



The Good Terrorist

Doris Lessing

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A hugely significant political novel for the late twentieth century from one of the outstanding writers of the modern era. In a London squat a band of bourgeois revolutionaries are united by a loathing of the waste and cruelty they see around them. These maladjusted malcontents try desperately to become involved in terrorist activities far beyond their level of competence. Only Alice seems capable of organising anything. Motherly, practical and determined, she is also easily exploited by the group and ideal fodder for a more dangerous and potent cause. Eventually their naive radical fantasies turn into a chaos of real destruction, but the aftermath is not as exciting as they had hoped. Nonetheless, while they may not have changed the world, their lives will never be the same again...

The Good Terrorist Details

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From Reader Review The Good Terrorist for online ebook

Rob says

As a lefty and former squatter this book contains dozens of painful home truths familiar to all of us involved in radical politics. The tiny left group removed from reality. The bragging about violence on protests. The lazy 'vanguard thinkers' who let everyone else do the work. All are present and correct in Lessing's unforgiving assault on a hapless bunch of middle class revolutionaries drifting from squat to squat in an attempt to escape from the real world. Alice, intelligent but consumed by her hatred of her parents, narrates this tale of pathetic naive idiocy as the band of brave class struggle warriors attempt to form dangerous alliances with the IRA and the Soviet Union. Jasper, Alice's whinging, bullying partner, is one of the most loathsome characters I have ever come across. Lessing said that if she wrote the book now it would have a religious rather than political dimension. Well, Chris Morris has dutifully produced that film already, with his *Four Lions*, which depicts the doomed efforts of a group of British Jihadists. My one complaint - this book is so consumed with its attack that it forgets to depict any positive aspects to progressive politics - there are no sympathetic characters, no-one working for real change, which as we know, so many genuinely want to fight for.

Jayyan Al-Bailasan says

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Naomi Foyle says

I found the staccato, pile-up syntax grating at first, but by the end of the book I was engrossed. That restless, angular, off-putting voice, I soon realised, not only conveys the world, ‘raw and dismal’, through Alice’s eyes, but also Alice and her world through Lessing’s. A Communist who hasn’t read Marx, a hostile daughter who steals from her own family, yet also a driven homemaker and fearless opponent of bureaucratic injustice, Alice’s triumphant judgements of others are simultaneously Lessing’s stinging condemnations of her central character’s moral blindness. The book was criticised in the NYT for not allowing Alice greater self-awareness, but the situation she creates for herself was highly unlikely to permit that – the greater the violence one indulges in, the more one needs to defend one’s behaviour. Rather, the book offers passages which peel away the abrasive layers of her personality like old wallpaper, giving us brief glimpses of Alice’s searing empathy for vulnerable others, but also of the lonely, unfulfilled woman she can never – without

flaring up in angry self-pity - acknowledge. I found her emotional displacement far more tragic and realistic than any psychological breakdown or guilt-ridden revelation on her part would have been. In a sense a disquisition on social and political violence, the book prises open a jarring complex of abusive behaviours - state violence, childhood trauma, emotional blackmail, terrorist atrocity - and tracks their mutual dependence. 'Battered babies grow up,' Roberta insists. Sometimes into not very likable people - but that's all the more reason to care what happens to them.

Manny says

I was thinking the other day about C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, a book which I utterly loathe. As I said in my review, you can pardon the uninspired writing or the preachiness. What gets me angry is the subplot with Puzzle the donkey, who fronts the religious coup and, somehow, is whitewashed and receives eternal salvation. Apparently, because his unspeakably evil acts were performed in good faith, everything is fine. The surprising thing is that Lewis lived through WW II, and was writing not that long after the Nuremberg trials, which, I thought at least, ought to have established for that generation that it's not sufficient merely to say that one was obeying orders.

