
Alice Ridout, Roberta Rubenstein, and Sandra Singer, eds. *Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook After Fifty*. New York: Palgrave, 2015. Pp. xi, 221. CAD \$90.

The introduction to *Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook After Fifty*, written by editors Alice Ridout, Roberta Rubenstein, and Sandra Singer, opens with an acknowledgement of Lessing's irritation at having her landmark novel misread by many readers and reviewers at the time of its publication, in 1962. In 1971, Lessing famously reacted to the audience's response in a preface that is included in all subsequent reprintings of *The Golden Notebook*. After explaining the concept of breakdown as self-healing, the "inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions," Lessing writes: "But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled . . . as being about the sex war" (8). She asserts that "the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize" (Lessing 10).

Despite Lessing's instruction and her "stated objections to analytical critique," contributors to the compilation challenge Lessing's interpretation of her own novel, approaching *The Golden Notebook* from a variety of angles, "even against authorial authority itself" (Ridout et al. 3). Unsurprisingly, Lessing's warning against division is similarly unheeded, given the novel's length and thematic and formal complexity. In Julie Cairnie's words, "critics carve up *The Golden Notebook* according to our own proclivities" (19). The collection, put together to celebrate Lessing's text after five decades, is afforded

“[j]ust over a half-century of chronological distance from the novel and its mid-fifties setting and preoccupations,” which enables “new geopolitical, theoretical, social, aesthetic, and autobiographical approaches through which to appreciate and reevaluate this ever-provocative text” (3).

Cairnie discusses the sections set in Rhodesia in the 1940s and their relevance to black and white Zimbabwean women writers; Ridout makes a delightful comparison between *The Golden Notebook* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*; and Jonah Raskin reminisces about a day spent interviewing Lessing on a bed in an old farmhouse. In these examples alone, the collection addresses vastly diverse topics, all circling Lessing and her novel, which continues to “challenge, surprise, and inspire twentieth-century readers” (9). The book includes a comprehensive introduction and twelve contributions from “established and emerging scholars across several generations and nationalities—American, Canadian, British, Australian” (3). The pieces range in topic and approach, are categorized into three parts, and clearly demonstrate that Lessing’s novel still has much to offer contemporary criticism over fifty years after its creation.

In Part I, “Politics and Geopolitics,” four contributors discuss political aspects of Lessing’s novel—the African setting of the black notebook (Cairnie), nuclear deterrence and the Cold War as important to the book’s narrative (Mark Pedretti, Cornelius Collins), and a discussion of feminism and homosexuality/homophobia in the text (Singer)—from a contemporary viewpoint and trace the implications of *The Golden Notebook* past the time of its publication and into the book’s future. Pedretti’s “Doris Lessing and the Madness of Nuclear Deterrence” is one of the most compelling pieces in the collection. He focuses on an area that is largely ignored in previous scholarship about the text: the importance of the nuclear bomb. He attributes this oversight to the general categorization of Cold War fiction as largely American and postmodern. By first tracing the relationship between postwar American literature and postmodernism, Pedretti also posits an “as yet unrecognized field of British nuclear literature” that encompasses *The Golden Notebook* and other British postwar books (34). Though focusing more on protagonist Anna Wulf’s dreams, Collins writes a very similar piece to Pedretti’s. Both emphasize nuclear weapons and the Cold War, the same dream passages, Mother Sugar (Anna’s therapist), and similar newspaper clippings from the text. The two essays are repetitive, especially placed one after the other, and this is perhaps the only time that the inclusion of an essay is noticeably inconsistent in the collection.

Part II, “Autobiographical, Aesthetic, and Theoretical Reconsiderations,” turns to the relationship between the novel’s form and content, raising

considerations of its generic and periodic classification. Roberta Rubenstein uses the archived documents of Clancy Sigal, with whom Lessing had a “romantic liaison” (101), as a key to *The Golden Notebook*, which she suggests is a *roman à clef*. Tonya Krouse argues that the novel “bridges the concerns of the first and second halves of the twentieth century” (131), which makes its categorization as either modern or postmodern impossible, and Sophia Barnes questions the notion of authorship by using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony. Another strong essay closes this section: Ridout’s “Rereading *The Golden Notebook* After Chick Lit.” The connection between Lessing’s novel and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* does not seem immediately apparent, but Ridout compares the two in a persuasive argument that suggests one may “read *The Golden Notebook* as an enabling text for chick lit” (166). By identifying the novels’ “focus on single women gaining mutual support from each other in a challenging urban environment” (155) and successfully applying a post-Foucauldian analysis of self-surveillance to both texts (160), Ridout’s piece convincingly connects Lessing’s and Fielding’s novels.

There is an irony in including, and in fact finishing with, Part III, titled “‘Timing is All’: Personal Reminiscences.” After an introduction and two sets of articles that largely challenge Lessing’s authority as the author of *The Golden Notebook*, the final section focuses on personal recollections of Lessing by scholars and friends, which include more intimate interpretations of the novel based on knowledge of Lessing, and sections of interviews in which, as with her 1971 preface, she reflects on her own writing. In “I Remember Doris Lessing and Her Illimitable Novel,” John Raskin writes that “[t]he famous author rose up in the same place her novel [*The Golden Notebook*] once occupied in my scheme of things” (183). Paul Schlueter (one of the earliest experts in Lessing scholarship), Florence Howe, and Gillian Beer also provide personal memories of Lessing and her books in this section. In the final part of the collection, Lessing the author gains import, again, to the interpretation of her text. Raskin’s title says what *Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook After Fifty* suggests: Lessing’s masterpiece remains important to current scholarship because it seems to be, or perhaps is, illimitable.

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Works Cited

Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. 1962. London: Harper, 2007. Print.