



the PARIS REVIEW

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 102 DORIS LESSING

Doris Lessing was interviewed at the home of Robert Gottlieb, in Manhattan's East Forties. Her editor for many years at Knopf, Mr. Gottlieb was then the editor of *The New Yorker*. Ms. Lessing was briefly in town to attend some casting sessions for the opera Philip Glass has based on her novel *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, for which she had written the libretto. Plans for the opera had been in more or less constant flux, and it was only after a minor flurry of postcards—Ms. Lessing communicates most information on postcards, usually ones from the British Museum—that the appointment was finally arranged.

While the tape recorder was being prepared, she said, “This is a noisy place here, when you think we’re in a garden behind a row of houses.” She points across the way at the townhouse where Katharine Hepburn lives; the talk is about cities for a while. She has lived in London for almost forty years, and still finds that “everything all the time in a city is extraordinary!” More speculatively, as she has remarked elsewhere, “I would not be at all surprised to find out . . . that the dimensions of buildings affect us in ways we don’t guess.” She spoke about spending six months in England before the age of five, saying, “I think kids ought to

travel. I think it's very good to carry kids around. It's good for them. Of course it's tough on the parents."

The interview was conducted on the garden patio. Silvery-streaked dark hair parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun, a shortish skirt, stockings, blouse, and jacket, she looked much like her book-jacket photos. If she seemed tired, it was hardly surprising considering the extent of her recent travels. She has a strong, melodious voice, which can be both amused and acerbic, solicitous and sarcastic.

—*Thomas Frick, 1988*

INTERVIEWER

You were born in Persia, now Iran. How did your parents come to be there?

DORIS LESSING

My father was in the First World War. He couldn't stick England afterwards. He found it extremely narrow. The soldiers had these vast experiences in the trenches and found they couldn't tolerate it at home. So he asked his bank to send him somewhere else. And they sent him to Persia, where we were given a very big house, large rooms and space, and horses to ride on. Very outdoors, very beautiful. I've just been told this town is now rubble. It's a sign of the times, because it was a very ancient market town with beautiful buildings. No one's noticed. So much is destroyed, we can't be bothered. And then they sent him to Tehran, which is a very ugly city, where my mother was very happy, because she became a part of what was called the "legation set." My mother adored every second of that. There were dinner parties every night. My father hated it. He was back again with convention. Then in 1924, we came back to England where something called the Empire Exhibition (which turns up from time to time in literature) was going on

and which must have had an enormous influence. The southern Rhodesian stand had enormous maize-cobs, corncobs, slogans saying “Make your fortune in five years,” and that sort of nonsense. So my father, typically for his romantic temperament, packed up everything. He had this pension because of his leg, his war wounds—minuscule, about five thousand pounds—and he set off into unknown country to be a farmer. His childhood had been spent near Colchester, which was then a rather small town, and he had actually lived the life of a farmer’s child and had a country childhood. And that’s how he found himself in the veld of Rhodesia. His story is not unusual for that time. It took me some time, but it struck me quite forcibly when I was writing *Shikasta* how many wounded ex-servicemen there were out there, both English and German. All of them had been wounded, all of them were extremely lucky not to be dead, as their mates were.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps a minor version of the same thing would be our Vietnam veterans coming back here and being unable to adjust, completely out of society.

LESSING

I don’t see how people can go through that kind of experience and fit in at once. It’s asking too much.

INTERVIEWER

You recently published a memoir in the magazine *Granta*, which, according to its title, was about your mother. In some ways it really seemed to be more about your father.

LESSING

Well, how can one write about them separately? Her life was, as they used to say, devoted to his life.

INTERVIEWER

It's astonishing to read about his gold-divining, his grand plans, his adventures . . .

LESSING

Well, he was a remarkable bloke, my father. He was a totally impractical man. Partly because of the war, all that. He just drifted off, he couldn't cope. My mother was the organizer, and kept everything together.

INTERVIEWER

I get the feeling that he thought of this gold-divining in a very progressive and scientific way.