Lewis gets away with it, at least as far as some people are concerned, partly because you aren't shown any direct chain of cause and effect between Puzzle's actions and the reign of terror those actions unleash. So it seemed natural to me to think that someone ought to write a book that filled in the gaps, portraying a not overly bright but essentially kind and well-meaning person who inadvertently and largely unknowingly finds themselves serving evil. When I got this far, I realized that I had already read the book in question: it's *The Good Terrorist*, which presents the moral issues in a far deeper and more convincing manner than *The Last Battle*. ~~If I felt like taking a cheap shot, I might add that this illustrates the difference between winning the Carnegie Medal and winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, but I will resist the temptation to do so.~~

In Lessing's novel, the central character, Alice, is rather like Puzzle. She's emotionally dependent on a wicked and manipulative person, and ends up helping them in all sorts of practical ways. But the story is far more credible. In Lewis's novel, evil is at least satisfyingly grandiose; Puzzle's misguided actions trigger the Apocalypse, which eventually turns out to be a Good Thing. (I'm not even going to start on analyzing what might be wrong with that argument). In Lessing's version, evil is more like the kind that we see every day. The terrorists are not just bad, but also pretty incompetent. Compare for example with Robert Mugabe, who's currently in the news all the time. He's ruining Zimbabwe though a mixture of evil and plain stupidity; it's hard to say which one is more important.

The biggest difference, however, is that Alice, deep down, is well aware of what she is doing. She just chooses not to think about it, which is what really happens most times that people come into contact with evil. The critical principle established at Nuremberg was that people who are given orders they know are morally wrong are obliged to refuse them. Lessing understands this extremely well, and wants to help the rest of us understand it better. I still can't quite grasp what Lewis was trying to do.

Glenn Sumi says

My admiration for Nobel laureate Doris Lessing continues to grow with this novel about a naïve group of

revolutionaries living in a squat in mid-1980s London.

Lessing's triumph is getting deep inside the complex mind of Alice Mellings, a spoilt, entitled and very clever upper-middle-class woman in her 30s who acts like the squat's den mother and is filled with contradictions.

Alice detests the striving, materialistic middle classes, and yet she enjoys – really thrives on – fixing up her squat and feeding her lazy comrades. She hates that her parents have split up, and yet she's enmeshed in a doomed relationship with a man named Jasper who's clearly closeted and is repulsed by her physically. And she loathes capitalism, although she's all too ready to steal cash and valuables from her parents and their friends.

What's remarkable is that Lessing lets us see things through Alice's perspective, but also shows us how appalling her behaviour is on a human level. Alice is such a good judge of human behaviour, but lacks the ability to understand her own failings. I imagine Lessing drew on her observations and experiences – and eventual disillusionment – with the Communist party decades earlier.

It's never really clear what the revolutionaries in this book want to do or achieve. At first they want to join the I.R.A. Then there's talk about Russia. Some of them affect working class accents to seem legitimate, even while ignoring actual working class people in their midst. No one discusses politics, but they go to the odd demonstration, occasionally quote Lenin and call anyone they disagree with "fascists."

While the book ticks away quietly for 300 pages, taken up with all manner of domestic and bureaucratic matters, Lessing sets the stage for a truly explosive finale. The casual way the climax is handled will make you think about the randomness and sheer banality of some terrorist acts and organizations.

Besides Alice, and perhaps Alice's mom, Dorothy, who's also disillusioned (is it a coincidence that Lessing's given them both names that evoke fictional girls who find themselves in fantastic, often scary worlds?), the characters aren't all that well-rounded. But that's intentional. One of the most disturbing things about the book is how the revolutionaries don't care about human life, only their own needs. When someone leaves, or attempts suicide, or even dies? Meh. They barely care. (Comrades, indeed.) Alice does, but is it because she's "well brought up," earning that adjective in the book's title?

This book is proof that you don't necessarily have to like a book's characters to be engrossed by them. Alice's insights and frustrating contradictions will haunt me, as will Lessing's brilliant, disturbing image of burying shit – literally, buckets of human waste – in one's back yard.

Sooner or later, that buried crap will come back. And Christ almighty will it be messy.

Neal Adolph says

It was around March 5th that I discovered it was Women's History Month. I was reading a book back then - a leftover of Black History Month - that I wasn't much enjoying. I quickly set it aside. There is a lot of literature I want to read that is written by women. But I could tell that no fiction was going to lift me out of whatever reading malaise it was that I acquired after finishing James Baldwin's lovely "Go Tell It On The Mountain". I picked up Naomi Klein's latest book and read two hundred pages. I wasn't impressed just yet, but I can see it is building towards something. At least, I think I can see that. Anyways, this is a review of the

book that I picked up after those two hundred, unsatisfying pages, suddenly feeling like I needed to really let my mind settle into fiction again.

