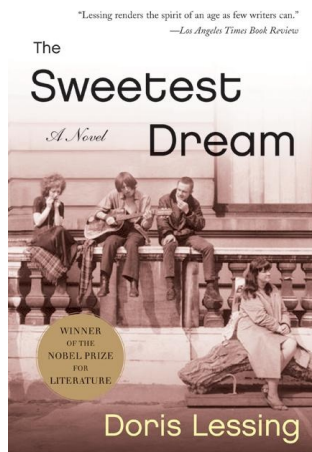


The Sweetest Dream



By Doris Lessing
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An Introduction This multigenerational story of the Lennox family spans most of the twentieth century and has its fulcrum in London during the 1960s, that turbulent and contradictory decade. The youth of that time, shattering old bonds and demanding new freedoms, were viewed by many of their elders not as romantic idealists, but as deeply damaged people. Julia, the Lennox clan matriarch and a victim herself of World War II, knows why. "You can't have two dreadful wars and then say 'That's it, and now everything will go back to normal.' They're screwed up, our children, they are the children of war." The aloof, well-to-do Julia and her daughter-in-law, the beleaguered Frances, fight together on behalf of "the kids" and their omnipresent band of dysfunctional friends. Earth Mother Frances's self-sacrifice and passivity are put to the test repeatedly by her ex-husband, 'Comrade' Johnny, the maddening figure whose ceaseless political agenda threatens to tear the Lennox family apart. Here is a memorable picture of a character only recently departed from our scene. "The revolution comes before personal matters" is Johnny's dictum, as he deposits discarded wives and forsaken children in the accommodating house whose emotional center is always the extendable kitchen table, that essential prop of the '60s. The friends of the family who occupy this table spend their evenings eating, boasting

about their shoplifting, and debating the violent ideologies of their time -- blithely unaware that their politics and beliefs will involve them more fully in the world. The latter portion of *The Sweetest Dream* recounts the experiences of Sylvia, Johnny's daughter by his second wife, in an African village dying of AIDS. Her fortitude in confronting the quintessential plague of the 1980s brings this story full-circle and engages it in some of the most profound issues of our era. This novel reflects our recent history like a many-faceted mirror, and it is full of people not easily forgotten, each -- for worse or for better, directly or indirectly -- made by war. **Discussion Questions**

1. How would you characterize the relationship between Julia and Frances Lennox? Were there any elements of their living arrangements that surprised you? How did you react when Sylvia came to stay in the Lennox house? Were Julia and Frances's reactions to her arrival typical in any way?
2. When Julia discusses the children's problems with Frances, she argues: "It's a good expression, that: *screwed up*. I know why they are...They're all war children, that is why. Two terrible wars and this is the result." (138) To what extent do you agree with her analysis? Do you think Julia has a special bias when it comes to the effects of war?
3. What role does Comrade Johnny play in the course of the book? Did you understand his political agenda? What were your impressions of his relationships with his children, Colin and Andrew; his wives, Phyllida and Frances, and his mother? How was his personality articulated?
4. What did you think of the hodgepodge of characters assembled around the Lennox kitchen table? In what ways are their complaints typical of teenagers? Did they express any adult concerns that you found noteworthy? Discuss your thoughts on Sophie's relationships with Andrew, Roland, and Colin.
5. During her liaison with Harold Holman, Frances confronts his idealistic vision of her former husband, Johnny: "And so they lay side by side, and if he was letting go dreams, such dreams, such sweet sweet dreams, she was thinking, Obviously I'm a very selfish person, just as Johnny always said." (120) To what do you think the title, *The Sweetest Dream* refers? Does this scene offer any clues?
6. How would you describe the scene that takes place at the dinner celebrating the publication of Colin's book? Are the actions and reactions of Frances, Johnny, Colin, and Andrew what you expected, based on their defined roles in the family?
7. Rose Trimble, the former Lennox houseguest turned journalist, attacks Colin, Julia, and Silvia in the course of her career, accusing them of Nazi affiliations. How does this turn of events affect Julia? How does it affect Silvia? Is Rose's behavior anticipated by her treatment of the Lennox family when she lives with them?
8. What did you think of Sylvia's transformation from a fragile, needy young girl to a courageous doctor in Zimlia? Are there aspects of her work that you found especially interesting, in light of her childhood? What are they?

About the Author: Doris Lessing was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919 to British parents. In 1925, the family moved to the British colony in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Lessing was enrolled in a convent school and, later, an all-girls high school, from which she dropped out at age 13, ending her formal education. At the age of 19, Lessing married and later gave birth to two children. She left her family in order to pursue her own career and interests, and found herself drawn to the Left Book Club, a Communist group. Shortly after she joined the Communist Party, she married Gottfried Lessing; they married and had a son. By 1949, Lessing was living in London with her son and had published *The Grass is Singing*, launching her career as a professional writer. During the postwar years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left in 1954. Over the years, Lessing has attempted to accommodate what she admires in 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), 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 profound detail. Lessing has also written several works of nonfiction, including *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* and *Walking in the Shade: 1949 to 1962*.