LESSING

His idea was—and there's probably something true about it somewhere—that you could divine gold and other metal if you only knew how to do it. So he was always experimenting. I wrote about him actually, in a manner of speaking, in a story I called "Eldorado." We were living in gold country. Gold mines, little ones, were all around.

INTERVIEWER

So it wasn't out of place.

LESSING

No! Farmers would always keep a hammer or a pan in the car, just in case. They'd always be coming back with bits of gold-bearing rock.

INTERVIEWER

Were you around a lot of storytelling as a child?

LESSING

No . . . the Africans told stories, but we weren't allowed to

mix with them. It was the worst part about being there. I mean I could have had the most marvelously rich experiences as a child. But it would have been inconceivable for a white child. Now I belong to something called a “Storytellers’ College” in England. About three years ago a group of people tried to revive storytelling as an art. It’s doing rather well. The hurdles were—I’m just a patron, I’ve been to some meetings—first that people turn up thinking that storytelling is telling jokes. So they have to be discouraged! Then others think that storytelling is like an encounter group. There’s always somebody who wants to tell about their personal experience, you know. But enormous numbers of real storytellers have been attracted. Some from Africa—from all over the place—people who are still traditional hereditary storytellers or people who are trying to revive it. And so, it’s going on. It’s alive and well. When you have storytelling sessions in London or anywhere, you get a pretty good audience. Which is quite astonishing when you think of what they could be doing instead—watching *Dallas* or something.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like coming back to England? I remember J. G. Ballard, coming there for the first time from Shanghai, felt very constrained; he felt that everything was very small and backward.

LESSING

Oh yes! I felt terribly constricted, very pale and damp; everything was shut in and too domestic. I still find it so. I find it very pretty, but too organized. I don’t imagine that there’s an inch of the English landscape that hasn’t been dealt with in some way or another. I don’t think there is any wild grass anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any deep urges or longings to go back to some kind of mythical African landscape?

LESSING

Well, I wouldn't be living in that landscape, would I? It wouldn't be the past. When I went back to Zimbabwe three years ago, which was two years after independence, it was very clear that if I went I would be from the past. My only function in the present would be as a kind of token. Inevitably! Because I'm the "local girl made good." Under the white regime I was very much a baddie. No one had a good word to say for me. You've got no idea how wicked I was supposed to be. But now I'm "OK."

INTERVIEWER

Were you bad because of your attitude to blacks?

LESSING

I was against the white regime. There was a total color bar. This phrase has completely gone now, "color bar." The only contact I had with blacks was what I had with servants. It's very hard to have a reasonable relationship with black people who have to be in at nine o'clock because there's a curfew, or who are living in total poverty and you are not.

INTERVIEWER

In the *Granta* memoir there's the image of you as a child, totting guns around, shooting game . . .

LESSING

Well, there was a great deal of game around then. There's very little these days, partly because the whites shot it out.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have a desire to be a writer in those early days? You mention hiding your writings from your mother, who tried to make too much of them.

LESSING

My mother was a woman who was very frustrated. She had a great deal of ability, and all this energy went into me and my brother. She was always wanting us to *be* something. For a long time she wanted me to be a musician, because *she* had been a rather good musician. I didn't have much talent for it. But everybody had to have music lessons then. She was always pushing us. And, of course, in one way it was very good, because children need to be pushed. But she would then take possession of whatever it was. So you had to protect yourself. But I think probably every child has to find out the way to possess their own productions.

INTERVIEWER

I just wondered if you thought of yourself as becoming a writer at an early age.

LESSING

Among other things. I certainly could have been a doctor. I would have made a good farmer, and so on. I became a writer because of frustration, the way I think many writers do.

INTERVIEWER

Because you've written novels in so many different modes, do people feel betrayed when you don't stick in one camp or another? I was thinking of the science-fiction fans, quite narrow-minded, who resent people who write "science fiction" who don't stick within their little club.

