



The Golden Notebook

Doris Lessing

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Anna is a writer, author of one very successful novel, who now keeps four notebooks. In one, with a black cover, she reviews the African experience of her earlier year. In a red one she records her political life, her disillusionment with communism. In a yellow one she writes a novel in which the heroine reviles part of her own experience. And in the blue one she keeps a personal diary. Finally, in love with an American writer and threatened with insanity, Anna tries to bring the threads of all four books together in a golden notebook.

The Golden Notebook Details

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From Reader Review The Golden Notebook for online ebook

Jeffrey Keeten says

*****WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE*****

“I was filled with such a dangerous delicious intoxication that I could have walked straight off the steps into the air, climbing on the strength of my own drunkenness into the stars. And the intoxication, as I knew even then, was the recklessness of infinite possibility.”

I would say that Miss Lessing was very fetching when she was younger, but I don't want to be accused of objectifying her. :-)

Anna keeps four notebooks, each representing different versions of herself, all with the intent of discovering the truth about herself. The red, the yellow, the black, and the blue covers, if all goes well, will merge into one golden notebook. An evolution of understanding that will set her free.

Free of what you might ask?

If she can ever discover her true self, she can escape the traitorous self she has always been. It is proving nearly impossible. *“I read this over today, for the first time since I wrote it. It's full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being ‘objective.’ Nostalgia for what? I don't know. Because I'd rather die than have to live through any of that again. And the ‘Anna’ of that time is like an enemy, or like an old friend one has known too well and doesn't want to see.”*

The only way to escape our past is to understand it. We must be at peace with it, but the past seeps into the present and the future, despite our best efforts to control it. *“At that time in my life, for reasons I didn't understand until later, I didn't let myself be chosen by men who really wanted me.”* She isn't that person now, not that it has made her any happier. By believing this, it says a lot about how she felt about herself. Any man who found her attractive or interesting became less desirable to her. Now she does let men choose her, and that has led to a series of temporary, unfulfilling relationships with married men. Did she learn from her past or is this just another form of avoiding commitment?

Their marriages are of no interest to her nor is she interested in the prospect of a marriage for herself. How can she discover who she is if she has to live in the shadow of a man as Mrs. _____? Marriage allows him to define her, and that elusive free self she is looking for will be forever buried under the avalanche of lost time given to achieving his desires, satisfying his whims, and helping him be successful. *“I am always amazed, in myself and in other women, at the strength of our need to bolster men up. This is ironical, living as we do in a time of men's criticising us for being ‘castrating’.... for the truth is, women have this deep instinctive need to build a man up as a man.... I suppose this is because real men become fewer and fewer, and we are frightened, trying to create men.”*

As women are trying to find themselves, define themselves, men are losing themselves. Men used to have clearly delineated roles... hunt, kill, protect... that evolved into... sports/academics, careers, providing. They were the head of household, but now that is less likely as women are becoming more successful in the work force. Men are being diminished as the balance of power in a household has shifted to something more equal. This is not a bad thing, but it is creating necessary adjustments for men who used to have a simple defined

goal as to how they would be considered successful. This role is evolving into a blending of responsibilities where much of what they do is not weighed and measured.

Of course, it feels like a step back as men are not needed to be men in the same way they were sixty years ago or a thousand and sixty years ago. Giving up this power has been a long time coming, but women who are dismissive of men who still hold on too tightly to old traditional roles must understand that it is scary to think of who we are without them.

"You're such a perfectionist. You're an absolutist. You measure everything against some kind of ideal that exists in your head, and if it doesn't come up to your beautiful notions then you condemn it out of hand. Or you pretend to yourself that it's beautiful even when it isn't."

I've always believe in the old adage that has been attributed to Albert Einstein. *"Men marry women with the hope they will never change. Women marry men with the hope they will change. Invariably they are both disappointed."* I don't know which is more unrealistic.

I was flipping around the channels one day and landed on Oprah, not sure why because I never watch daytime talk shows, but there was a crowd of mostly women complaining about men. As I was listening to them speak, I realized that these women didn't want more sympathy or more consideration from men, but actually wanted men to be more like them. They wanted men to have similar emotional responses to circumstances as women do. Narcissistic to say the least. Why would anyone want to hold up a mirror to their spouse and see themselves? I think it is important that we react somewhat differently to situations. My son leaving for college was very emotional for my wife who thought she was losing something. For me, his leaving was a matter of pride because I could see him as a man instead of a boy.

So when women talk about changing a man, are they truly talking about changing him into being more like themselves? Are they molding him to fulfill their vision of a progressive, successful future? If this is the case, I would say that the shifting power is having a detrimental effect and could be contributing to an increasing divorce rate. Couples, in my opinion, should be working towards common goals, but also in some cases towards separate goals as well. As women free themselves, they need to make sure they aren't incarcerating their spouses (unless that turns him on) in the process.

"His green eyes were fixed, not seeing his mouth, like a spoon or a spade or a machine-gun, shot out, spewed out, hot aggressive language, words like bullets. 'I'm not going to be destroyed by you. By anyone. I'm not going to be shut up, caged, tamed, told be quiet keep your place do as you're told I'm not...I'm saying what I think, I don't buy your world.'

It disappoints Anna that when she falls in love with the American, who has been kicked out of the communist party for being anti-Stalinist too soon (It never pays to be right first.), that she falls into a traditional role of wanting exclusivity and finding herself consumed by jealousy. Her whole life's work has come undone. The golden notebook proves more elusive than the golden snitch.

This book has carried a heavy load as one of the major pieces of feminist literature. Doris Lessing in 1962 was exploring concepts of what women should be striving for just as a growing number of women were starting to reject the idea that they had to fulfill the male version of what it means to be female. (They may have lost their way in the 1980s with the big shoulder pads. I was so glad when women quit dressing like offensive linemen. The last thing women should do is try to be more like men.) Though there were aspects

that I disagreed with in this book, I thought overall it was fairly balanced. Lessing also points out some fallacies in thinking by women even as she celebrates Anna's attempt to achieve true freedom. Although freedom can sometimes be a very lonely existence.

Understanding yourself so that you can express your true needs is important. Don't expect others to intuitively know what you want. A revolution without a platform leads to blaming others instead of asking for change. People can make you unhappy or happy for a short time, but ultimately we all have to find ways to make ourselves happy. We have to understand and accept that we will never truly completely know ourselves. Don't become so wrapped up in a personal philosophy that you forget to live.

Equality doesn't scare me as long as women are raised up instead of men being brought down.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Weinz says

And thus ends my summer of "I am WOMAN". Having read only female writers for the last four months (with a momentary departure for Dostoevsky) I feel I have rid myself of the phalocentricities of my normal reading. An egotistical misogynist cleansing.

****warning, teeny tiny spoilers... but not really... but kinda****

This novel is similar to other revolutionary books of the past (*On the Road* is the first one that comes to mind) I think that we have progressed beyond its original shock value. Its original revolutionary ideas and message have been used, reproduced and regurgitated onto film in abundance. At one time I can see Lessing's message in this novel as something revolutionary. A voice, until then, unheard of. Whereas now, it has the tired message of the past. A message that's significance has lessened or become obsolete.

At times in the novel I relished in Anna's words, in her emotions and her ideas only to watch this strong intelligent woman make the same "stupid woman" mistakes over and over with the same outcome every time. Is this indicative of the same struggle a lot self-reliant women go through? She values herself as an independent woman but routinely followed the same destructive path with men as her emotional crutch. Consistently picking the men that would keep her exactly where she was and never taking a step further into the unknown. She fell into a stagnant comfort zone of complacency.

