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Lessing Is More

By Marya Smith

Last October I went to hear Doris Lessing speak, thinking of myself as a suppliant at the feet of a great woman writer. I left several hours later with very different thoughts about myself and the two hundred or so women and men who had chosen to spend that particular work-night evening in that particular fashion—seeing the word made flesh, so to speak.

I arrived a full hour early, along with dozens of others, to be assured a ticket. Six o'clock came and Lessing walked to the podium. Despite a troublesome cough, she read admirably from her new book (part two of her autobiography) and from a prepared speech. The words were good, and I felt satisfied, getting more than my money's worth from my \$10 ticket.

Then the questions began, and Lessing managed to demolish most of our expectations of how a Famous Author should perform. Her visible reluctance to be in our midst and her blunt, cutting answers were as unsettling as her fiction can be. She may have been on her publisher's leash for the requisite book tour, but this was no dancing bear.

Stepping up to the mike, many of the questioners passionately told Lessing where they had first read her, how she had changed their lives. She was unimpressed, dismissing most of the questions as unsuitable, even foolish. Toward the end, one man commended Lessing for her "combative" attitude.

One business-suit-clad man, who had spent most of the pre-talk wait on his cell phone, professed, "I was so taken by your books when I read them in the seventies that I traveled to London and tried every means I could to arrange a meeting with you, but your publishers insisted that it would be impossible."

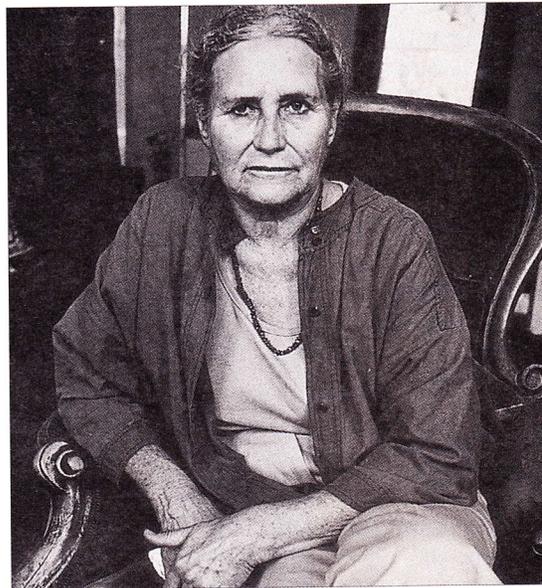
Lessing said curtly, "If I met everyone for tea, I wouldn't be able to get any

work done, would I?"

"But what were you doing in the seventies?" he insisted. "Were you in self-imposed exile?"

He hadn't understood. He thought her unavailability must have had a momentous cause, and he wanted to know what important event had kept her from him. That the woman simply preferred to work went right past him.

In answer to the next question she re-



sponded, "Actually, my mind is on the book I'm writing now, the book this tour is keeping me from." Lessing, it became clear, would rather we were all back at home reading her books, not sitting in the plush seats of the Art Institute of Chicago's Rubloff Auditorium expecting to be entertained.

A woman finally asked the question forming in many of our minds: "Why are you here tonight?"

"I'm promoting my new book. It's only in the last fifteen years that authors have been expected to do this kind of thing," Lessing answered, and waved her hand, her voice trailing off. Then she spoke again with force: "You might better ask yourself why *you* are here."

To pay our respects, to touch the hem

of your skirt, to be uplifted by a favorite author speaking from a safe, secular pulpit. Or were my high-minded motives somewhat lower than I wanted to think? Why am I here, I began to wonder. Away from my reading chair, where I might actively connect with the author's mind and heart, what did I expect? Here, I had become the passive but demanding consumer—consuming the author, devouring her precious writing time.

I began to wonder when viewing the Celebrity Author became as much the point as reading the book. Was it around the same time that the concept of Artist as Knickknack emerged—when museum shop offerings began overshadowing the mega-retrospectives of art that inspired them? Eyeing the water lily key chains, address books, and umbrellas, would Monet be as ambivalent as Lessing? Gratified in part by the sales—but also despairing, wanting to send patrons out of the gift shop and back to the galleries?

I felt uncomfortable, seeing myself for the first time as an eager participant in the culture of promotion, one of the reader/consumers whose expectations drew the reluctant author away from her desk. And I felt a little sad to see the great Lessing herself, author of the classic *The Golden Notebook* and other profound works, entrapped in the demands of marketing. That night she was product or commodity as surely

as her books on the table outside.

I was suddenly glad for her simmering anger, her resistance to the whole system that had, at least temporarily, taken her captive.

Reflecting on how Lessing fielded our questions so testily that night, I am just beginning to hear the subtext to her frustration:

This is not what writers do, parading around the world answering questions. What writers do is sit alone, thinking, writing.

This Promoter/Performer is not who I am: search for me in my books. Find me on the page. Ask your questions there, and I will answer readily. Ms.
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