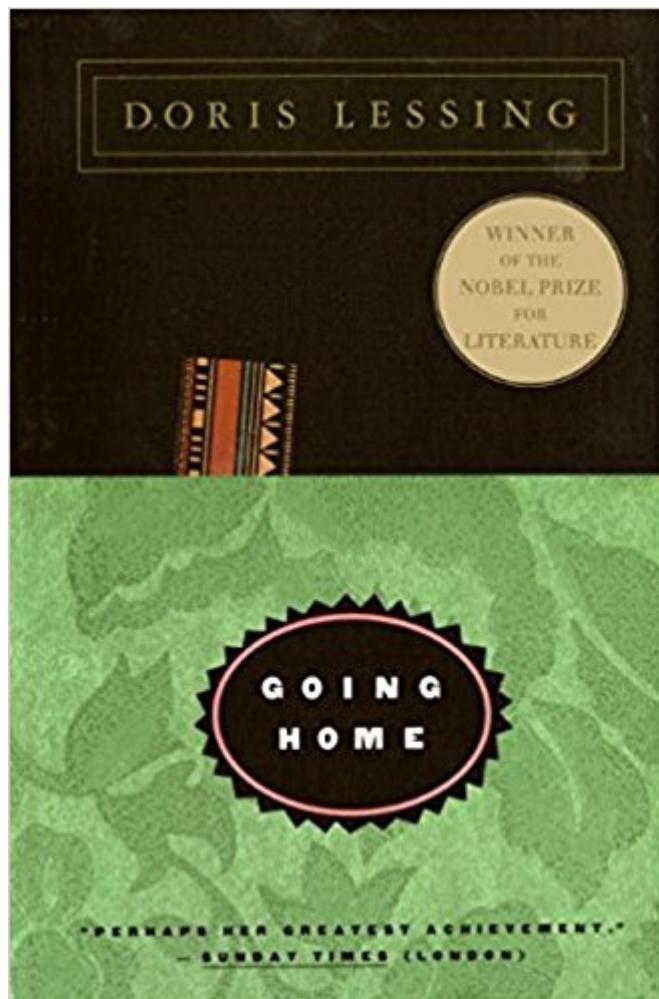


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Going Home



Synopsis

"Africa belongs to the Africans; the sooner they take it back the better. But--a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it. Perhaps it may be that love of Africa the country will be strong enough to link people who hate each other now. Perhaps..." Going Home is Doris Lessing's account of her first journey back to Africa, the land in which she grew up and in which so much of her emotion and her concern are still invested. Returning to Southern Rhodesia in 1956, she found that her love of Africa had remained as strong as her hatred of the idea of "white supremacy" espoused by its ruling class. Going Home evokes brilliantly the experience of the people, black and white, who have shaped and will shape a beloved country.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A coda to the events portrayed in *Under My Skin*, which sold more than 30,000 copies and is considered one of the most prominent autobiographies of 1994, *Going Home* is Lessing's account of her return to Africa, the land of her youth.

Winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature, Doris Lessing was one of the most celebrated and distinguished writers of our time, the recipient of a host of international awards. She wrote more than thirty books—among them the novels *Martha Quest*, *The Golden Notebook*, and *The Fifth Child*. She died in 2013.

Lessing documents the nature of the political and cultural milieu of Southern Rhodesia in the

mid-fifties. In many ways this is an excellent historical investigation in journalistic prose. My concern is with the book's underlying assumption that those who left Britain to occupy the colony either became less moral, or were already less moral, than those who stayed behind. Lessing tends to represent those who remained back in Britain as denizens of proper and correct behavior. Life in Africa is thus seen to exert a corrupting influence on otherwise wholesome and correctly mannered British people: "Why was it that when white people came out from Britain, first they were indignant about the colour bar and the treatment of the Africans, and then they very fast became as rude and cruel as the old Rhodesians?" (p162) I feel the book has the quality of being a bit dated for its moralizing perspective. "Africa belongs to the Africans" and Europe belongs to the Europeans is the underlying premise of the book -- and although it is unspoken, it comes across in many different ways, such as in the formulation quoted above. What needs to be examined, in order to give a sense of context to the book, is whether attitudes remain automatically "civilized" so long as they do not go abroad. Also, are black Africans not similarly subject to "corruption" by virtue of living in Africa -- or is this corrupting effect of the continent only effective on the whites who have gone there? Lessing's book attempt to teach a moral lesson about colonialism, but leaves these fundamental philosophical questions unanswered.

It is fifty years since Doris Lessing published *Going Home*, an account of her return to Rhodesia, the country where she grew up. By then in her thirties, she had already achieved the status of restricted person because of her political allegiances and her declared opposition to illiberal white rule. These days Zimbabwe makes the news because of internal strife and oppression. It is worth remembering, however, that fifty years ago the very structures of Southern Rhodesian society were built upon oppression, an oppression based purely on race. Fifty years on Doris Lessing's *Going Home* an historical record of this noxious system, a record that is more effective, indeed more powerful because of its reflective and observational, rather than analytical style. Doris Lessing, a one-time card-carrying Communist, laid a large slice of the blame for the perpetuation of discrimination firmly at the door of the white working class. Though not all white workers were rich - indeed she records that many were abjectly poor - what they had and sought to preserve was an elevated status relative to the black population. She describes white artisans as white first and artisans second. Though trade unions actively sought equal pay for equal work, they never campaigned for any kind of parity for black workers. On the contrary, they demanded the maintenance of racially differentiated pay rates. How's that for the spirit of socialist internationalism and brotherhood! (I accept there is a misplaced word there...). In fact Doris Lessing records that it was the relatively

liberal capitalist enterprises that demanded more black labour, their motive of course arising from cost savings, not philanthropy. So trade unions spent much of their time making sure that companies hired their quota of higher paid, white labour. Even in the 1950s, she remarks on the likelihood that many Africans were already better educated than their white counterparts. White youth shunned education as unnecessary, while Africans saw it as a possible salvation. She notes that the people who treated the African population the worst were recent immigrants from Europe, particularly those from Britain, who tended to be less educated themselves and drawn from the ranks of the politically reactionary. Such people, apparently, were equally critical of immigrants from southern Europe, and expected Spaniards and Greeks to work for African wages, not the white wages that they themselves demanded. The situation in Rhodesia, clearly, had to change. Not only was such crass discrimination unsustainable, it was also comic, as are all racially posited class systems. While the South Africans over the border created honorary whites of the Japanese they increasingly had to do business with, the Rhodesians went through their own equally idiotic contortions. An example of such nonsense is quoted by Doris Lessing when she remarks that there was a privileged group of Africans who were granted the right not to carry passes with them at all times, as long as they carried a pass to record their exemption. But it is also worth remembering that Doris Lessing, herself, was a banned person, unable to travel to certain places and very much under the watchful eyes of the authorities. In *Going Home* she observes a society that had to collapse under the weight of its unsustainable contradictions. The fact that this took more than twenty years after the book was written was nothing less than a crime, and probably contributed to the subsequent and equally lamentable reaction. Doris Lessing records seeing a British film towards the end of her travels. She describes it as a "cosy little drama of provincial snobberies and homespun moralities played out in front of African farmers in their big cars". Fifty years on, Britain is probably cosy and provincial, and the snobberies are still rife. But now it is not Rhodesia where these reactionaries look down on people of other races overpay and under-educated themselves. It is not in Africa where corporations would dearly love to employ cheaper labour, imported if need be. Rhodesia's white privilege of the 1950s was obviously absurd. But there are some parallels with economic and class relations in the Britain of today and, like all good books, Doris Lessing's *Going Home* may even add prescience to its qualities.

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