The book was The Good Terrorist by Doris Lessing.

There is much to be said about this book and its exploration of terrorism in the late twentieth century. It is a satire, perhaps. Or, perhaps it is more specifically an insulting depiction of radicalism, its disorganization, its dependence upon incomplete, broken humans who desire so much but are convinced that they desire nothing. Does this make any sense yet? I'm not sure. Doris does it so well though that, all of a sudden, somehow, it does. And it is beautiful.

As many reviews have shown, though, the real triumph in this book lies in the characters rather than the plot. It centres around a commune/squat in London and its rotating membership. And these characters are interesting, tragic figures. Spurned by life. Seeking success. Fomenting hatred. Getting along and refusing to get along. Lessing clearly recognized that they needed to be well-developed because, in the end, not much really happens in this book. Lots of small events, sure, but things only really pick up in the last hundred pages.

That doesn't mean the first 250 are bad pages. In fact, I think they are my favourite pages - the last few, while still very good, clearly moved the book in a different direction and, to my mind, the book was weakened somewhat as a result. That said, if the book started in satire, it also ended in satire. The middle was devoted to the characters.

And one character in particular. Alice Mellings, the narrator and protagonist. And the reader vacillates in their judgement of her. Sometimes she is the calm, precise, intelligent, thoughtful figure. The maternal character in the home who is caring for everybody when they need caring and preventing catastrophes when they need to be prevented. Also the figure who is most frequently overlooked, despite her incredible contributions to the community. Alice is also the character with whom you grow most impatient. She makes silly choices, and abuses the wrong people in her life. She is terribly weak in all the wrong ways. And when she falters she seems to falter in all the wrong moments. And, in the end, you decide she is an unreliable narrator, and you have to wonder if what she has told you is true or just some falsified memory. The thing is, Lessing builds her up to have these flaws right from the get go, but they are dominated, rather than balanced, by the many great things that Alice does for her community. So you are a bit disappointed in your own judgement of her character when you reach the end.

The frustrating thing was that I understood Alice so well. I related to her perfectly. I saw myself in her, and then momentarily recognized myself in her band of friends. But Alice, above all others in this novel, may be one of the great characters of all the novels I have read.

This is my second Lessing novel, but I'll definitely be reading more. A Briefing for a Descent into Hell or Shikasta will be next, and hopefully before the end of the calendar year. I was impressed by what I saw - a controlled, brilliant mind was at work here. One whose opinions are clear and precise, and whose understanding of humanity is equally refined but entirely conflicted.

Abeer Saleh says

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 Extra:

Episode 1 of 2

A band of inept revolutionaries in a London squat are trying to court the IRA while Alice is homemaking. Stars Olivia Vinall

Episode 2 of 2

Faye is found bleeding after a suicide attempt, but Alice has promised not to involve the authorities.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09s...>

Jennifer (aka EM) says

It's been about 2 weeks now since I've finished *The Good Terrorist*, and so I'm in that place where I feel most compelled but least capable of writing a review. Since that's never stopped me before, here goes.

I must applaud Lessing for her skill at creating characters, Alice in particular, who are utterly annoying, petulant, stupid, dangerously immature, and appallingly destructive. These characters wrap their fundamental laziness and selfishness in a cloak of ignorant, misguided, sociopathological ideology, and revel in their victimhood while blaming everyone but themselves for their pathetic lot in life. If I met these people in real life, my inner school-marm would, I know, come blazing forth and I would give them each a right tongue-

lashing, berating them for being the spoilt children they are. Okay, I would probably do that later, in the car on the way home, after I thought of something pithy and eviscerating to say without needing to fear any comeback or comeuppance at the hands of these dangerously half-witted revolutionaries.