LESSING

Well, it is narrow-minded, of course it is. Actually, the people who regard themselves as representatives of that community seem now to want to make things less compartmentalized. I've been invited to be guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention, in Brighton. They've invited two Soviet science-fiction writers too. In the past there's always been trouble; now they're hop-

ing that glasnost might allow their writers to actually come. Actually, it never crossed my mind with these later books that I was writing science fiction or anything of the kind! It was only when I was criticized for writing science fiction that I realized I was treading on sacred ground. Of course, I don't really write science fiction. I've just read a book by the *Solaris* bloke, Stanislav Lem. Now that's real classic science fiction . . . full of scientific ideas. Half of it, of course, is wasted on me because I don't understand it. But what I do understand is fascinating. I've met quite a lot of young people—some not so young either, if it comes to that—who say “I'm very sorry, but I've got no time for realism” and I say “My God! But look at what you're missing! This is prejudice.” But they don't want to know about it. And I'm always meeting usually middle-aged people who say, “I'm very sorry. I can't read your non-realistic writing.” I think it's a great pity. This is why I'm pleased about being guest of honor at this convention, because it does show a breaking down.

INTERVIEWER

What I most enjoyed about *Shikasta* was that it took all the spiritual themes that are submerged or repressed or coded in science fiction, and brought them up into the foreground.

LESSING

I didn't think of that as science fiction at all when I was doing it, not really. It certainly wasn't a book beginning, I don't know, say, “At three o'clock on a certain afternoon in Tomsk, in 1883 . . .”—which is, as opposed to the cosmic view, probably my second most favorite kind of opening, this kind of beginning!

INTERVIEWER

You've written introductions for many collections of Sufi stories and prose. How did your interest and involvement with Sufism come about?

everything they said. Words in their mouths now in June's had a laboured effortful quality, dreadful because of the fluencies so easily available, but to others.

They went off at last, June lingering behind. From her look around the room, I could see she did not want to go. She was regretting not the act but the consequences of it, which might sever her from her beloved Emily.

"What was that about?" I asked.

Emily's bossiness dropped from her, and she slumped, a worried and tired child, near Hugo. He licked her cheek.

"Well, they fancied some of your things, that's all."

"Yes, but ..." My feeling was But I'm a friend and they shouldn't have poked on me! Emily caught this, and with her dry little smile she said, "June had been here, she knew the lay-out, so when the kids were wondering what place to do next, she suggested yours."

"Makes sense, I suppose."

"Yes," she insisted, raising serious eyes to me, so that I shouldn't make light of her emphasis. "Yes, it does make sense."

"You mean, I shouldn't think there was anything personal in it?"

Again the smile, pathetic because of its knowingness, its precocity but what an old-fashioned word that was, depending for its force on certain standards.

"Oh, no, it was personal! ... a compliment, if you like!"

She put down her face into Hugo's yellow fur and ~~she~~ ^{laughed} and ~~she~~ ^{laughed}, I knew ~~that she~~ ^{that she} ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~laughing~~ ^{laughing}.

LESSING

Well, you know, I hate talking about this. Because really, what you say gets so clichéd, and it sounds gimmicky. All I really want to say is that I was looking for some discipline along those lines. Everyone agrees that you need a teacher. I was looking around for one, but I didn't like any of them because they were all "gurus" of one kind or another. Then I heard about this man Shah, who is a Sufi, who really impressed me. So I've been involved since the early sixties. It's pretty hard to summarize it all, because it's all about what you experience. I want to make a point of that because a lot of people walk around saying "I am a Sufi," probably because they've read a book and it sort of sounds attractive. Which is absolutely against anything that real Sufis would say or do. Some of the great Sufis have actually said, "I would never call myself a Sufi—it's too large a name." But I get letters from people, letters like this—Hi, Doris! I hear you're a Sufi too! Well, I don't know what to say, really. I tend to ignore them.

INTERVIEWER

I imagine that people try to set you up as some sort of guru, whether political or metaphysical.