As a divorced mom to three I have gone through my own journey in discovering what it really means to be a woman in our time; an independent free thinking woman of our time. I understand the conflicting feelings of feminism and vulnerability mixed with autonomy and doubt. Because of this it was painful to see Anna, a witty intelligent woman depend so much on the validation of men. Relying on the attention of men that, inherently she knows, are emotionally and physically unavailable. Anna's process of introspection is one I'm familiar with and use daily, her notebooks. The book itself was philosophical through journal writings and personal ramblings that comes to its own conclusions and absolutions by the end. Which is probably another reason I didn't not connect with the way this book concluded. I understood the reasoning behind Lessing's ending but disagreed.

Well written and worth the read.

Now back to the misanthropic readings I love so much.

Madeline says

"In what way are you different? Are you saying there haven't been artist-women before? There haven't been women who were independent? There haven't been women who insisted on sexual freedom! I tell you, there are a great line of women stretching out behind you into the past, and you have to seek them out and find them in yourself and become conscious of them.'

'They didn't look at themselves as I do. They didn't feel as I do. How could they? I don't want to be told when I wake up, terrified by a dream of total annihilation, because of the H-bomb exploding, that people felt that way about the cross-bow. It isn't true. There is something new in the world. And I don't want to hear, when I've had encounter with some Mogul in the film industry, who wields the kind of power over men's minds that no emperor ever did, and I come back feeling trampled on all over, that Lesbia felt like that after an encounter with her wine-merchant. And I don't want to be told when I suddenly have a vision (though God knows it's hard enough to come by) of a life that isn't full of hatred and fear and envy and competition every minute of the night and the day that this is simply the old dream of the golden age brought up to date...I want to be able to separate in myself what is old and cyclic, the recurring history, the myth, from what is new, what I feel or think that might be new...' I saw the look on her face, and said: 'You are saying that nothing I feel or think is new?'"

Anna Wulf is a writer with one published work to her name. The book was fairly successful, enabling Anna to support herself and her young daughter with the profits from the royalties, as well as taking in boarders in her London house. Although she hasn't gotten anything else published, Anna keeps up her writing, keeping four different notebooks. In a black notebook, she writes about her time as a young woman in Africa when she first became involved with the Communist Party. A red notebook describes her later disillusionment with the movement in the 1950's. In a yellow notebook, she writes a novel that's basically a fictionalized version of an affair she once had. A blue notebook is for her personal diary. Additionally, several chapters are titled "Free Women" and are a third-person description of Anna's conversations with Molly, a friend from her Communist days.

This was a slog, and not just because it's essentially just 635 pages of people sitting around and talking. The structure reminded me of Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, so that was an automatic strike against this book, because *The Blind Assassin* does the whole blending-fact-and-fiction schtick a hell of a lot better than *The Golden Notebook* does. It seemed like the more interesting notebooks got fewer pages than they deserved, while the less interesting parts took up too much space - I could have read an entire book just about Anna's experiences in Africa, but the stuff about her later disillusionment with Communism was kind of like reading a blow-by-blow description of paint drying.

But the biggest problem with this book was, I'll admit, mostly my fault. I went into this book knowing one thing: this is a Very Important Feminist Text, so I read it with that mindset. And you know what I found?

Dudes. Lots and lots of dudes. Seriously, for a "feminist book" - or, hell, just a book written by a woman and featuring a female protagonist - there is a hell of a lot of page time wasted on male characters. I say "wasted" because no one in this story is even remotely interesting, except for maybe Anna's friends from her Africa days. But like I said, they get kind of shafted by the narrative and instead we have to read pages and pages about Anna having a series of dismal affairs - Anna seems incapable of having a relationship that's satisfying in any way, and a mean part of my brain starting thinking, hey Anna, you know how they say that if

everyone you meet is an asshole, that means *you're* the asshole? Maybe there's a reason everyone you date is bad at sex and emotionally unavailable.

Anyway, we hear A LOT about Anna's many, many, boring and terrible relationships, and the worst of them comes at the end of the book, when she starts having an affair with an American man named Saul Green. Saul Green is the living worst. Saul Green makes Fitzgerald Grant seem lovable. Saul Green is the opposite of Batman. But Anna loves Saul Green, for absolutely no fucking reason, and so we have to read chapter and chapters of Anna dating this terrible person and talking about how much she loves him, and I hated every moment I had to read about his character. The worst part? At the end, Anna buys the golden notebook featured in the title, and Saul, because he is The Worst, tells Anna that he wants the notebook for himself. Because he is The Worst. And Anna, unable to see that she's dating a spoiled two-year-old who somehow managed to pass for an adult man, just laughs, like, Oh Saul, you're so funny when you joke about denying my personal autonomy! But he's not joking, because guess what Saul does? He gets his hands on Anna's golden notebook and writes his own name on the inside cover. If my boyfriend wrote his name on a notebook that I specifically told him I was saving for something special, I would probably beat him with my own shoe. Anna's reaction?

"It made me laugh, so that I nearly went upstairs and gave it to him."

No. No no. No no no no

[illegible]

(I'm sorry, I completely lost my train of thought there. That's how much I hate Saul Green and every minute I wasted reading about him while Doris Lessing tried to convince me he was charming.)

Come to think of it, I'm not %100 sure this book even passes the Bechdel test. The "Free Women" scenes were my favorite, and the ones that came the closest, because they were all about Anna and Molly talking, but guess what they talk about? Molly's ex-husband, and her son. And then I realized that the "Free Women" sections were primarily concerned with the male characters' storylines, and then I had to lie down for a while until I stopped wanting to set this book on fire.

The one shining bright spot of this book: as you can tell from the excerpt at the top of this review, the writing is very good, and the characters are all solid. They're just boring and/or infuriating.

Petra X says

Given up because although it was well written and the characters developed well early on, I just have no interest at all in the upper middle class who have angst and money instead of housework and jobs. They pontificated about sex and politics and other people's affairs when the rest of the country were out working and thinking of who was cooking dinner that night and whether or not tuppence on the tax each week was going to make school trips a bit difficult. Just not what I want to read about right now.

Two stars because generally I really like Lessing and I love her writing.

K.D. Absolutely says

This most is the influential and most talked-about 1962 novel of the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature recipient, Doris Lessing. She was the 11th female who received the prize and the oldest (91 y/o) person ever to have won it.

Reading this 634-page dense novel was not a easy thing for me. There were times that I wanted to put it down and create a new shelf "Started But Not Finished" or probably "To Be Continued Someday." However, I have a promise to myself to finish all the books I started. So I kept on reading. I made the right decision! I had an amazing time especially in the last 50 pages of the novel.

The format is a feat that is novel in itself: the main story inside the story is entitled *Free Women* and it is divided into several parts. Then each part is further divided into one of the 4 "notebooks" that the main protagonist, **Anna Wulf**, writes or has written: black (about her life in Africa), red (about her life as a communist in Britain), yellow (her scrapbook as a novelist) and blue (her diary). She even creates an alter-ego make-believe character, Ella present in the black notebook. Then there is the golden notebook which presents the theme "Breakdown." That notebook serves to be the synopsis of the 4 wherein the two main characters, Anna and her American lover Saul both wrote its entries as they share their love without hindrances and pretensions that explains the theme: breaking down the walls.

