



Under My Skin

By Doris Lessing
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Plot Summary:

"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."

—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 departure, 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 devastating 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 portrait 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."

Topics For Discussion

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?

About the Author

Doris Lessing was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919. Lessing has described her childhood as an uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain. Her mother, obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules, then installed Doris in a convent school and, later, an all-girls high school in Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out at the age of thirteen. Lessing, however, made herself into a self-educated intellectual, reading Dickens, Kipling, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. Doris's early years were spent absorbing her father's bitter memories of World War I, taken in as a kind of "poison." "We are all of us made by war," Lessing has written, "twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it." Lessing left home when she was fifteen and took a job as a nursemaid. Her employer gave her books on politics and sociology; she was also writing stories, and sold two to magazines in South Africa.

In 1937, she moved to Salisbury (Southern Rhodesia), where she worked as a telephone operator and, at nineteen, married Frank Wisdom and had two children. A few years later, feeling trapped in a persona she feared would destroy her, she left her family, remaining in Salisbury. She was drawn to the members of the Left Book Club, a group of Communists. Gottfried Lessing was a central member of the group; shortly after she joined, they married and had a son. During the postwar years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left altogether in 1954. By 1949, Lessing had moved to London with her young son and published *The Grass is Singing*, beginning her career as a professional writer. After writing the *Children of*

Violence series, about the growth in consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest, Lessing broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a daring narrative experiment. Her most recent works include two volumes of autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997), and a novel, *Love, Again* (1995).