LESSING

I think people are always looking for gurus. It's the easiest thing in the world to become a guru. It's quite terrifying. I once saw something fascinating here in New York. It must have been in the early seventies—guru time. A man used to go and sit in Central Park, wearing elaborate golden robes. He never once opened his mouth, he just sat. He'd appear at lunchtime. People appeared from everywhere, because he was obviously a holy man, and this went on for months. They just sat around him in reverent silence. Eventually he got fed up with it and left. Yes. It's as easy as that.

INTERVIEWER

Let me ask you one more question along these lines. Do you think that reincarnation is a plausible view?

LESSING

Well, I think it's an attractive idea. I don't believe in it myself. I think it's more likely that we "dip into" this realm on our way on a long journey.

INTERVIEWER

That this planet is merely one single stop?

LESSING

We're not encouraged—I'm talking about people studying with Shah—to spend a great deal of time brooding about this, because the idea is that there are more pressing things to do. It's attractive to brood about all this, of course, even to write books about it! But as far as I was concerned, in *Shikasta* the reincarnation stuff was an attractive metaphor, really, or a literary idea, though I understand that there are people who take *Shikasta* as some kind of a textbook.

INTERVIEWER

Prophecy, perhaps?

LESSING

It was a way of telling a story—incorporating ideas that are in our great religions. I said in the preface to *Shikasta* that if you read the Old Testament and the New Testament and the Apocrypha and the Koran you find a continuing story. These religions have certain ideas in common, and one idea is, of course, this final war or apocalypse, or whatever. So I was trying to develop this idea. I called it "space fiction" because there was nothing else to call it.

INTERVIEWER

I have the feeling that you are an extremely intuitive kind of fiction writer, and that you probably don't plan or plot out things extensively, but sort of discover them. Is that the case, or not?

LESSING

Well, I have a general plan, yes, but it doesn't mean to say that there's not room for an odd character or two to emerge as I go along. I knew what I was going to do with *The Good Terrorist*. The bombing of Harrod's department store was the start of it. I thought it would be interesting to write a story about a group who drifted into bombing, who were incompetent and amateur. I had the central character, because I know several people like Alice—this mixture of very maternal caring, worrying about whales and seals and the environment, but at the same time saying, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs," and who can contemplate killing large numbers of people without a moment's bother. The more I think about that, the more interesting it becomes. So I knew about her; I knew about the boyfriend, and I had a rough idea of the kinds of people I wanted. I wanted people of different kinds and types, so I created this lesbian couple. But then what interested me were the characters who emerged that I hadn't planned for, like Faye. And then Faye turned into this destroyed person, which was surprising to me. The little bloke Phillip turned up like this—right about then I was hearing about an extremely fragile young man, twenty-one or twenty-two, who was out of work, but was always being offered work by the authorities. I mean, loading very heavy rolls of paper onto lorries, in fact! You'd think they were lunatics! So he always got the sack at the end of about three days. I think it's quite a funny book.

INTERVIEWER

Really?

LESSING

Well, it is comic, in a certain way. We always talk about things as if they are happening in the way they're supposed to happen, and everything is very efficient. In actual fact, one's experience about anything at all is that it's a complete balls-up. I mean everything! So why should this be any different? I don't believe in these extremely efficient terrorists, and all that.

INTERVIEWER

Conspiracies, and so on?

LESSING

There's bound to be messes and muddles going on.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work on more than one fictional thing at a time?

LESSING

No, it's fairly straight. I do sometimes tidy up a draft of a previous thing while I'm working on something else. But on the whole I like to do one thing after another.

INTERVIEWER

I'd imagine then that you work from beginning to end, rather than mixing around . . .

LESSING

Yes, I do. I've never done it any other way. If you write in bits, you lose some kind of very valuable continuity of form. It is an invisible inner continuity. Sometimes you only discover it is there if you are trying to reshape.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a feeling of yourself as having evolved within each genre that you employ? For instance, I thought the realistic

perspective in *The Good Terrorist*, and even sometimes in the Jane Somers books, was more detached than in your earlier realism.