So, what is the story all about? Just like most appreciated novels, it depends on how you look at it. I agree with what Ms. Lessing wrote in her 1971 Introduction:

*... that the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion **only** when it is plan and shape and intention is not understood, because the moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't anything more to be got out of it.*

And when a book's pattern and the shape of its inner life is as plain to the reader as it is to the author - then perhaps it is time to throw the book aside...

For me it is about: sex war, communism in Europe in the 50's and mental illness. In the first, it is said to have influenced the Women's Liberation during the post WWII era. In the second, I had a heyday learning about the spread of Communism in Europe in the 50's. Here is where I knew that there was a C.P. (communist party) in Great Britain during to years (or maybe up to now). Although communism is becoming thing of a past or shall I say, it is changing its face, it is nice to know what happened during those years. In the third, the novel can just be seen as populated by insane characters. The insanity here is not the mental institution type. It is about passion to survive, to be happy and to continuously hope despite the odds.

One nice short quote for those who still have valentine hangover: *"Love's the same the world over."*

I will always remember this book. This is my constant companion as a search for cure for my two completely torn ligaments due to the badminton accident that happened to me in the evening of February 23, 2010. As I lay in the surgeon's operating table tomorrow, I will keep in mind the beauty of this book - especially on insanity.

Glenn Sumi says

Dear class:

Welcome to an exclusive Goodreads seminar on Doris Lessing's classic 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook*!

Let's start with a quiz, shall we?

1. What's the best reason for reading this book?

- A) It's a feminist classic, and still speaks to feminists – male and female – today.
- B) It's a seminal contemporary novel, and its challenging structure – there's a traditional novel about a London writer named Anna Wulf, interspersed with four notebooks that individually address Anna's various interests (growing up in Africa, Communism, trying to write a second book after a very successful first one, daily life, dreams and psychoanalysis) – still feels bold half a century later.
- C) Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature and her crotchety response to journalists when she heard about it remains priceless.
- D) The book addresses big questions, like: What happens when we become disillusioned with our political ideals? How do we reconcile the various parts of ourselves: sexual being, responsible parent, sympathetic partner, loyal friend, concerned global citizen? Can we integrate them? How do we define a "good" person, and why is a good man so damn hard to find?
- E) All of the above.

Answer: E

2. It's a long book, well over 600 pages. Does it need to be that long?

- A) Yes. Every sentence is perfect. There's no repetition. It's very tidy. I don't know why you're even asking this question. Shame on you.
- B) God no. But neither art nor life are clean, with all the edges folded neatly. Lessing understands this. Art can get messy, requiring sketches, multiple drafts, thumb prints in the margins. Family life can seethe with resentments and bitterness, like a pot that's boiled over on the stove. And sex and relationships? Sheesh. Let's be honest. We're not always rational in those departments. We can find ourselves dating or sleeping with the same sort of person for all sorts of f-cked up reasons. We make mistakes. That's the human condition. So writing about all of that has to be messy too. Besides, it seems that Lessing penned "the well-written" novel before this. She's trying something new.
- C) I suppose not. But imagine being her editor. I can see Lessing fighting to include even the more difficult, earnest, rambling passages. (And there are quite a few.)
- D) It's not really *that* long. And flipping back to the contents page, which tells you how long each chapter is, is handy. (Pro tip: the chapters tend to get shorter as the book progresses!) And there are playful connections BETWEEN the sections which turn you into a literary detective! It's (sort of) fun!

Answer: B (half marks for C and/or D)

3. This book has a reputation for being serious. Is there any humour?

- A) No! Lessing deals with Communism, art, a (possible) nervous breakdown, class, colonialism in Africa

and the uneasy war between the sexes in the 1940s and 50s. Those are serious subjects!

B) Um, you're in the literature section. The humour section is in another part of the store.

C) So now you're in the humour section. I recommend Amy Poehler's *Yes Please* and Mindy Kaling's *Why Not Me*. They're both funny but they're also very *real*... oh, sorry.

D) Hell, yes. There are a couple of hilarious scenes of Anna meeting with TV and movie people who want to adapt her best-selling first novel for another medium and (of course) have no idea what her book's about and want to completely alter it into something sanitized and safe. And there are some horrible, funny examples of earnest Communist-themed fiction that Anna has to consider for publication, which contributes to her eventually leaving the party.

Answer: D

4. What's the most shocking sequence to a reader today?

A) The scenes where Anna/(alter ego) Ella thinks only of pleasing a man.

B) The continual discussion about the lack of "real men" and the dismissive attitude towards homosexuality.

C) The tampon scene.

D) The stilted conversations between Anna and her friend Molly.

E) The frank talk about vaginal vs. clitoral orgasms and having orgasms while in love with one's partner.

Answer: "Shocking" is a strong word, but... any of the above were surprising in different ways.

5. Will you read more books by Doris Lessing?

A) Yes. I want to read her five-novel *Children Of Violence* series, which seems to deal with some of the same themes as *The Golden Notebook*. I'm also keen to read her popular first book, *The Grass Is Singing*, which is set in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and put her on the map. (I'm pretty sure there are parallels between this book and the fictional book Anna wrote in *Notebook*.)

B) Yes. I'm moderately curious about her science fiction. Clearly her quest for answers extended beyond our planet. But her five-volume *Canopus In Argos* series is hard to find, even in good bookstores and libraries. (Fun fact: she collaborated with Philip Glass on operas based on two of these books!)

C) Yes. Since *The Golden Notebook* deals with "reality vs. art," I'm curious about the facts of Lessing's life, which she revealed in a series of memoirs and autobiographies. Note: Lessing called her 1974 sci-fi dystopia *Memoirs Of A Survivor* an "attempt at an autobiography."

D) Yes. Lessing also published several volumes of short stories, most famously "To Room Nineteen," which deals with open relationships, another theme of this book. Lessing even wrote books under a pseudonym (see: *The Diaries Of Jane Somers*).

E) No. This book gave me a headache, and I found the central character a whiny, privileged white woman going on about first-world problems.

Answer: A, B, C and D are all fine. And I totally understand E. Enjoy!

Sidharth Vardhan says

(The spoilers are no spoiler. They just go into some of my intellectual queries which have little to do with book.)

Another of those books that would have been better if it was shorter. The book has several divisions and each division has a section of a short novella 'Free Women' (by omniscient narrator) and sections of diaries Anna,

the protagonist, keeps.

Now, as a matter of principle I do not ... don't laugh, I'm perfectly capable of having principles, so, I was saying As a matter of principle, I do not read anyone's personal diaries. If you know me, you can guess that it has nothing to do with respect of privacy or anything, just that people are often more judgmental and critical in their personal diaries.

Not so free women

That is problem with Anna. Either she is surrounded by lousy people all around or she is lying when she says she doesn't easily dislike a person. In fact, she can be highly useful friend for women - she is like this litmus paper which turns red on seeing every guy that is going to be bad relationship. If she finds a guy charming, you can be sure he is either a bully or suffers from some neurological disorder, the degree of which is can be ascertained by how quickly she sleeps with him - her normal average being three pages and two nights. I have no problem with her sexual life, but I have a problem with over-analysis and complaints that follows in next few pages when relationship has fallen apart. Reading those diaries like being a platonic friend of a woman who just had a breakup. And you do not need to overanalyse the thing, since most of the men are married. Think of it, a married guy wants to sleep with her the first time they meet feeling no guilt for his wife - what are chances he is going to respect a woman who is prepared to sleep with him first time she met him, herself feeling no guilt towards his wife.

