative experiment in which the multiple selves of a contemporary woman are rendered in astonishing depth and detail. Anna Wolf, like Lessing herself, strives for ruthless honesty as she aims to free herself from the chaos, emotional numbness and hypocrisy afflicting her generation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Lessing began to explore more fully the quasi-mystical insight Anna Wolf seems to reach by the end of *The Golden Notebook*. Her "inner-space fiction" deals with cosmic fantasies (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, 1971), dreamscapes and other dimensions (*Memoirs of a Survivor*, 1974), and science-fiction probings of higher planes of existence (*Canopus in Argos: Archives*, 1979-1983). These reflect Lessing's interest, since the 1960s, in Idries Shah, whose writings on Sufi mysticism stress the evolution of consciousness and the belief that individual liberation can come about only if people understand the link between their own fates and the fate of society.

Lessing's other novels include *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Fifth Child* (1988); she also published two novels under the pseudonym Jane Somers (*The Diary of a Good Neighbor*, 1983, and *If the Old Could.*, 1984). In addition, she has written several nonfiction works, including books about cats, a love since childhood. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* was recently joined by *Walking in the Shade: 1949 to 1962*, both published by HarperCollins.