LESSING

It was probably due to my advanced age. We do get detached. I see every book as a problem that you have to solve. That is what dictates the form you use. It's not that you say, "I want to write a science fiction book." You start from the other end, and what you have to say dictates the form of it.

INTERVIEWER

Are you producing fairly continuously? Do you take a break between books?

LESSING

Yes! I haven't written in quite a while. Sometimes there are quite long gaps. There's always something you have to do, an article you have to write, whether you want to or not. I'm writing short stories at the moment. It's interesting, because they're *very* short. My editor, Bob Gottlieb, said, quite by chance, that no one ever sends him very short stories, and he found this interesting. I thought, "My God, I haven't written a very short story for years." So I'm writing them around fifteen hundred words, and it's good discipline. I'm enjoying that. I've done several, and I think I'm going to call them "London Sketches," because they're all about London.

INTERVIEWER

So they're not parables, or exotic in any way?

LESSING

No, not at all. They're absolutely realistic. I wander about London quite a lot. And any city, of course, is a theater, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

Do you have regular working habits?

LESSING

It doesn't matter, because it's just habits. When I was bringing up a child I taught myself to write in very short concentrated bursts. If I had a weekend, or a week, I'd do unbelievable amounts of work. Now those habits tend to be ingrained. In fact, I'd do much better if I could go more slowly. But it's a habit. I've noticed that most women write like that, whereas Graham Greene, I understand, writes two hundred perfect words every day! So I'm told! Actually, I think I write much better if I'm flowing. You start something off, and at first it's a bit jagged, awkward, but then there's a point where there's a click and you suddenly become quite fluent. That's when I think I'm writing well. I don't write well when I'm sitting there sweating about every single phrase.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of a reader are you these days? Do you read contemporary fiction?

LESSING

I read a great deal. I'm very fast, thank God, because I could never cope with it otherwise. Writers get sent enormous amounts of books from publishers. I get eight or nine or ten books a week, which is a burden because I'm always very conscientious. You do get a pretty good idea of what a book's like in the first chapter or two. And if I like it at all, I'll go on. That's unfair, because you could be in a bad mood, or terribly absorbed in your own work. Then there are the writers I admire, and I'll always read their latest books. And, of course, there's a good deal of what people tell me I should read. So I'm always reading.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us more about how you put the Jane Somers

hoax over on the critical establishment? It strikes me as an incredibly generous thing to do, first of all, to put a pseudonym on two long novels to try to show the way young novelists are treated.

LESSING

Well, it wasn't going to be two to begin with! It was meant to be one. What happened was, I wrote the first book and I told the agent that I wanted to sell it as a first novel . . . written by a woman journalist in London. I wanted an identity that was parallel to mine, not too different. So my agent knew, and he sent it off. My two English publishers turned it down. I saw the readers' reports, which were very patronizing. Really astonishingly patronizing! The third publisher, Michael Joseph (the publisher of my first book), was then run by a very clever woman called Phillipa Harrison, who said to my agent, "This reminds me of the early Doris Lessing." We got into a panic because we didn't want her going around saying that! So we took her to lunch and I said, "This *is* me, can you go along with it?" She was upset to begin with, but then she really enjoyed it all. Bob Gottlieb, who was then my editor at Knopf in the States, guessed, and so that was three people. Then the French publisher rang me up and said, "I've just bought a book by an English writer, but I wonder if you haven't been helping her a bit!" So I told him. So in all, four or five people knew. We all expected that when the book came out, everyone would guess. Well, before publication it was sent to all the experts on my work, and none of them guessed. All writers feel terribly caged by these experts—writers become their property. So, it was bloody marvelous! It was the best thing that happened! Four publishers in Europe bought it not knowing it was me, and that was nice. Then the book came out, and I got the reviews a first novel gets, small reviews, mostly by women journalists, who thought that I was one of their number. Then "Jane Somers" got a lot of fan letters, mostly nonliterary, from people looking after old people and going crazy. And a lot of social workers, either disagreeing or agreeing, but all saying they were pleased I'd written it. So then