(view spoiler)

And this Anna is supposed to be a modern 'free woman'. She decides she will live independent of man. So does her sister. The two women are 'free women' giving the title to a short novella contained within the book. A joke really, since while Anna lets herself being controlled by men in her life, her sister believes she is being controlled by her own 20year old son who has just lost his eye-sight. I mean get some perspective - the boy lost his eyesight at twenty! And he is sitting in his room making no demands. Where is control in that?

I actually started getting the feeling that the two women actually are looking for bullies. The sister sleeps again with a man who singing abuses to her just after last time they did - because she can't helping pitying the puppy face the menake when theywho come asking for sex. Why I don't I find women like that? Anna darling actually finds all normal guys she comes across boring. And it is not just heterosexual men, but then according to her homosexual men are not proper men. And will badly influence her daughter. But then to be fair, she doesn't entertain verry high opinions of homosexual women either - she won't join her sister not-so-kind mankind because it is being lesbian in mind if not body.

(view spoiler)

Lessing said the book is not about sex war - maybe, although the part about Anna's life in South Africa seems to be an orgy in which, according to her own words, a group of twenty youngsters is busy sleeping with each other.

But what the hell is all that about? That woman need someone to live for, while men can live freely and this lets men control them? Because Anna is either needing to care for her daughter or have a man in her life. In

fact, Anna's sister seem to think that all the individualism their generation has gained is meaningless and the next generation should have married in twenties.

On balance, Anna does make some telling observations - comparatively very few from experience (though she herself refuses to learn from them).

So much about women liberation.

Communism

Now diaries - there are four to begin with, each with a cover of different color. The Black notebook, is about her experience as author. A bit of good writing here about artist struggling against commercialisation of his work. For most part, Anna dwells on her African experience, which was source of her book. Her African experience makes a fine satire of joke communist revolution was in Africa, some semi-rich white people led by a couple of bullies busy having good time.

In red one she records her political life, her disillusionment with communism - she meets lots of people (obviously sleeps with some)- but this is still best part of novel. She draws her fears about McCarthyism which, if you ask me, is a perfect example of people wanting to punish thought crime. She is disillusioned as she slowly comes to understand that like any mass organization, communist party depended on a system of illusions developed by resisting vocabulary and forcing the language of all discussion into a few words and slogans. The anti-intellectual nature of communism must have affected Anna's self-image - which might be part of reason behind her failed relationships. There are some other brilliant observations made by Anna, who is strangely so clever when it comes to observing politics. These two diaries are best part of the book.

In a yellow one she writes a novel in which the heroine tries to fictionalize part of her own experience (a failed relationship of course). In the blue one she keeps a personal diary - meetings with her therapists etc. I have no idea what the Golden Notebook which she undertook to write in an effort to unite other four was about.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

Lessing herself came to view *The Golden Notebook* as a failure, and I think she was right.

What she meant was that the innovation and experimentation she intended as the novel's central point and *raison d'être* was misunderstood by readers with an infernally stubborn insistence on wanting to figure out its theme, meaning, intent, and relevance to their own lives.

Readers invested - and continue to invest - it with whatever agenda they bring to it in the first place, and interpret it conventionally. I'm sure Lessing would agree that, in so doing, many have missed her point entirely.

The problem for me is: what exactly IS the point?

She never intended it to be a feminist treatise, and yet, that's what it has become (check out any of the 'feminist novels' listopias here on GR; it's always there). Why this book is claimed as a bastion of feminist thought completely eludes me.

A book that is this hateful to women simply cannot be a feminist treatise – and no amount of “Second Wave” excuse-making will make it so. If you see it this way, if you see yourself in it, well then...I am sorry for you. Read Charlotte Brontë. Read Virginia Woolf. Read Margaret Atwood. THESE authors will empower you. Lessing will not; she has no intention of doing so.

Self-pitying, self-hating codswallop is what it reads like to me. Its moral lessons – when they are not contradictory – are ambiguous to the point of insensible. Where the hell does she STAND, Lessing? This is always the trouble I have with her books and her characters; they are so morally confounding and inconsistent that you have to believe their author is setting them up as an example of something. Or writing satire.

Yet at the same time, she makes them “Everywoman” – as though they represent all of us; or there’s some twisted way of divining their essential goodness or rightness, and if you can’t understand it, well you’re no better than The Man, or The Society, or The System.

I can’t understand these characters’ psychologies. In her zeal for realism, Lessing saps them of any clear psychological truth (and ironically, has one of them engaged in interminable psychoanalysis. At least, I read that as irony). Without any otherwise useful or believable clues to motivation, I’m left to see the slow decline to madness as a direct and inevitable consequence of this woman’s - Everywoman’s - attempt to claim her independence, personhood, right to exist as a healthy, happy, whole person.

This just makes me sad; sadder still when I think that women are internalizing this message in some way, even taking comfort from it.

Another thing that sticks in my craw with Lessing is that her characters are so *passive*. They seem to be victims of their circumstances and their fate, entirely without agency to change their situations - with Lessing sitting back and seeming to say: see, this is what happens when good people exist within a corrupt, inequitable, dehumanizing system. Isn't that just despicable. Aren't they or he (there's a lot of man-hating in this novel; another place we must agree to disagree, Lessing and I) just evil and we must band together, we women, and condemn them.

Condemn, but not take action. Taking action - actually trying to change anything - comes to no good end in Lessing. It turns to violence and hate; sometimes outwardly (as in *The Good Terrorist*), and here, inwardly. Whether internalized or externalized, activism - and specifically, individual activism - is a flawed response to a corrupt system; it's deeply dysfunctional and destructive.

It's almost as though Lessing is saying that taking action would feed right into the system you're trying to change, and therefore strengthen it. That one must be a martyr to the cause - because the cause is bigger than any individual, and individualism is, by definition, antithetical to the collective.

I think this book actually succeeds well at showing the two-steps-forward-one-step-back process of disaffiliating with a political system with which one comes to disagree, or a gender stereotype against which one rebels.

If this is the innovation she's trying to achieve - making a kind of fiction that better reflects messy, non-linear reality - then ok.

But Lessing's bleak nihilism ends up beyond frustrating to me. She doesn't provide any hope that there's a positive, constructive alternative to societal - or interpersonal - woes.

I guess I like my fiction more fictional. "*What you mean is more conventional, easier,*" I imagine Lessing spitting condescendingly back at me.

Maybe so. But one more thing:

The nail in the coffin for *The Golden Notebook*, for me, is that it is structure above and in deliberate, intentional exclusion of considerations of plot or character.

In achieving her vision of a never-before-written fiction that expresses reality more realistically than the conventional novel had achieved, Lessing wedges her characters into a plot that is spread thin to the point of transparency over a framework that shows through at every turn.

Maybe it's not fair to evaluate against 50 years of post-modernism, but it reads about as sophisticated as a 14-year-old's journal scribbles, and so contrived as to be laughable.

And perhaps it's forgivable, at least understandable, that there is leakage across the red, blue, black and yellow diaries so the structure itself, as a way to achieve her literary goals, is muddy.

If that's the point - if what she's saying is that it's not so easy to compartmentalize different aspects of one's life and that doing so leads to complete fragmentation (as shown in the golden notebook, natch), then mon dieu! That was a pretty long way around to that point.

