"THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK IS DORIS LESSING'S MOST IMPORTANT WORK AND HAS LEFT ITS MARK UPON THE IDEAS AND FEELINGS OF A WHOLE GENERATION OF YOUNG WOMEN."
—ELIZABETH HARDWICK, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

The Golden Notebook

Doris Lessing

THE AUTHOR OF THE SUMMER BEFORE THE DARK

THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

DORIS LESSING

With a new Introduction
by the author

THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK
A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with Simon & Schuster, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Simon & Schuster edition published June 1962
2nd printing ..... October 1962
3rd printing ..... March 1973
Bantam edition published September 1973

Back cover courtesy of Jill Krementz

THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

The powerful and liberating novel that raised the consciousness of a generation

"Doris Lessing writes about her own sex with the unrelenting intensity of Simone de Beauvoir, and about sex itself with the frankness and detail of John O'Hara."

—*Washington Post*

"A long and complex novel which draws on all the talents and insights of this gifted woman. It is no ordinary work of fiction . . . The technique, in a word, is brilliant, and in itself places Doris Lessing in the forefront of present British women novelists."

—John Barkham, *Saturday Review Syndicate*

"England's brilliant Doris Lessing looks deeply into the problem of a sensitive and disillusioned modern woman . . . Seldom are the troubled recesses of a soul probed as ruthlessly as Mrs. Lessing has done here . . . It is a rewarding book, an unusually perceptive one."

—*Milwaukee Journal*

"This exciting writer has tried much, has aimed high, has paraded a dazzling galaxy of gifts."

—*Baltimore Sun*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DORIS LESSING is one of the leading writers in the world today. She was born in 1919, grew up in Southern Rhodesia, and settled in England in 1949. In the subsequent years she wrote numerous books, including *Going Home* and *African Stories*—magnificent portraits of the loved and hated land of youth—*The Grass Is Singing, The Habit of Loving, In Pursuit of the English, A Man and Two Women*, and *The Four-Gated City*. Her most recent works are *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* and *The Summer Before the Dark*. Mrs. Lessing is best known for her pioneering novel, *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*, and for the intelligence and passion with which she writes about women like herself and about their involvement in various centers of tension in the contemporary world.

Introduction

The shape of this novel is as follows:

There is a skeleton, or frame, called *Free Women*, which is a conventional short novel, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself. But it is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of *Free Women*. She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognises, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness—of breakdown. Pressures, inner and outer, end the Notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they are finished, from their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*.

Throughout the Notebooks people have discussed, theorised, dogmatised, labelled, compartmented—sometimes in voices so general and representative of the time that they are anonymous, you could put names to them like those in the old Morality Plays, Mr. Dogma and Mr. I-am-Free-Because-I-Belong-Nowhere, Miss I-Must-Have-Love-and-Happiness and Mrs. I-Have-to-be-Good-At-Everything-I do, Mr. Where-is-a-Real-Woman? and Miss Where-is-a-Real-Man?, Mr. I'm-Mad-Because-They-Say-I-Am, and Miss Life-through-Experiencing-Everything, Mr. I-make-Revolution-and-Therefore-I-Am, and Mr. and Mrs. If-We-Deal-Very-Well-with-This-Small-Problem-Then-Perhaps-We-Can-Forget-We-Daren't-Look-at-The-Big-Ones. But they have also reflected each other, been aspects of each other, given birth to each other's thoughts and behaviour—*are* each other, form wholes. In the inner Golden Notebook, things have come together, the divisions have broken down, there is formlessness with the end of fragmentation—the triumph of the second theme, which is that of unity. Anna and Saul Green the American "break down". They are crazy, lunatic, mad—what you will. They "break down" into each other, into other people, break through the false patterns

they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve. They hear each other's thoughts, recognise each other in themselves. Saul Green, the man who has been envious and destructive of Anna, now supports her, advises her, gives her the theme for her next book, *Free Women*—an ironical title, which begins: "The two women were alone in the London flat." And Anna, who has been jealous of Saul to the point of insanity, possessive and demanding, gives Saul the pretty new notebook; *The Golden Notebook*, which she has previously refused to do, gives him the theme for his next book, writing in it the first sentence: "On a dry hillside in Algeria a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle." In the inner Golden Notebook, which is written by both of them, you can no longer distinguish between what is Saul and what is Anna, and between them and the other people in the book.

This theme of "breakdown", that sometimes when people "crack up" it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions, has of course been written about by other people, as well as by me, since then. But this is where, apart from the odd short story, I first wrote about it. Here it is rougher, more close to experience, before experience has shaped itself into thought and pattern—more valuable perhaps because it is rawer material.