I thought, Okay, I shall write another one. By then I was quite fascinated with Jane Somers. When you're writing in the first person, you can't stray too far out of what is appropriate for that person. Jane Somers is middle-class, English, from a very limited background. There are very few things more narrow than the English middle class. She didn't go to university. She started working very young, went straight to the office. Her life was in the office. She had a marriage that was no marriage. She didn't have children. She didn't really like going abroad. When she went abroad with her husband, or on trips for her firm and her office, she was pleased to get home. She was just about as narrow in her experience as you can get. So in the writing, I had to cut out all kinds of things that came to my pen, as it were. Out! Out! She's a very ordinary woman. She's very definite in her views about what is right and what is wrong.

INTERVIEWER

What to wear . . .

LESSING

Everything! I have a friend who is desperately concerned with her dress. The agonies she goes through to achieve this perfection I wouldn't wish on anyone! Jane Somers was put together from various people. Another was my mother. I wondered what she would be like if she were young now, in London. A third one was a woman I knew who used to say, "I had a perfectly happy childhood. I adored my parents. I liked my brother. We had plenty of money. I loved going to school. I was married young, I adored my husband"—she goes on like this. But then, her husband dies suddenly. And from becoming a rather charming child-woman, she became a person. So I used all these things to make one person. It's amazing what you find out about yourself when you write in the first person about someone very different from you.

INTERVIEWER

Your original idea with the Jane Somers books was to probe the literary establishment?

LESSING

Yes. I've been close to the literary machine now for a long time. I know what's good about it and what's bad about it. It's not the publishers I've had it in for so much as the reviewers and the critics, whom I find extraordinarily predictable. I knew everything that was going to happen with that book! Just before I came clean I had an interview with Canadian television. They asked, "Well what do you think's going to happen?" and I said, "The English critics are going to say that the book is no good." Exactly! I had these sour nasty little reviews. In the meantime the book did very well in every other country.

INTERVIEWER

In your preface to *Shikasta* you wrote that people really didn't know how extraordinary a time this was in terms of the availability of all kinds of books. Do you feel that in fact we're going to be leaving the culture of the book? How precarious a situation do you see it?

LESSING

Well, don't forget, I remember World War II when there were very few books, very little paper available. For me to walk into a shop or look at a list and see anything that I want, or almost anything, is like a kind of miracle. In hard times, who knows if we're going to have that luxury or not?

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel any sense of responsibility in presenting these prophecies aside from telling a good story?

LESSING

I know people say things like, “I regard you as rather a prophet.” But there’s nothing I’ve said that hasn’t been, for example, in the *New Scientist* for the last twenty years. Nothing! So why am I called a prophet, and they are not?

INTERVIEWER

You write better.

LESSING

Well, I was going to say, I present it in a more interesting way. I do think that sometimes I hit a kind of wavelength—though I think a lot of writers do this—where I anticipate events. But I don’t think it’s very much, really. I think a writer’s job is to provoke questions. I like to think that if someone’s read a book of mine, they’ve had—I don’t know what—the literary equivalent of a shower. Something that would start them thinking in a slightly different way perhaps. That’s what I think writers are for. This is what our function is. We spend all our time thinking about how things work, why things happen, which means that we are more sensitive to what’s going on.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever do any of those sixties’ experiments with hallucinogens, that sort of thing?

LESSING

I did take mescaline once. I’m glad I did, but I’ll never do it again. I did it under very bad auspices. The two people who got me the mescaline were much too responsible! They sat there the whole time, and that meant, for one thing, that I only discovered the “hostess” aspect of my personality, because what I was doing was presenting the damn experience to them the whole time! Partly in order to protect what I was really feeling. What should have happened was for them to let me alone. I suppose they were afraid I

was going to jump out of a window. I am not the kind of person who would do such a thing! And then I wept most of the time. Which was of no importance, and they were terribly upset by this, which irritated me. So the whole thing could have been better. I wouldn't do it again. Chiefly because I've known people who had such bad trips. I have a friend who took mescaline once. The whole experience was a nightmare that kept on being a nightmare—people's heads came rolling off their shoulders for months. Awful! I don't want that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you travel a great deal?