Their 180-degree political differences aside, what this reminded me of was Ayn Rand with a little more literary polish. At least with Rand, you know what drum she's banging and can dismiss her (or, if you're so inclined, accept her) on that basis, and for those of us who find her politics and worldview disgusting, then on the basis of just plain bad writing.

The renowned, redoubtable, Nobel-prizewinning Lessing, on the other hand, is not as easily dismissed. Case in point, my ability to get deeply immersed in a review of a book I didn't enjoy and that I read more than four months ago.

For that - and a couple of other bits that I won't go into right now - two stars.

Dolors says

"Art is the mirror of our betrayed ideals" page 385.

Still under the effects of the inebriating *The Brothers K*, I thought the best way to overcome a *book hangover* was to get drunk again. Reckless and foolish, I know.

My head still spinning around and my heart wrenched into a tight ball as I write these lines. "The Golden notebook" is not a kind book.

It has challenged my patience and tolerance with its apparent non direction. I have even despised Anna, the narrator of the story, thinking her naive, selfish and snobbish.

But being a woman who dwells in constant contradiction, I have irrevocably fallen under the spell of Lessing Anna's radical voice. A woman, writer and mother who says the unsayable, thinks the unthinkable and puts it all down in her notebooks in all its raw emotional and intellectual chaos.

Four Notebooks pouring with self contempt, full of disillusionment, tolls for searching clues in her past in

order to reconcile her unbearably miserable present.

The **black** recalls Anna's youth in wartime Rhodesia, her initial involvement with the Communist Party and how her early experiences served as material for her later successful novel. Also a retrospective insight in which Anna can't neither recognize herself nor her ingenuous expectations on women's independence and liberation.

"What business has a novelist to cling to the memory of a smile or a look, knowing so well the complexities behind them?" page 115.

The **red** portrays her political doubts with shocking power and blistering honesty, threading radical exploration of communism together with Anna's growing need for truth-seeking rather than political ideology.

I found her growing estrangement with The Party especially poignant when she starts feeling dubious about ends justifying means and the cynicism of some "comrades".

"Yet why do I have a home at all? Because I wrote a book I am ashamed of, and it made a lot of money. Luck, luck, that's all. And I hate all that – 'my' home, 'my' possessions, 'my' rights. And yet come to the point where I'm uncomfortable, I fall back on it like everyone else. Mine. Property. Possessions." page 356

The **yellow** notebook was the one that struck me the most but at the same time also shined out with unexpected recognition. Anna's futile effort to write as a third person, naming her creation Ella, in an attempt to distance herself from the inadequacy and constant failures of her relationships with men reminded me strongly of **D.H. Lawrence's** reflections on sexuality, morality and motherhood.

Anna's reaffirmed feelings of independence reacting against the vanity, egoism and insecurities of her usually married male partners contrast with her constant displays of traditional female behavior (expecting to stop being the mistress to become the wife). It all sounded so real and sincere to me that I felt Anna's sufferings and sorrows as my own.

"I am unhappy because I have lost some kind of independence, some freedom; but my being 'free' has nothing to do with writing a novel; it has to do with my attitude towards a man, and that has been proved dishonest, because I am in pieces." page 283.

Finally, the **blue** notebook appears as an accurate account of everyday life where intertwined switches of mood, rambling thoughts and semi-deranged descriptions of dreams become a crude testimony of existential doubts.

"But-isn't there something wrong with the fact that my sleep is more satisfying, exciting, enjoyable than anything that happens to me awake?" page 217.

Defragmented pieces of unconsciousness create the most truthful and frightening image of a woman who questions the different versions of herself to find her long lost wholeness.

Doris Lessing addresses the conflicts between the maternal and erotic life, of the difficulties to conduct a career, or at least to try to, while raising a child, of the letdown that comes along with exploration of political ideologies, of the hardships of facing a mental breakdown, of the frustration of being a liberated woman but still be dependant on a masculine presence in her life. And she does it all looking at the reader straight in the eye, without blinking.

And don't get me wrong, I don't see Lessing as some sort of personal feminist hero, I don't think that's the point. But then, as now, being in my early thirties, this novel has guided me towards which questions to ask

and which answers are better left unsought.

Everything. Life, love, death, the myriad beings buried deep inside me. Everything has become **Golden** clear. Because there has to be a crack in everything so that the light gets in.

The failures and inadequacies of my past.

The bleakness of my upcoming future.

The beauty and the futility of it all, so worth the effort.

Manny says

I was discussing Flaubert the other day with notgettingenough, and remarked on how surprisingly different all his books are. *Salammbô*, as I say in my review, is completely different from *Madame Bovary*. *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, which I'm currently reading, is completely different from both of them. But apart from *Madame Bovary*, firmly established as one of the most famous novels of all time, Flaubert's books are not widely read these days. You get the impression that people wish he'd done more naturalistic psychological studies and not, you know, *experimented* so damn much.

Not commented that Michael Frayn, one of her personal heroes, had the same problem. And I remembered an interview with Doris Lessing where she talked about her science-fiction phase. "People would have preferred me to carry on rewriting *The Golden Notebook* for ever," she said, "but I wanted to do something else."

Well, even though *The Golden Notebook* is a fine book, and I prefer it to *Shikasta* and its successors, I think she was absolutely right. She didn't say so in the interview, but a large chunk of the book is already more or less recycled out of *A Ripple From The Storm* - if she'd repeated herself again she'd have died of boredom, although it was obviously the safe choice. She's one of the most courageous authors I know, and I find her artistic integrity absolutely awe-inspiring.

Hadrian says

Lessing wrote a deeply profound book here, and I'm rather ashamed that I only ever got around to reading her only after the news of her passing.

I've heard The Golden Notebook described as a feminist novel, which is not entirely wrong, but gives only a part of the whole picture. Instead, it could be interpreted as a comprehensive and overwhelming portrait of the minds and self-expressions of women, but also with brutal honesty about emotion and sex being caught within the currents of history. There are sections about "free women", but that might be a false name, or at least a dream, trying to uncover a sense of honesty.

Well, no, that might not be the whole story. It could be a 'splintering apart'. There is the part of the book which the post-modernist tinkers love and that is the 'splitting' apart of narratives, with our protagonist writing their life story in four colored notebooks, separating the parts of their life story in an attempt to find something original to write again after their own failed novel. Or it could be the splintering apart of their own lives and attempts to find a meaning or their experiments with men, which all turn into billowing slow-motion train wrecks.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Aubrey says

If before this book you wanted to be a writer, if after you finished it you still wanted to be a writer, then all the power to you.

What concerns us here is an English white heterosexual female, mother, author, communist. Upper-class, unmarried, unconsciously feminist. Neurotic, classist, homophobic, probably racist, there aren't enough interactions with people of color to tell, but it seems likely considering the upbringing, the upbringing of the English society attuned to her personal attributes, her physical features, her financial stability, her sexuality mentality and race.

Do you have the story? Do you feel the pigeonholing begin? Do you sense your survival tactics classifying this contextual chorus as quickly as characterization consoles the contributors of compositions of caliber, of classics? Do you ease your way in expectations, do you settle your mind in the proper slots of when to be amused, when to be terrified, when to be aroused, when to be offended?