My most damning vitriol I would reserve for Alice, who--unlike the others--does NOT lack for redeeming qualities. She will work tremendously hard to make life better for herself and others (although her efforts are not the least altruistic or selfless). Alice is clever and spooky-smart about people, capable of seeing through them to their real motivations, and then using that--without compunction--to manipulate them and steal from them. She wields her resourcefulness and acuity as tools to 'beat the system' rather than effect constructive change, and so she lost my sympathy about 35 pages in. But Lessing has painted such a remarkable portrait, that despite my distaste for each and every one of the characters, I couldn't help but to keep reading. Oh yes, she hooked me, she did.

I spent the remainder of the book searching for some way in to Alice's psyche, to understand her and to excuse her abhorrent, ultimately criminal, actions. I couldn't. Lessing provided proof points to discount every possible reason why the 36-year-old Alice, living in a squat with a closeted gay boyfriend who frequently abandons and abuses her, is everybody's doormat. Mental illness, generational poverty, lack of education, childhood abuse or neglect--none of these likely suspects bore fruit as a logical explanation for Alice's behaviour.

So by the end, when Alice's full stupidity and cowardice were revealed--with no reasonable explanation available--I felt both frustrated and horrified. But...I'm questioning myself because smart people, not the least of whom the author herself, seem to think she was "quite mad" (as Lessing says in the *The Languages We Use* afterword). I certainly saw emotional volatility, odd outbursts, strange behaviour (possibly even delusional), and a definite anti-social inclination without any moral centre. But hell, Alice seemed the sanest of the lot! I therefore didn't see mental illness in Alice. Faye, yes. But not Alice. And, this is Lessing's major accomplishment: as she says, "if a mad person is in a political setting, or a religious one, a lot of people won't even notice he or she is mad."

Otherwise, I'd have to question what Lessing was trying to do here--was she trying to show how banal and commonplace evil really is? How easily we can overlook or misapprehend the looming dangers all around us? Specifically, how short a distance it is from armchair Communist (or any other ideological or religious zealotry) and petty thief to cold-blooded terrorist, bomb-maker and killer? Maybe this book was a little ahead of its time, but from the vantage point of 2009, these themes almost seem... oh, I don't know...quaintly simplistic, I guess.

The greater accomplishment was the extremely compelling dynamic between the unpleasantness of the characters, the stupidity and hypocrisy of their minor acts of vandalism and thievery and their own petty conflicts with each other versus the stumbling but inexorable march, despite being barely capable of getting themselves arrested along the way, to the final, bloody conclusion.

I found the black humour throughout extremely satisfying--visible only now, with some distance and thinking back on what Lessing's true achievement was here. There is not a shred of sympathy for the plight of these characters: they are shown to be hypocritical fools and incompetents, and downright cruel--behaviour that belies the more lofty principles they spout. Lessing was, in effect, putting her own politics under the magnifying glass. A clever feat, and worthy of a solid 4-stars (I'm upping my rating) even though, by the end, I still felt a little tricked into having spent so much time with such unpleasant people.

Deborah Markus says

After the Boston Marathon bombing, I had to reread this book. Everything I could say about it within that context -- that it shows the danger of "the cause" trumping morality; that terrorists are frightening not because they're monsters but because they aren't -- sounds trite and obvious. So I won't focus on those points, other than to say that yes, Doris Lessing does them full justice without being the least bit hamhanded.

Many of the Goodreads reviews of this book have mentioned how difficult it is to enjoy a book whose characters are so unlikable. Lessing reminds me in that respect of Shirley Jackson's early novel *The Road Through The Wall*. The difference is that Jackson's work is peopled with dozens of characters, every one of whom is at least off-putting and many of whom are positively repulsive. By the end of the book, the reader is forced to wonder what the point was either of reading or writing that book.

The Good Terrorist, on the other hand, is populated by weak and often annoying characters; but many are sympathetic in spite of their flaws, and seem bewildered to find themselves in this story.

We readers share their bafflement. What could Alice Mellings' parents have done that could possibly be seen as turning their daughter into the title character? Her father and mother are ordinary in many ways, interesting in others.

Her mother, Dorothy, is to me the most compelling character. She alone is utterly clear-eyed. Like many women of her generation, she realizes too late that the ordinary choices she made -- not going on to university, marrying very young -- doomed her to a life she's determined her own daughter won't repeat.