But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war.

I have been in a false position ever since, for the last thing I have wanted to do was to refuse to support women.

To get the subject of Women's Liberation over with—I support it, of course, because women are second-class citizens, as they are saying energetically and competently in many countries. It can be said that they are succeeding, if only to the extent they are being seriously listened to. All kinds of people previously hostile or indifferent say: "I support their aims but I don't like their shrill voices and their nasty ill-mannered ways." This is an inevitable and easily recognisable stage in every revolutionary movement: reformers must expect to be disowned by those who are only too happy to enjoy what has been won for them. I don't think that Women's Liberation will change much though—not because there is anything wrong with their aims, but because it is already clear that the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by the cata-

clysms we are living through: probably by the time we are through, if we do get through at all, the aims of Women's Liberation will look very small and quaint.

But this novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation. It described many female emotions of aggression, hostility, resentment. It put them into print. Apparently what many women were thinking, feeling, experiencing, came as a great surprise. Instantly a lot of very ancient weapons were unleashed, the main ones, as usual, being on the theme of "She is unfeminine", "She is a man-hater." This particular reflex seems indestructible. Men—and many women—said that the suffragettes were defeminised, masculine, brutalised. There is no record I have read of any society anywhere when women demanded more than nature offers them that does not also describe this reaction from men—and some women. A lot of women were angry about *The Golden Notebook*. What women will say to other women, grumbling in their kitchens and complaining and gossiping or what they make clear in their masochism, is often the last thing they will say aloud—a man may overhear. Women are the cowards they are because they have been semi-slaves for so long. The number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with is still small. Most women will still run like little dogs with stones thrown at them when a man says: You are unfeminine, aggressive, you are unmanning me. It is my belief that any woman who marries or takes seriously in any way at all a man who uses this threat, deserves everything she gets. For such a man is a bully, does not know anything about the world he lives in, or about its history—men and women have taken infinite numbers of roles in the past, and do now, in different societies. So he is ignorant, or fearful about being out of step—a coward. . . . I write all these remarks with exactly the same feeling as if I were writing a letter to post into the distant past: I am so sure that everything we now take for granted is going to be utterly swept away in the next decade.

(So why write novels? Indeed, why! I suppose we have to go on living *as if*. . .)

Some books are not read in the right way because they have skipped a stage of opinion, assume a crystallisation of information in society which has not yet taken place. This book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the Women's Liberation movements already existed. It came out first ten years ago, in 1962. If it were coming out now for the first

time it might be read, and not merely reacted to: things have changed very fast. Certain hypocrisies have gone. For instance, ten, or even five years ago—it has been a sexually contumacious time—novels and plays were being plentifully written by men furiously critical of women—particularly from the States but also in this country—portrayed as bullies and betrayers, but particularly as underminers and sappers. But these attitudes in male writers were taken for granted, accepted as sound philosophical bases, as quite normal, certainly not as womanhating, aggressive or neurotic. It still goes on, of course—but things are better, there is no doubt of it.

I was so immersed in writing this book, that I didn't think about how it might be received. I was involved not merely because it was hard to write—keeping the plan of it in my head I wrote it from start to end, consecutively, and it was difficult—but because of what I was learning as I wrote. Perhaps giving oneself a tight structure, making limitations for oneself, squeezes out new substance where you least expect it. All sorts of ideas and experiences I didn't recognise as mine emerged when writing. The actual time of writing, then, and not only the experiences that had gone into the writing, was really traumatic: it changed me. Emerging from this crystallising process, handing the manuscript to publisher and friends, I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis.

Yet the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise.

"Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love. . . ." says Anna, in *Free Women*, stating a theme—shouting it, announcing a motif with drums and fanfares . . . or so I imagined. Just as I believed that in a book called *The Golden Notebook* the inner section called the Golden Notebook might be presumed to be a central point, to carry the weight of the thing, to make a statement.

But no.

Other themes went into the making of this book, which was a crucial time for me: thoughts and themes I had been holding in my mind for years came together.

One was that it was not possible to find a novel which described the intellectual and moral climate of a hundred years ago, in the middle of the last century, in Britain, in the way Tolstoy did it for Russia, Stendhal for France. (At this point it is necessary to make the obligatory disclaimers.) To read

The Red and the Black, and *Lucien Leuwen* is to know that France as if one were living there, to read *Anna Karenina* is to know that Russia. But a very useful Victorian novel never got itself written. Hardy tells us what it was like to be poor, to have an imagination larger than the possibilities of a very narrow time, to be a victim. George Eliot is good as far as she goes. But I think the penalty she paid for being a Victorian woman was that she had to be shown to be a good woman even when she wasn't according to the hypocrisies of the time—there is a great deal she does not understand because she is moral. Meredith, that astonishingly underrated writer is perhaps nearest. Trollope tried the subject but lacked the scope. There isn't one novel that has the vigour and conflict of ideas in action that is in a good biography of William Morris.