Because that's what she does. She, Mrs. Anna Wulf, neé Anna Freeman (in actuality a 'free' woman, but let us save the carpings over lazy linguistics for another time), sees her world and feels the effects of that streamlined ideological training (you knew those words were coming, I love analyzing via this manner too much for a review to escape without them), and through some combination of fate and fortune can put them into words. The jargon of socialists versus the uninitiated working class (look at that discourse analysis class being put to work), the conflict between the expectations of men and those of women (look, I put men first, what does say about me), the pandering contempt of public society for the word 'artist' (oh you're supposed to be tortured, however else would you come up with such delightful things for us, we couldn't *bear* it if you wasted your talents, disappointed the rest of us who haven't been blessed with such *insight into the human condition*).

She sees homosexuals as less than 'real men', she who cannot fathom the mixing of 'male' and 'female', cannot think outside the dichotomy of the gender lines of the English, no Kinsey scale formatting, confusing sexuality and mismatches between mind and body, just two words and the fearful gap . She talks of Africa as if it were something to be 'saved' by white people, we must let the Africans, those 'poor things', come to their true civilized calling but god forbid we accredit their myriad cultures or trust them as equals or look to them as experienced and authorized experts for a second, it is much better if we stick to our learning and reasoning and fall in circling patterns of thought that only work on paper. Children are a mystery, a mainframe of serialized progressions that cannot possibly successfully analyze the world and people around them, cannot possibly be capable of resignation with life, not when their parents need them to cope with their own. That would be monstrous.

She separates. Here is this book, this book composed without thought of composition, received with open

arms by the popular opinion, full of lies and stereotypes and standards spiced with the slightest hint of chaos, the smallest fracture of 'fighting the system', that thrill, that excitement, feeding the average conformer their daily dose of moralizing self-righteousness, their carefully controlled observance of 'the real world'. And now she is the 'artist', that tortured soul like so many others, who is not only unhappy but is supposed to be unhappy and learn how to be from those others (Joyce and Woolf and Kafka and Fitzgerald and Koestler and so many others who were *truly* unhappy), unhappy for the rest of us poor souls who cannot comprehend that talent, that quirk, and must rely on others who can, give us that side of madness that you have been blessed with that we who can cope so well with reality and its broken ideologies cannot ever have. And now she cannot write, because there are parts of her that fit within the system and parts of her that don't, there are parts that she successfully absorbed in her progression of existence and parts that never quite deadened the natural rejection, parts that give her pleasure and parts that give her pain, pain of guilt that increases with every observation, every analysis, every laying out of personal problems alongside the horrors of the world and finding the former severely lacking, a diagnosis of 'it could be worse; it shouldn't hurt', a conjectured solution of wishing to be a man so as to be able to fuck, so as to be able to ignore the shamed agony and bleeding of the vagina and all its myriad biological woes, so as to be able to ignore all that masculine patronizing and pigeonholing, that oedipal complex compensation, so as to be able to not think with feelings and feel with thought as so many men appear to be capable of.

Nothing is certain but death and taxes, and so those with life and those with money have the recipe for happiness. That is what everyone strives for, that is the goal the world round, and those who are threatened in both categories don't want to believe that eventual stabilization will not bring them peace. They don't want to believe that after the attainment of both there exists the realm of the small ills, the tiny hurts, the malformations of identity(?) in coping with ideas and the machines that drive it, the emptiness that sinks in after the distracting thoughts of fleeing a massacre and keeping a job and the adrenaline of panic fade away. The possibility that whatever brain chemistry has been equipped cannot deal with what reality demands of its conscripts, demands that do not include the slightest hint of empathy for illnesses of the neurons. Plenty of paranoia and fear and conscious ignorance, yes. Kindness or understanding, no.

Selfish. Self-ish. Angry-ish, sad-ish, complicated-ish. Not quite there. Not quite the sublime self, the inherent rights, the pure drive for living, that brave entity that copes with so much in the effort to exist. Selfish. Working for money is selfish; who are you to only put forth efforts that you are paid for, selling yourself in whatever form for a small pittance? Fighting for your rights is selfish; who are you to say that what you have is not good enough, who are you to judge that it is not equal to everyone else, you and your inherent bias and will subsumed by this 'oppressed' self? Running for your life is selfish; who are you to say that you do not want to die, when so many others have gone before you, in agonized desperation that you cannot even begin to imagine?

And my god now you want to *write* about it? Go ahead. Go ahead with your need for income, your need for validation, your need for life, your selfish whims, your unconscious prejudices, your broken self that you think is oh so painful but really, you're hardly that 'special snowflake' that you coddle so, that overly analytical stereotypical mess that cries about one thing but is secretly bigoted about everything else it doesn't have to deal with that can't even exist like the rest of us normal people, who may not have your talents but can cope just fine with a 9 to 5 job two kids and a spouse yes sirree we do just fine with our drinking our abuse our categorical separations our unconscious hypocrisies our identities set on the straight and narrow that we cannot feel straining and breaking at the seams. We deal just fine with the emptiness of words created by a species for communication and nothing more, we don't see an object and think of the history that led to its creation and all its ill-fitting complexities and contradictions, we don't regard a person and register their ancestral lines of being oppressive and being oppressed. We don't look at ourselves and clinically observe the prejudice that led from this day of education here, this dangerous misconception that

was born from this experience there, that disillusionment with what we are complicit with by existing. So much of it that is violence and blood. So many cannibal identities trapping behind with the punctured equilibrium of our past. So many coping mechanism selves trotting forth in our unrealistic idealistic opportunistic future.

We can hide from those feelings. We can be cold. We can be in control and funnel ourselves through the necessary fault lines, the civilized dichotomies, the socioeconomic machine.

Tell us, why should we care if you write about what causes you pain, if it does not cause us pain? Tell us, why should we care if you write about what you cannot cope with and hate that you cannot cope, if we can cope? Tell us, why should we care if you write about how we hurt you, if we do not know why it should? Tell us, why should we care when you question the rules, if those are the rules that we play by? Tell us, why should we care when you want to break the rules, if the rules are what we cannot imagine living without? Tell us, writer with money and intellect and security grown in comfort subsisting on a small effort grown profitable by chance because of your birth and your ancestry that so many of us would happily trade you for, why should we care about your problems when they are not all the problems?

Tell us, writer, you egotistical masochist, you lazy worm, you overly sensitive prat that cannot bear for your works to be commercialized and conformed and can afford to do so without sacrificing your standard of living, you sycophantic preacher who only wishes for social justice in the areas you are hurt by, you witless freak who cannot live a 'normal life', you coward pandering at indecision, pandering at mental illness, pandering at suicide, pandering at life.

Tell us, writer, why should we care when you strip away the world and show us how 'good' and 'evil' and every word known and unknown are winding labyrinths of infinite complexity mating in an obscene frenzy within every thing, every person, every concept.

Tell us, writer, why should we care if you cannot deal with it like the rest of us.

Tell us.

Lisa says

"It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative."

Maybe 50 or 100 pages into the novel, I knew (and felt it as a physical sensation, a shiver going down my spine) that Doris Lessing had written the perfect description of the compartmentalised psyche of the modern world. The myth of my times!

I don't share each political view she demonstrated in the red notebook, but I can certainly see myself writing a political diary that is forcibly separated from other notebooks, depicting my emotional or intellectual or casual everyday worries. My approach to emotional matters and to education and literature may also be of a different kind, and my everyday life is clearly different from the 1950s London that serves as a backdrop for *The Golden Notebook*. But it doesn't matter, I still recognise the golden thread leading through all those different, confusing strands of life that are carefully cut off from each other by the writer's abstract intellectual power.