LESSING

Too much; I mean to stop.

INTERVIEWER

Mostly for obligations?

LESSING

Just business, promoting, you know. Writers are supposed to sell their books! Astonishing development! I'll tell you where I've been this year, for my publishers. I was in Spain . . . Barcelona and Madrid, which is enjoyable, of course. Then I went to Brazil, where I discovered—I didn't know this—that I sell rather well there. Particularly, of course, space fiction. They're very much into all that. Then I went to San Francisco. They said, "While you're here, you might as well . . ."—that phrase, "you might as well"—"pop up the coast to Portland." You've been there?

INTERVIEWER

No, never.

LESSING

Now there is an experience! In San Francisco, they're hedo-

nistic, cynical, good-natured, amiable, easygoing, and well-dressed—in a casual way. Half an hour in the plane and you're in a rather straight-laced formal city that doesn't go in for casual behavior at all. It's amazing, just up the coast there. This is what America's like. Then I went to Finland for the second time. They've got some of the best bookstores in the world! Marvelous, wonderful! They say it's because of those long, dark nights! Now I'm here. Next I'm going to be in Brighton, for the science-fiction convention. Then I won a prize in Italy called the Mondello Prize, which they give in Sicily. I said, "Why Sicily?" and they said, deadpan, "Well, you see, Sicily's got a bad image because of the Mafia . . ." So I'll go to Sicily, and then I shall work for all the winter.

INTERVIEWER

I hear you've been working on a "space opera" with Philip Glass.

LESSING

What happens to books is so astonishing to me! Who would have thought *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* would turn into an opera? I mean it's so surprising!

INTERVIEWER

How did that come about?

LESSING

Well, Philip Glass wrote to me, and said he'd like to make an opera, and we met.

INTERVIEWER

Had you known much of his music before?

LESSING

Well, no I hadn't! He sent some of his music. It took quite a bit of time for my ears to come to terms with it. My ear was always

expecting something else to happen. You know what I mean? Then we met and we talked about it, and it went very well, which is astonishing because we couldn't be more different. We just get on. We've never had one sentence worth of difficulty over anything, ever. He said the book appealed to him, and I thought he was right, because it's suitable for his music. We met, usually not for enormous sessions, a day here and a day there, and decided what we would do, or not do. I wrote the libretto.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever done anything like that before?

LESSING

No, never with music.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have music to work from?

LESSING

No, we started with the libretto. We've done six versions of the story so far, because it is a story, unlike most of the things he does. As something was done, he would do the music, saying he'd like six more lines here or three out there. That was a great challenge.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say anything about your next project?

LESSING

Yes, my next book is a little book. It's a short story that grew. The joke is that a short novel in England is very much liked. They're not terribly popular here in the U.S. They like big books here. Getting your money's worth. It's about a very ordinary family that gives birth to a goblin. And this is realism. I got the idea from two sources. One was this fantastic writer called Loren Eiseley. He wrote a piece—I can't remember what it was actually

about—where he’s walking up the seashore in the dusk, and on a country road he sees a girl that he says is a Neanderthal girl; a country girl in a country district, nothing very much to be asked of her, hardly noticed except as a stumpy girl with a clumsy skull. It’s just the most immensely touching, sad piece. It stuck in my mind, and I said, “If Neanderthals, why not Cro-Magnons, why not dwarves, goblins, because all cultures talk about these creatures?” The other source was the saddest piece in a magazine, from a woman who wrote in and said, “I just want to write about this or I shall go crazy.” She’d had three children, I think. Her last child, who was now seven or eight, had been born, she said, a devil. She put it in those terms. She said that this child had never done anything but hate everyone around. She’s never done anything normal, like laugh or be happy. She destroyed the family, who couldn’t stand her. The mother said, “I go in at night and I look at this child asleep. I kiss her while she’s asleep because I don’t dare kiss her while she’s awake.” So, anyway, all this went into the story. The main point about this goblin is, he’s perfectly viable in himself. He’s a normal goblin. But we just cannot cope with him.