But Alice refuses to learn the lessons her mother struggles to teach her. She goes to university but refuses to look for work. Choosing instead to be a perpetual child, she lives a mangled copy of her mother's life.

Some of Dorothy's insights are disturbingly appropriate to current American political discourse. In a quarrel with a lifelong friend, she says:

"Do you realize I have to think twice before I invite you here? You can't be invited with anyone who has a different political opinion on anything, because you start calling them fascists! You won't meet anyone, even, who reads a right-wing newspaper. You've become a dreary bigot, Zoe, do you know that?"

And later in that conversation come this observation, which I'm terrified may be true:

"People go on [demonstrations] because they get a kick out of it. Like picnics. ...No one bothers to ask any longer if it achieves anything, going on marches or demos. They talk about how they feel. That's what they care about. It's for kicks. It's for fun. ...All you people, marching up and down and waving banners and singing pathetic little songs -- 'All You Need Is Love' -- you are just a joke. To the people who really run this world, you are a joke. They watch you at it and think: Good, that's keeping them busy."

Her friend accuses her of wanting to "smash things up." She means that Dorothy wants "to break with all your friends;" but I think Alice, who overheard this entire conversation, takes this idea quite literally. Dorothy has recently told Alice that Dorothy wasted her life cooking for people (family, friends) and is glad she doesn't have to anymore. Alice, who has spent most of the book making "wholesome" food for her "comrades," never makes another pot of soup. She refuses to stay at home preparing food for the returning hungry warriors, and instead insists on accompanying her friends to a bombing that is as senseless as it is

destructive.

This brilliant book is a difficult read. Many other reviewers have pointed out that for a story about terrorism, it's surprisingly slow-moving and low on action. Which is true until the very end. Nothing happens and nothing happens and then everything happens.

But don't be misled by the stretches of seeming calm. Every word, every scene, every conversation is there for a reason. Lessing is too great a writer to waste our time with unnecessary words.

Lubna Ah says

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Aubrey says

There are a lot of defenders of the notion that satire doesn't actually have to obviously criticize whatever odious mechanisms are incorporated into its workings in order to call itself such. Those people can stay in their paradisaical lah-dee-dah-I-Live-In-A-Vacuum-Land and far far away from me. If I wanted to engage with normalizing of Everything Fucked Up In The World instead of deconstructing the lot entirely, I'd go nearly everywhere else other than the world of satire. True, not all is written in my vein of goal. True, even some of that which is in my lane does more harm than good. However, thinking's a good thing to do. I like thinking. I'm going to keep on starting there rather than within the brick wall a great deal seem to prefer.

The interesting thing about empathy is how easily it is trained. It does not communicate. It does not seek to

change itself. What it does is push the empathetic individual to latch on to the most appealing targets that will be the easiest to "fix" when the more painful aspects of the biological capability arise. This compatibility between empathetic and empathized depends on a variety of factors: aesthetic appeal, ideological structure, proneness to violence, etc, etc. In main concerned character Alice's case, we have some special characteristics: civilized hospitality is All, violation of civilized hospitality (spanning from personal to governmental to international depending on Alice's pertaining awareness) is Evil Incarnate, and blind (and memory troubled) adherence to the former will Always End Well. When the successful track record runs long enough, it is hard to remember the holes and the luck.

In terms of not being like myself, an armchair critic who continues to reside in a well off suburban area, Alice gets full marks. In terms of her shitting on with one hand and entitling herself with the other to the fruits of capitalism, colonialism, feminism, and any other isms she cannot cure with a batch of soup, Alice is nothing more than a maternal figure with a need for a peculiar breed of urban warfare thrills. Armchair critic I may be, but as a member of a settler state, I am aware of how easily my death (among many) could appear in a chapter that touched upon "The Driving out of the Invaders of the North Americas" in the longer history of things, if the continent would even still be termed said Eurocentric such. Unlike Alice, I do not pretend to be entitled to any more death and destruction for "the greater good."

There are huge numbers of protests going around my country right now, and there will continue to be so while politics commits certain groups to the sector of Open Season. Those who see politics as useless, solely the fault of the populace, a mass hallucination of the young, a laughable thought of community in the state of supreme individualism, or solely the act of voting, walk away. Walk away, and only come back when you can tell me why this book is a tragedy, and how it came to be that some forms of slaughtering human beings for nothing are acceptable, and some are not.