Of course this attempt on my part assumed that that filter which is a woman's way of looking at life has the same validity as the filter which is a man's way . . . setting that problem aside, or rather, not even considering it, I decided that to give the ideological "feel" of our mid-century, it would have to be set among socialists and marxists, because it has been inside the various chapters of socialism that the great debates of our time have gone on; the movements, the wars, the revolutions, have been seen by their participants as movements of various kinds of socialism, or Marxism, in advance, containment, or retreat. (I think we should at least concede the possibility that people looking back on our time may see it not at all as we do—just as we, looking back on the English, the French, or even the Russian Revolutions see them differently from the people living then.) But "Marxism", and its various offshoots, has fermented ideas everywhere, and so fast and energetically that, once "way out" it has already been absorbed, has become part of ordinary thinking. Ideas that were confined to the far left thirty or forty years ago had pervaded the left generally twenty years ago, and have provided the commonplaces of conventional social thought from right to left for the last ten years. Something so thoroughly absorbed is finished as a force—but it was dominant, and in a novel of the sort I was trying to do, had to be central.

Another thought that I had played with for a long time was that a main character should be some sort of an artist, but with a "block." This was because the theme of the artist has been dominant in art for some time—the painter, writer, musician, as exemplar. Every major writer has used it, and

most minor ones. Those archetypes, the artist and his mirror-image the businessman, have straddled our culture, one shown as a boorish insensitive, the other as a creator all excesses of sensibility and suffering and a towering egotism which has to be forgiven because of his products—in exactly the same way, of course, as the businessman has to be forgiven for the sake of his. We get used to what we have, and forget that the artist-as-exemplar is a new theme. Heroes a hundred years ago weren't often artists. They were soldiers and empire builders and explorers and clergymen and politicians—too bad about women who had scarcely succeeded in becoming Florence Nightingale yet. Only oddballs and eccentrics wanted to be artists, and had to fight for it. But to use this theme of our time "the artist", "the writer", I decided it would have to be developed by giving the creature a block and discussing the reasons for the block. These would have to be linked with the disparity between the overwhelming problems of war, famine, poverty, and the tiny individual who was trying to mirror them. But what was intolerable, what really could not be borne any longer, was this monstrously isolated, monstrously narcissistic, pedestalled paragon. It seems that in their own way the young have seen this and changed it, creating a culture of their own in which hundreds of thousands of people make films, assist in making films, make newspapers of all sorts, make music, paint pictures, write books, take photographs. They have abolished that isolated, creative, sensitive figure—by copying him in hundreds of thousands. A trend has reached an extreme, its conclusion, and so there will be a reaction of some sort, as always happens.

The theme of "the artist" had to relate to another, subjectivity. When I began writing there was pressure on writers not to be "subjective". This pressure began inside communist movements, as a development of the social literary criticism developed in Russia in the nineteenth century, by a group of remarkable talents, of whom Belinsky was the best known, using the arts and particularly literature in the battle against Csarism and oppression. It spread fast everywhere, finding an echo as late as the Fifties, in this country, with the theme of "commitment." It is still potent in communist countries. "Bothering about your stupid personal concerns when Rome is burning" is how it tends to get itself expressed, on the level of ordinary life—and was hard to withstand, coming from one's nearest and dearest, and from people doing everything one respected most: like, for instance, trying to fight colour

prejudice in Southern Africa. Yet all the time novels, stories, art of every sort, became more and more personal. In the Blue Notebook, Anna writes of lectures she has been giving: " 'Art during the Middle Ages was communal, unindividual; it came out of a group consciousness. It was without the driving painful individuality of the art of the bourgeois era. And one day we will leave behind the driving egotism of individual art. We will return to an art which will express not man's self-divisions and separateness from his fellows but his responsibility for his fellows and his brotherhood. Art from the West becomes more and more a shriek of torment recording pain. Pain is becoming our deepest reality . . ." I have been saying something like this. About three months ago, in the middle of this lecture, I began to stammer and couldn't finish . . .'