INTERVIEWER

Is the space series going to continue?

LESSING

Yes. I haven’t forgotten it. If you read the last one, *The Sentimental Agents*—which is really satire, not science fiction—you’ll see that I’ve ended it so that I’ve pointed it all to the next volume.* In the next book, I send this extremely naive agent off to . . . What’s the name of my bad planet?

INTERVIEWER

Shammat?

LESSING

Yes, to Shammat, in order to reform everything. It’s going to

* The book ends in the middle of a sentence.

be difficult to write about Shammat because I don't want to make it much like Earth! That's too easy! I have a plot, but it's the tone I need. You know what I mean?

INTERVIEWER

Do you do many public readings of your own work?

LESSING

Not very many. I do when I'm asked. They didn't ask me to in Finland. I don't remember when was the last. Oh, Germany last year, my God! That was the most disastrous trip. It was some academic institution in Germany. I said to them, "Look, I want to do what I always do. I'll read the story and then I'll take questions." They said, the way academics always do, "Oh you can't expect our students to ask questions." I said, "Look, just let me handle this, because I know how." Anyway, what happened was typical in Germany: We met at four o'clock in order to discuss the meeting that was going to take place at eight. They cannot stand any ambiguity or disorder—no, no! Can't bear it. I said, "Look, just leave it." The auditorium was very large and I read a story in English and it went down very well, perfectly OK. I said, "I will now take questions." Then this bank of four bloody professors started to answer questions from the audience and debate among themselves, these immensely long academic questions of such tedium that finally the audience started to get up and drift out. A young man, a student sprawled on the gangway—as a professor finished something immensely long—called out, "BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH." So with total lack of concern for the professors' feelings I said, "Look, I will take questions in English from the audience." So they all came back and sat down, and it went well . . . perfectly lively questions! The professors were absolutely furious. So that was Germany. German academics are the worst.

INTERVIEWER

Recently, you've turned to writing nonfiction.

LESSING

I've just written a book, a short book, about the situation in Afghanistan. I was there looking at the refugee camps, because what happens is that men usually go for the newspapers, and men can't speak to the women because of the Islamic attitudes. So we concentrated on the women. The book's called *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, which is a quote from one of their fighters, who said, "We shout to you for help but the wind blows away our words."

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever worry about what sort of authority you could bring to such an enormous story, being an outsider visiting only for a short time?

LESSING

Do journalists worry about the authority they bring, visiting countries for such a short time? As for me, rather more than most journalists, I was well briefed for the trip, having been studying this question for some years knowing Afghans and Pakistanis (as I made clear in the book) and being with people who knew Farsi—this last benefit not being shared by most journalists.

INTERVIEWER

Your methods of reportage in that book have been the target of some criticism by American journalists, who charge that your trip to Afghanistan was sponsored by a particular pro-Afghan organization. How do you respond to that?

LESSING

This is the stereotypical push-button criticism from the left, from people who I do not think can expect to be taken seriously, for I made it clear in the book that the trip was not organized by a political organization. I went for something called Afghan Relief, set up by some friends, among them myself, which has helped several people to visit Pakistan, but not with money. I paid my own

expenses, as did the others I went with. The point about Afghan Relief is that it has close links with Afghans, both in exile and fighting inside Afghanistan, and includes Afghans living in London, as advisors. These Afghans are personal friends of mine, not “political.” Afghan Relief has so far not spent one penny on administration; all the fund-raising work, here and in Pakistan, is done voluntarily. To spell it out: no one has made anything out of Afghan Relief except the Afghans.

INTERVIEWER

From the tag that you used for the Jane Somers book: “If the young knew / If the old could . . .” Do you have any things you would have done differently, or any advice to give?

LESSING

Advice I don’t go in for. The thing is, you do not believe I know everything in this field is a cliché, everything’s already been said, but you just do not believe that you’re going to be old. People don’t realize how quickly they’re going to be old, either. Time goes very fast.