Ahmed says

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Alexandra says

Meh! und Wäh!

Was hat die Kritikerin der WELT über dieses Buch geschrieben? *"Die gute Terroristin ist eine dramatische und literarisch aufregende Mischung aus Thriller, Gesellschaftsroman, Zeitgemälde und einem glühenden Plädoyer, dem Terror endlich eine endgültige Absage zu erteilen."*

Meine Meinung: Ein sprödes langweiliges nichtssagendes Werk in dem gehirntote gelangweilte Kinder der Oberschicht mit einem ausreichenden sozialen Netz a bissi rebellieren, Kommunismus und Arbeiterklasse spielen, alle verachten (auch jene Arbeiter, für die sie zu kämpfen vorgeben), blöde Parolen von Faschisten und Klassenkampf klopfen, die Eltern beklauen, demonstrieren, a bissi dilletantisch Bombenattentate ausführen... usw. usf. Die paar authentischen wirklichen arbeitslosen Hausbesetzer aus der Unterschicht werden eh an den Rand gedrängt, ausgenutzt und wenn sie abkratzen, zuckt man noch kurz mit den Schultern, schüttelt sich ab und macht mir der gaar so wichtigen Revolution weiter. Die meisten Figuren sind völlig ambivalent wie die Protagonistin Alice. Die Gute Terroristin ist kein Oxymoron, sondern die Hausbesetzerin ist wirklich so. Einerseits organisiert repariert kocht & putzt sie im besetzten Haus, um es für die sehr peinliche Revolutionsnachhilfegruppe zu Muttis Wohlfühlhöhle zu machen, andererseits verabscheut sie Spießertum und badet in langweiligen revolutionären Parolen.

Dabei muss ich bezüglich meiner Bewertung sagen, unsympathische Figuren machen mir gar nichts aus, aber wenn sie derart gähnend langweilig beschrieben sind, dann muss ich die Autorin abstrafen. Da wird doch tatsächlich raumgreifend ständig thematisiert ob man nun Kummerl nach UDSSR Ausrichtung, Trotzkist, IRA oder sonstwas ist und das nicht so kurz, knackig und witzig wie bei Monty Phytons konspirativen Treffen nach dem Circus im Rom mit der judäischen Volksfront bzw. der Volksfront von Judäa, sondern den ganzen Roman immer wieder und wieder. Und was soll das mit dem Upperclass Sprachduktus, den jeder einzelne der Hausbesetzergruppe durch irgendeinen anderen Unterschicht-Dialekt zu kaschieren versucht? Ausgewalzt nicht nur auf mehreren Seiten, nein es wird immer wieder als Thema im Roman aus der Mottenkiste des bourgeois Grauens hervorgekramt für jeden einzelnen der Gruppe aber auch jeder Fremde wird aufgrund des Sprachduktus detailliert analysiert und taxiert. Ich weiß von der Manie der Briten mit Sprache, aber muss ich das verstehen und auch noch raumgreifend lesen. Zudem werden gefühlte 1000 Suppen gekocht und die Hausrenovierung in einem Detaillierungsgrad geschildert, der dem Film Hinterholz 8 seine Ehre gemacht hätte.

Ab der Mitte des Werkes, immer wenn mir die Autorin irgendwas politisches mitteilen will, bin ich beinahe in Narkolepsie gefallen, weil es so platt und schnarchnasig vermittelt wird. Gleich einem Leierkasten oder einer hängengebliebenen Schallplatte ewig dieselben politischen Parolen, so kann die Revolution einfach nicht funktionieren, genausowenig wie dieser Roman, wenn sie beide so scheinheilig und total einschläfernd daherkommen. Das ist wirklich soooo *gähn*, wo die Thrillerelemente bei all dem Gekochte, Geputze, den Reparaturen dem peinlichen Spiel auf Eratzfamilie und wo das glühende Plädoyer gegen Terrorismus in diesem Buch abgeblieben sein soll, ist mir schleierhaft, ich habt mit der Lupe gesucht, und nicht gefunden.

