

Doris Lessing. *The Sweetest Dream*. Flamingo, 2001.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Doris Lessing turned 82 this year, but she shows no sign of mellowing or tiring. Her output continues to be prodigious, even for a writer half her age. Since 1994 she has published no fewer than 6 new books – 2 volumes of autobiography and 4 novels, and her range of styles is as various as it ever was. The most recent novels have included a futurist fable (*Mara and Dann*), a smaller-scale but not short realist novel (*Love, Again*), a picaresque sequel to *The Fifth Child*, her modern-day morality tale (*Ben in the World*), and, most recently, a huge baggy family saga, *The Sweetest Dream*.

With *The Sweetest Dream*, Lessing has reverted to the 60s in more than just subject matter. In her author's note – she can rarely resist the temptation to include one – she expresses the hope that she has managed to recapture the spirit of the 60s, and perhaps for this reason she has written a book very reminiscent of *The Four-Gated City* and, to a lesser extent, *The Golden Notebook*.

The first thing that struck me about this new novel was its sheer size – a large format paperback with 480 odd pages. The scale of the book is matched and perhaps justified by the enormous range of issues it grapples with. All her familiar themes from the 60s are there – the legacy of the world wars, the cruel stupidity of communism and communists, the ravages of mental illness and the resulting breakdown of families – but a few new targets have been identified – the corruption of post-colonial regimes, poverty and the AIDS epidemic in

Africa and, controversially perhaps, the excesses of feminism. 'Some people have come to think that our – the human being's – greatest need is to have something or somebody to hate. For decades the upper classes, the middle class, had fulfilled this useful function ... But now this creed showed signs of wearing thin. The new enemy, men, was even more useful, since it encompassed half the human race. From one end of the world to the other, women were sitting in judgement on men. ... Never have there been smugger, more self-righteous, unself-critical people.' (227)

Lessing has lost none of her indignation – one might almost call it rage – and it seems to surprise even her that her female mainstay, Frances – the capable middle-aged woman found in so many of her books – is allowed to achieve happiness with her second husband Rupert despite his chronically useless first wife and troubled children. 'To be so thoroughly out of phase with one's time does take a certain bravado: a man and a woman daring to love each other so thoroughly – well, it was hardly to be confessed, even to each other.' (473)

Similar remarks are made several times through the novel.

The drama which Lessing herself initiated when she left her 2 children behind with first husband in Southern Rhodesia, to be brought up by a new wife, is played out over and over in this book. Frances takes on a steady stream of other people's children, children who can't get on with their own parents for one reason or another. The generation gap is endemic in her world. One could be forgiven for believing that Frances is the only capable adult in London, with flocks of discontented teenagers arriving for every meal, as well as the discarded wives of both her husbands. She is in a way irritatingly passive – a sometimes ungracious martyr to the demands others make of her, but unable to say no. She

works to pay the household bills, cooks enormous meals, lovingly described – in another life, Lessing could have been a food writer – and provides emotional support for a bewildering array of people – not all well differentiated, although there are some memorable characters like the detestable Rose, who repays Frances' generosity by becoming a journalist and raking as much muck as she can over the family's name. The complexities of kinship are sometimes extreme. Lessing's point is that blood ties mean nothing. Sylvia, for example, the fragile, anorexic step-daughter of Frances' first husband Johnny, cannot cope with her unstable and over-emotional mother, but finds a surrogate in Julia, Johnny's mother, who is no relation.

Lessing is as careless as ever of the niceties of novel-writing. Her characters often sidle into the narrative – a person who is mentioned casually can suddenly take on a major role – but on the other hand a minor character is sometimes described in great detail. Dramatic events, too, can grow out of everyday scenes with little preparation. I am sure this is a deliberate technique: it is an approach to truthfulness which has always been her aim, even in her most fantastic work. Even her style with its occasional clumsiness and the bare bones of her didacticism showing through, is intentionally rough. She has said that she doesn't polish her work, she roughens it, and I'm convinced that she regards beautiful prose as in some way dishonest.

This is vintage Lessing – and there's plenty of it. It's absorbing despite a loss of intensity about 2/3rds of the way through, when decades slip past and suddenly the teenagers of the first part of the novel are in their 40s. But it's a heroic work in her inimitable style, and her admirers will not be disappointed.