My golden notebook would probably look like a rainbow, mixing up various notes that belong to two or three books at the same time, making a big mess of emotions, intellectual and political challenges. It would show my helpless attempts at writing down the chaos that invades my life each day. I would need notebooks for teaching, for parenting, for art, for... Modern life is rich, complicated, and full of confusing information.

But it doesn't really matter that the details of my imaginary notebooks would be different from the major story lines in Lessing's masterpiece. When I read this novel, I felt for the first time that someone had been brave enough to dare to open up the compartments of complicated, contradictory thoughts and feelings, that someone dared to ask the questions that others ignored because the answers were either too painful and depressing or simply too nonsensical: Pandora's box ripped wide open, and one question mark after the other pouring out, leaving hope for an answer lonely at the bottom:

The question of race.

The question of entitlement.

The question of gender.

The question of sexuality.

The question of power.

The question of indoctrination.

The question of dissidence.

The question of love.

The question of submission.

The question of community.

The question of solitude.

The question of responsibility.

The question of freedom.

The question of slavery.

The question of humankind - divided into different compartments that consistently meet, fight, attract, and eat each other.

Ten years ago, Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and the argument was that she was "that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny."

That sentence, including the "female experience", made me angry. What is wrong with a world that needs to define her writing as that of "female experience", when men writing about their personal perspective speak for "humanity"? Why not award - to use a random example - Coetzee's presumably "male experience", as shown in his outrageously misogynistic meditations on male Youth?

Men, apparently, still have "universal" experience while women have "female" experience? In my perception, Lessing wrote as much about male as about female experience, and she spoke of the challenges women and men face in the world. Just like Coetzee. She is a writer of "human experience", I hope, for I wouldn't want to believe only one half of humanity is capable of conducting four diaries simultaneously and of combining them to the golden notebook of their existence. Weaving by day, unweaving by night, thus we carry on until the end, whether our shroud is finished or not. Men and women, with their "individual and collective experience".

Lessing is a must-read for men and women who are interested in finding the various facets of their emotional and intellectual patterns. The Golden Notebook is her masterpiece, a classic, an odyssey told by a modern

woman instead of an ancient man.

And just like the ancient epic, it speaks to all of us who love and cherish storytelling as a means to combine the different threads of our lives to a meaningful rainbow pattern.

Pink says

I have to give this five huge stars. Even though I had problems with the last few chapters, this was never a chore to get through. I looked forward to reading it each day and enjoyed each of the notebooks, as different as they were. This is a feminist novel in as much as it's about female characters and their sexual relationships, but it's more of a look at mental breakdown, in a post war, communist party era. Masterful writing, as expected from Lessing and highly recommended.

Cheryl says

It's about contradictions, I first told a friend as we discussed this book: The same person who orders a diet coke, has ice cream for dessert; someone orders fat-free salad dressing with a side order of french fries. Take Beyonce's new single *Hold Up*: supposedly this woman (who we'll pretend is not Beyonce) is known as the "baddest woman in the game" and yet she's "up in [this guy's] sheets" while he repeatedly cheats on her, but never mind that, she'll still *hold him down*, even while she's treated in "a wicked way." We laughed.

It's about juxtaposition, we agreed later, about how much of life exists as juxtaposition. Take this novel for example:

1. Strong-minded, opinionated feminist

juxtaposed with

woman in love with a man who treats her like a second-class citizen and slave.

2. The logical force that warns us of stupidity

juxtaposed with

the inner force that makes even the most clever, talented woman look idiotic.

3. Intellectually-refined

juxtaposed with

psychologically-challenged.

4. Free women

juxtaposed with

the enslaved.

The list goes on...need I mention former communists, a society that turns to socialism? The son of a feminist who doesn't respect women? The characterization of male characters that make you dislike them? Then again, you don't go on liking this main character or any of the female characters here. In fact, I'm not even sure we're meant to like these women, or focus on them, for this book is thematically and structurally designed to have one considering the weight of words, the change in people and societies. This is a psychological force and I'm not only referring to the breakdown at the end that is so jarring in its presentation, nor am I referring to the journal form that invites you into the mind of a woman who prefers to assume several different personalities. I am referring to the force that will overcome you as you read.

It's not surprising that Lessing loved reading Lawrence, for I saw pieces of *Women in Love* as I also saw fragments of Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*. Yet in comparing the inner workings of characters, the rumination, this sort of displacement of mind in body in society, I really saw Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I was disappointed that unlike Martha in Lessing's *Martha Quest*, I didn't see a character who cared much about the less-privileged around her--society's outcasts she should have been allegedly fighting for. An explanation could be that she couldn't, because as her mind weakened, so did her body, for she seemed to survive on sex, to even become enslaved by it. I would like to think that her mental lapse is why she evicted her homosexual tenant; why she didn't care about the biracial child her white male friend abandoned in stark poverty; why she gave that asshole a chunk of her life.

Anna tries to say a lot that is buried beneath a bombardment of ideals, in a stylistically stupefying novel of four notebooks that slowly emerge into one golden notebook of singular artistry. So even though I wanted social reform badass, Martha, I'd like to think that maybe Anna couldn't be a Martha because of this thing, and

the people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know...once having been there, there's a terrible irony, a terrible shrug of the shoulders, and it's not a question of fighting it, or disowning it, or of right or wrong, but simply knowing it is there, always.

Maybe I'd like to think of life as juxtaposition and not merely contradictions; arguably, there's distinction between the two. Or maybe I'd just like to view it this way.

Rowena says

"I see I am falling into the self-punishing, cynical tone again. Yet how comforting this tone is, like a sort of poultice on a wound."

— Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*

This big book is well worth the effort. Having started my foray into Lessing's work through her non-fiction, I was curious how her intellect would feature in her fiction writing. This definitely wasn't a light read; the

subject matter was pretty serious- life, feminism, politics, Africa and so on. The story revolves around Anna Wulf, single mother and best-selling author of one popular book, who is suffering from writer's block and is seeing a psychiatrist. The book follows Anna through her marriage, divorce, early years in Rhodesia, her countless love affairs, and her quest to find the right balance as a woman while being a mother, while recording various life events in a series of colour-coded notebooks.

Generally I liked the candidness of this book though I felt some aspects were too graphically described. I kept thinking all the way through the book about how impactful it must have been when it was first published over 60 years ago especially as it dwelt on the subject matters of feminism and female sexuality.

Because I live in a relatively emancipated age, the feminist parts didn't interest me as much as the political and historical content. The section on European life in colonial Southern Rhodesia was intriguing. Also, seeing how communism was treated was interesting especially as I don't think communism has such a great stigma these days. Politics were definitely a large part of this book.

Did I like Anna? I found her slightly infuriating for the most part but at the same time as a woman I can definitely sympathize with her, issues that affect many women. Trying to find balance mostly.

The book was written in a fragmented style, which I quite liked because it kind of ties in with Anna and her fragmented persona:

“We’re driven by something to be as many different things or people as possible.”

I put off writing this review for so long because there was so much content and points for discussion in the book. This is the perfect book to discuss with others; too bad it’s too long for my bookclub.

Ruth says

I created a new Goodreads shelf, "aborted," specifically for this book (& any future ones that I stop reading). Apparently it's an important novel & has been very influential, but I found it terribly tedious. 126 pages in, I found myself sinking into a foul mood: the characters are minutely analyzed but still feel remote, & the central conflict at that point (the beginnings of the collapse of hope & a sense of purpose among a group of Communist Party members), which would normally fascinate me, just annoyed me. And the book is huge & weighs down my commute bag.

So away with you, irritating tome!