Und dann auch noch Literaturnobelpreis? Echt jetzt? Da müssen die anderen Romane der Autorin aber wirklich um Klassen besser sein.

Fazit: 2,3 Sterne diesmal abgerundet auf 2 denn der Roman hat meine erste und ultimative Todsünde

begangen, und mich gelangweilt. Geärgert hat er mich auch, aber das ist nicht so schlimm.

Issa Deerbany says

David says

The story moves very slowly, and things really only start to happen in the final act, yet I was never bored by this book. Doris Lessing's writing is like one of the finer social satirists of the 19th or early 20th century, writing about contemporary events, or at least contemporary for the 1980s, when this book was written. *The Good Terrorist* is about Alice Mellings, who is, with great and lasting irony, exactly the sort of comfy-making, boo-boo kissing motherly type as her own mother was, even though Alice is now a "revolutionary" who spits on everything her horrible, awful, no-good shitty bourgeois parents stand for, when she isn't begging them for money (and stealing from them when they won't give it).

The grown woman of solidly middle-class Brits, Alice was given everything by her parents, including a good university education. But we learn that her fractured relationship with both mother and father (who are themselves divorced) is at the root of all Alice's discontents. Now her father is remarried and running a business and trying to wash his hands of his problem child of a grown daughter, and her mother has turned into an impoverished alcoholic. Alice's interactions with her parents are painful because it's one of those situations where an outside observer can easily see that if just one of them would bend, just a little bit, they could make peace, but they always manage to say exactly the wrong things to each other, and neither Alice nor her parents ever have the emotional maturity to talk like grown-ups without verbal knives drawn.

When not being reduced to an eternally rebellious teenager in the presence of her parents, Alice is a whirlwind of industriousness and hard work ethic, even though it's all applied to keeping an "approved tenancy" in which she and her fellow communist "revolutionaries" are squatting from being demolished by the council. Her co-revolutionaries are all freeloading under-achievers like Alice, the difference being that she *could* easily make something of her life, while most of her "comrades" are just plain losers.

But amidst all their "organizing" and "protesting" and "sticking it to the fat capitalist pigs," a plan gradually emerges to work with either the IRA or with their revolutionary Russian comrades. At first this seems like as much a joke as any of their other plans, since Alice is the only one who ever actually does anything, and

she's mostly doing housework and den-mothering all these wanker wannabes. What would the IRA or the Soviets want with a bunch of idiots like these? But if you insist on being a useful idiot long enough, someone will use you, and like shadows at the edges of a campfire, the real actors out there begin to come circling.

The Good Terrorist isn't a suspense novel or a spy thriller or a crime caper. It's a character drama, with a bunch of interesting characters who are all much alike except in that they are each individuals with their own problems and quirks, and they're all kind of unlikable idiots, even before they start getting in over their heads with real bad guys. Only Alice is sympathetic, and she's still as much of a fool and a naif as the rest of them, it's just that in her case, we can see all the wasted energy and potential. Her entire life has been spent in a kind of dreamworld, living for other people, being shaped by other people's opinions of her, and deliberately looking away from ugly reality. She's too good for the people around her, but she also pretty much deserves what she gets.

I might have wished there was a bit more action, maybe a twist or two, but *The Good Terrorist* held my attention and Doris Lessing's writing had no real weakness other than a leisurely in-no-hurry-to-get-anywhere pace. This wasn't an exciting book and the plot is only there to make the characters do things while we get to know them, but the day-to-day mundanity of the story is deceptive, and if that's all you see, you're missing the point, which is the banality of evil and the obligation of anyone who wants to consider themselves a "good" person to *not* do nothing when other people are doing things you know are wrong. I'll definitely read more by Lessing; she delivers wonderful characterization with sharp, straight-faced black humor. This book is like a verbal confection of delicate (and indelicate) interpersonal dialog and nuanced character studies. With a bomb at the center.

Ghaida. says

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Cwinters02 says

I hated this damn book. I was forced to read it for class, and now I have to write a fucking 10-page paper on it by Wednesday. Every page was torturous to read. Nothing happened until the very end, and even that sucked. I recommend that you never read this book. There was not one character or plot line worth investing a second of your life on. Thanks for listening.

Jan-Maat says

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