

DORIS LESSING (1919- 2013), "To Room Nineteen," pp. 197-229, unedited, pp. 197-198

Excerpts from *Women & Fiction. Short Stories by and about Women* (New York: Mentor – Penguin Group, 1975); see also: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,2188747,00.html>

Doris Lessing was born in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran), the daughter of a British army captain and a musician. At the age of 5, she moved with her family to a farm in southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she was educated at a Catholic school, though she quit at the age of 14 to earn her living at various secretarial jobs. She started writing at the age of 18. In 1949, after a brief marriage then divorce, she moved to England with a small child and very little money. She is best known for her 5-volume 'Martha Quest' series, Children of Violence and The Golden Notebook, a work described as treating writer's block, but about which she said, 'it is an attempt to explain certain political and sexual attitudes that have force now.' Lessing, whose earlier works dealt with social issues, such as racial and gender discrimination, has moved away from activist writing since the 1980s. In 2007, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, only the 11th woman to be so honored.

This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence; the Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence.

They were older when they married than most of their married friends: in their well-seasoned late twenties. Both had had a number of affairs, sweet rather than bitter; and when they fell in love—for they did fall in love—had known each other for some time. They joked that they had saved each other "for the real thing." That they had waited so long (but not too long) for this real thing was to them a proof of their sensible discrimination. A good many of their friends had married young, and now (they felt) probably regretted lost opportunities; while others, still unmarried, seemed to them arid, self-doubting, and likely to make desperate or romantic marriages.

Not only they, but others, felt that they were well matched: their friends' delight was an additional proof of their happiness. They had played the same roles, male and female, in this group or set, if such a wide, loosely connected, constantly changing constellation of people could be called a set. They had both become, by virtue of their moderation, their humour, and their abstinence from painful experience people to whom others came for advice. They could be, and were, relied on. It was one of those cases of a man and a young woman linking themselves whom no one else had ever thought of linking, probably because of their similarities. But then everyone exclaimed: Of course! How right! How was it we never thought of it before!

And so they married amid general rejoicing, and because of their foresight and their sense for what was probable, nothing was a surprise to them.

Both had well-paid jobs. Matthew was a subeditor on a large London newspaper, and Susan worked in an advertising firm. He was not the stuff of which editors or publicized journalists are made, but he was much more than "a subeditor," being one of the essential background people who in fact steady, inspire and make possible the people in the limelight. He was content with this position. Susan had a talent for commercial drawing. She was humorous about the advertisements she was responsible for, but she did not feel strongly about them one way or the other.

Both, before they had married, had had pleasant flats, but they felt it unwise to base a marriage on either flat, because it might seem like a submission of personality on the part of the one whose flat it was not. They moved into a new flat in South Kensington on the clear understanding that when their marriage had settled down (a process they knew would not take long, and was in fact more a humorous concession to popular wisdom than what was due to themselves) they would buy a house and start a family.

And this is what happened. They lived in their charming flat for two years, giving parties and going to them, being a popular young married couple, and then Susan became pregnant, she gave up her job, and they bought a house in Richmond. It was typical of the couple that they had a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter. Everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose. But people did feel these two had chosen; this balanced and sensible family was no more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense for *choosing* right.

And so they lived with their four children in their garden house in Richmond and were happy. They had everything they had wanted and had planned for.

And yet...

Well, even this was expected, that there must be a certain flatness....

Yes, yes, of course, it was natural they sometimes felt like this. Like what?

Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail. Matthew's job for the sake of Susan, children, house, and garden—which caravanserais needed a well-paid job to maintain it. And Susan's practical intelligence for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden—which unit would have collapsed in a week without her.

But there was no point about which either could say: "For the sake of *this* is all the rest."

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(IMAGE SOURCE: Clipart in Microsoft Word)

GIST: Ms. Meyer got a mysterious note asking her to go to Room 19 in a dodgy hotel. Who could possibly have sent it to her, and when? **TAKE TWO MINUTES ONLY TO SKIM READ**, and **FIND** these words in the text / title, **COUNT** how many times they appear, and **CHOOSE** the correct numbers (ex., 9) from the pulldown menus. Oh, the mysterious note writer has included *at least* one thing not in the text / title, so watch out!

19/nineteen

Susan's

Mr. Richmond

4/four

DETAILED: So, Ms. Meyer might have gotten the note from Susan Rawling, or maybe even from Matthew Rawling, but why? **READ** the **questions** twice *WITHOUT* looking at the text, then **SCAN READ** the **text** twice *WITHOUT* looking at the questions, then **ANSWER** the **True (T) – False (F)** questions by ticking the correct answers *WITHOUT* looking back at the text. Watch out! You have **ONLY 15 MINUTES** to read the questions and the text, and do the answers. Be careful! The grumpy receptionist has included *at least* one trick question!

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 1. Susan and Matthew had two sons and two daughters. | T F |
| 2. Susan and Matthew had known each other awhile before falling in love. | T F |
| 3. They were a happy couple; there was nothing missing from their lives. | T F |
| 4. Susan and Matthew moved into a new flat, together, after they got married. | T F |
| 5. Susan and Matthew both contributed to keeping their little family going. | T F |
| 6. They were so sensible that people often went to them for advice. | T F |
| 7. The basis of the Rawlings' marriage was their shared love of living quietly. | T F |
| 8. Everyone was happy that they had gotten married. | T F |