Anna's stammer was because she was evading something. Once a pressure or a current has started, there is no way of avoiding it: there was no way of *not* being intensely subjective: it was, if you like, the writer's task for that time. You couldn't ignore it: you couldn't write a book about the building of a bridge or a dam and not develop the mind and feelings of the people who built it. (You think this is a caricature?—Not at all. This *either/or* is at the heart of literary criticism in communist countries at this moment.) At last I understood that the way over, or through this dilemma, the unease at writing about "petty personal problems" was to recognise that nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions—and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas—can't be yours alone. The way to deal with the problem of "subjectivity", that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience—or so you think of it when still a child, "*I* am falling in love", "*I* am feeling this or that emotion, or thinking that or the other thought"—into something much larger: growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares.

Another idea was that if the book were shaped in the right way it would make its own comment about the conventional novel: the debate about the novel has been going on since the novel was born, and is not, as one would imagine from reading

contemporary academics, something recent. To put the short novel *Free Women* as a summary and condensation of all that mass of material, was to say something about the conventional novel, another way of describing the dissatisfaction of a writer when something is finished: "How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped."

But my major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped.

As I have said, this was not noticed.

One reason for this is that the book is more in the European tradition than the English tradition of the novel. Or rather, in the English tradition as viewed at the moment. The English novel after all does include *Clarissa* and *Tristam Shandy*, *The Tragic Comedians*—and Joseph Conrad.

But there is no doubt that to attempt a novel of ideas is to give oneself a handicap: the parochialism of our culture is intense. For instance, decade after decade bright young men and women emerge from their universities able to say proudly: "Of course I know nothing about German literature." It is the mode. The Victorians knew everything about German literature, but were able with a clear conscience not to know much about the French.

As for the rest—well, it is no accident that I got intelligent criticism from people who were, or who had been, marxists. They saw what I was trying to do. This is because Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other—or tries to, but its limitations are not the point for the moment. A person who has been influenced by Marxism takes it for granted that an event in Siberia will affect one in Botswana. I think it is possible that Marxism was the first attempt, for our time, outside the formal religions, at a world-mind, a world ethic. It went wrong, could not prevent itself from dividing and subdividing, like all the other religions, into smaller and smaller chapels, sects and creeds. But it was an attempt.

This business of seeing what I was trying to do—it brings me to the critics, and the danger of evoking a yawn. This sad bickering between writers and critics, playwrights and critics: the public have got so used to it they think, as of quarrelling children: "Ah yes, dear little things, they are at it again." Or: "You writers get all that praise, or if not praise, at least all that attention—so why are you so perennially wounded?"

And the public are quite right. For reasons I won't go into here, early and valuable experiences in my writing life gave me a sense of perspective about critics and reviewers; but over this novel, *The Golden Notebook*, I lost it: I thought that for the most part the criticism was too silly to be true. Recovering balance, I understood the problem. It is that writers are looking in the critics for an *alter ego*, that other self more intelligent than oneself who has seen what one is reaching for, and who judges you only by whether you have matched up to your aim or not. I have never yet met a writer who, faced at last with that rare being, a real critic, doesn't lose all paranoia and become gratefully attentive—he has found what he thinks he needs. But what he, the writer, is asking is impossible. Why should he expect this extraordinary being, the perfect critic (who does occasionally exist), why should there be anyone else who comprehends what he is trying to do? After all, there is only one person spinning that particular cocoon, only one person whose business it is to spin it.

It is not possible for reviewers and critics to provide what they purport to provide—and for which writers so ridiculously and childishly yearn.

This is because the critics are not educated for it; their training is in the opposite direction.

It starts when the child is as young as five or six, when he arrives at school. It starts with marks, rewards, "places", "streams", stars—and still in many places, stripes. This horse-race mentality, the victor and loser way of thinking, leads to "Writer X is, is not, a few paces ahead of Writer Y. Write Y has fallen behind. In his last book Writer Z has shown himself as better than Writer A." From the very beginning the child is trained to think in this way: always in terms of comparison, of success, and of failure. It is a weeding-out system: the weaker get discouraged and fall out; a system designed to produce a few winners who are always in competition with each other. It is my belief—though this is not the place to develop this—that the talents every child has, regardless of his official "I.Q.", could stay with him through life, to enrich him and everybody else, if these talents were not regarded as commodities with a value in the success-stakes.

The other thing taught from the start is to distrust one's own judgement. Children are taught submission to authority, how to search for other people's opinions and decisions, and how to quote and comply.