Drew says

Like every really, really good book I read, this one left me somewhat at a loss for words. Nonetheless, I'll try to do it some justice if I can.

I hesitated to read this book for a long time because of the description it always gets: Anna, a writer, keeps four different notebooks, one about her experiences in Africa, one about the Communist Party, one of autobiographical fiction, and one that's a diary. At the end of her psychic chain and in love with an American writer, she decides to combine them all into one golden notebook.* And so on. This to me sounded, well, really boring. Not going to sugar-coat it. Luckily, it wasn't at all; this is a fat book, no doubt, but it does grab you right from the beginning, and I'll say that I finished the last 350 pages in a single feverish day. This quote from the back also helped:

"What's terrible is to pretend that the second-rate is the first-rate. To pretend that you don't need love when you do; or you like your work when you know you're quite capable of better."

Not because it demonstrates top-notch prose (Lessing's prose verges more toward the unassuming than toward the pyrotechnic, though it's still tight, disciplined, and a pleasure to read) but because the sentiment is one that I agree with.

As that quote should demonstrate, *The Golden Notebook* isn't about notebooks, or feminism, or communism, or any other ism, despite what people will tell you. Lessing herself, in her introduction, both marveled at the fact that people made such diverse claims about what the book was "about," and railed against the fact that almost nobody seemed to see the whole picture the way she did.

So what IS it about? Were I pressed, I would say it's about how to cope with all the first-world problems that go along with being conscious of third-world problems. Anna, the central character, is both a Communist and a feminist (though the latter word doesn't get bandied about--this book may have been from before the term was popular), meaning she's concerned with inequality. She's spent some time in Africa, observing the abject failure of the communist dream. She's spent some time volunteering for the Communist Party in England, watching them feebly try to defend Stalin's actions in the late '40s and early '50s. And she's spent her whole life in and out of ill-fated romances with men who seem normal but are monsters, or men who seem normal but are shadows of their former selves, or men who seem perfect but inexplicably leave her. So in short, Anna spends her life fighting personal battles against chauvinism and impersonal battles against global inequality, and both sets of battles, so far as we see in the book, are futile.

Anna's endless meditation on this futility is one thing I found particularly helpful and illuminating--specifically the conclusion that the futility of a given project in no way constitutes a reason not to attempt it. E.g. everyone in the US knows his or her vote doesn't count; lots of people use that idea as a reason not to vote, and I imagine Anna has nothing but contempt for them. Some people vote anyway, and this is the right choice, but the justification is complex, and to try to express it here would be to oversimplify--just read the book!

One other thing that left a big impression on me was that *The Golden Notebook* is deeply concerned, even on a structural level, with how women think and perceive, and how that differs from the way men think and perceive. You would think that you could understand something of this just by reading books by female authors, but I suspect that many female authors try to write from a more universal perspective, in order to capture a more universal audience.

Lessing, as an author of integrity above all (see the above quote if you don't believe me), is never tempted to do such a thing, and the results are fascinating. In her book, Anna and Molly converse in such a way that the meaning of the words they say is not even close to the whole of the communication. Facial expressions (and I'm not talking about something as facile as smiling v. frowning, I'm talking about minuscule variations--a real smile, a fake smile, a twitch, a quick eye movement, etc.), tone and timbre of voice, body language,

spatial positioning, and other less tangible factors are equally important, or maybe even more important than content. Anna in particular is so perceptive when it comes to these nuances that it can seem like telepathy--she often knows what a given character is going to say or do before it happens--and it's completely believable. Here's an extended example that includes everything I've mentioned so far. Anna is talking with her Communist friend Molly's son about his businessman father (Molly and the father are divorced):

He said unexpectedly: "You know, he's not stupid at all."

[Anna:] "I don't think we've said that he is."

Tommy smiled patiently, saying: "You're dishonest. He said aloud: 'When I said I didn't want those jobs he asked why, and I told him, and he said, I reacted like that because of the influence of the communist party.'"

Anna laughed: "I told you so; and said: 'He means your mother and me.'"

Tommy waited for her to have finished saying what he had expected her to say, and said: "There you are. That's not what he meant. No wonder you all think each other stupid; you expect each other to be. When I see my father and my mother together, I don't recognise them, they're so stupid. And you too, when you are with Richard."

"Well what did he mean, then?"

"He said that what I replied to his offers summed up the real influence of the communist parties on the West. He said that anyone who has been, or is, in the C.P., or who has had anything to do with it is a megalomaniac. He said that if he was Chief of Police trying to root out communists somewhere, he'd ask one question: 'Would you go to an undeveloped country and run a country clinic for fifty people?' All the Reds would answer: 'No, because what's the point of improving the health of fifty people when the basic organisation of society is unchanged.' He leaned forward, confronting her, and insisted: 'Well, Anna?' She smiled and nodded: 'All right; but it was not enough.' She said: 'No, that's not stupid at all.'"

He leaned back, relieved. But having rescued his father, so to speak, from Molly's and Anna's scorn, he now paid them their due: "But I said to him, that test wouldn't rule you or my mother out, because both of you would go to that clinic, wouldn't you?" It was important to him that she should say yes; but Anna insisted on honesty, for her own sake. "Yes, I would, but he's right. That's exactly how I'd feel."

Obviously, this little passage touches on the futility-theme, although only on the surface compared to where the rest of the book goes. What's more interesting is that you can tell even from this small example that the way dialogue is handled in *The Golden Notebook* is quite unusual, and has to be, because it's not just covering quoted conversation, it's covering all the other variables I mentioned above. Anna interprets "You're dishonest" from nothing more than a patient smile; she sees confrontation in a lean; and the sum of all the nonverbal information he's given her over the course of the conversation makes her sure of the correct answer to his final question. And she's always right. Not only that, but every movement she makes comes attached to a meaning: for her, a laugh can and does mean specifically 'I told you so'; a smile can indicate concession, although she notes it's 'not enough.' Every word she can't say because it would be too painful (whether to her or her interlocutor) aloud, she consigns to a subtle gesture or expression or movement--the meaning still gets communicated, although the recipient may or may not notice.

This noticing is important too, and Anna's thoughts about it get close to the root of why women seem so inscrutable to men, and vice versa. Some men in *The Golden Notebook* are perceptive enough to have a conversation on the same plane as Anna; Tommy, above, is one of them. Most of them, including Richard, are not. Anna constantly marvels at the fact that most men treat the text of what they say as the most important, or even only, aspect of the communication, and the fact that this preference causes all sorts of grave miscommunication between men and women. Possibly this is all obvious; certainly it must be obvious to anyone who's studied this sort of thing. But it's still illuminating to see it play out over the course of the novel, and though I'm familiar with the concept too, I don't feel like I'm the more perceptive type--I constantly struggle to interpret shrugs, leans, smiles, etc. So the book has all sorts of interesting case studies

for me.

If none of this sounds remotely interesting to you, then you may not like the book. But if that's not the case, give it a try; Lessing is the real deal.

*It seemed particularly lame to me that she would make a 'golden' notebook if she'd already had a yellow one, but I imagine this very specific qualm stems from a climbing incident in which I was attempting to belay my partner on two ropes simultaneously,** and it was key for each rope to have a name, so that I could give slack with one while taking it in with the other, and though one rope was mostly orange and the other one mostly blue--I kid you not--my partner insisted on referring to them as 'yellow' and 'gold.'

**This technique is for minimizing the likelihood that a crucial rope will be severed by a falling rock, if you're curious.