As in the political sphere, the child is taught that he is

free, a democrat, with a free will and a free mind, lives in a free country, makes his own decisions. At the same time he is a prisoner of the assumptions and dogmas of his time, which he does not question, because he has never been told they exist. By the time a young person has reached the age when he has to choose (we still take it for granted that a choice is inevitable) between the arts and the sciences, he often chooses the arts because he feels that here is humanity, freedom, choice. He does not know that he is already moulded by a system: he does not know that the choice itself is the result of a false dichotomy rooted in the heart of our culture. Those who do sense this, and who don't wish to subject themselves to further moulding, tend to leave, in a half-unconscious, instinctive attempt to find work where they won't be divided against themselves. With all our institutions, from the police force to academia, from medicine to politics, we give little attention to the people who leave—that process of elimination that goes on all the time and which excludes, very early, those likely to be original and reforming, leaving those attracted to a thing because that is what they are already like. A young policeman leaves the Force saying he doesn't like what he has to do. A young teacher leaves teaching, her idealism snubbed. This social mechanism goes almost unnoticed—yet it is as powerful as any in keeping our institutions rigid and oppressive.

These children who have spent years inside the training system become critics and reviewers, and cannot give what the author, the artist, so foolishly looks for—imaginative and original judgement. What they can do, and what they do very well, is to tell the writer how the book or play accords with current patterns of feeling and thinking—the climate of opinion. They are like litmus paper. They are wind gauges —invaluable. They are the most sensitive of barometers of public opinion. You can see changes of mood and opinion here sooner than anywhere except in the political field—it is because these are people whose whole education has been just that—to look outside themselves for their opinions, to adapt themselves to authority figures, to "received opinion"—a marvellously revealing phrase.

It may be that there is no other way of educating people. Possibly, but I don't believe it. In the meantime it would be a help at least to describe things properly, to call things by their right names. Ideally, what should be said to every child,

repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this:

"You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others, will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself—educating your own judgement. Those that stay must remember, always and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society."

Like every other writer I get letters all the time from young people who are about to write theses and essays about my books in various countries—but particularly in the United States. They all say: "Please give me a list of the articles about your work, the critics who have written about you, the authorities." They also ask for a thousand details of total irrelevance, but which they have been taught to consider important, amounting to a dossier, like an immigration department's.

These requests I answer as follows: "Dear Student. You are mad. Why spend months and years writing thousands of words about one book, or even one writer, when there are hundreds of books waiting to be read. You don't see that you are the victim of a pernicious system. And if you have yourself chosen my work as your subject, and if you do have to write a thesis —and believe me I am very grateful that what I've written is being found useful by you—then why don't you read what I have written and make up your own mind about what you think, testing it against your own life, your own experience. Never mind about Professors White and Black."

"Dear Writer"—they reply. "But I have to know what the authorities say, because if I don't quote them, my professor won't give me any marks."

This is an international system, absolutely identical from the Urals to Yugoslavia, from Minnesota to Manchester.

The point is, we are all so used to it, we no longer see how bad it is.

I am not used to it, because I left school when I was fourteen. There was a time I was sorry about this, and believed I had missed out on something valuable. Now I am grateful for a lucky escape. After the publication of *The Golden Notebook*, I made it my business to find out something about the literary machinery, to examine the process which made a critic, or a reviewer. I looked at innumerable examination papers—and couldn't believe my eyes; sat in on classes for teaching literature, and couldn't believe my ears.

You might be saying: That is an exaggerated reaction, and you have no right to it, because you say you have never been part of the system. But I think it is not at all exaggerated, and that the reaction of someone from outside is valuable simply because it is fresh and not biased by allegiance to a particular education.

But after this investigation, I had no difficulty in answering my own questions: Why are they so parochial, so personal, so small-minded? Why do they always atomise, and belittle, why are they so fascinated by detail, and uninterested in the whole? Why is their interpretation of the word *critic* always to find fault? Why are they always seeing writers as in conflict with each other, rather than complementing each other . . . simple, this is how they are trained to think. That valuable person who understands what you are doing, what you are aiming for, and can give you advice and real criticism, is nearly always someone right outside the literary machine, even outside the university system; it may be a student just beginning, and still in love with literature, or perhaps it may be a thoughtful person who reads a great deal, following his own instinct.

I say to these students who have to spend a year, two years, writing theses about one book: "There is only one way to read, which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you, reading only those, dropping them when they bore you, skipping the parts that drag—and never, never reading anything because you feel you ought, or because it is part of a trend or a movement. Remember that the book which bores you when you are twenty or thirty will open doors for you when you are forty or fifty—and vice versa. Don't read a book out of its right time for you. Remember that for all the books we have in print, are as many that have never reached print, have never been written down—even now, in this age of compulsive reverence for the written word, history, even social ethic, are taught by means of stories, and