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Doris Lessing Wins Nobel Prize in Literature

By **MOTOKO RICH** and **SARAH LYALL**

[Doris Lessing](#), the Persian-born, Rhodesian-raised and London-residing novelist whose deeply autobiographical writing has swept across continents and reflects her engagement with the social and political issues of her time, won the 2007 [Nobel Prize](#) in Literature on Thursday.

Announcing the award in Stockholm, the Swedish Academy described her as “that epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny.” The award comes with a 10 million Swedish crown honorarium, about \$1.6 million.

Ms. Lessing, who turns 88 later this month, never finished high school and largely educated herself through voracious reading. She has written dozens of books of fiction, as well as plays, nonfiction and two volumes of autobiography. She is the 11th woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Ms. Lessing learned of the news from a group of reporters camped on her doorstep as she returned from a visit to the hospital with her son. “I was a bit surprised because I had forgotten about it actually,” she said. “My name has been on the short list for such a long time.”

As the persistent sound of her phone ringing came from inside the house, Ms. Lessing said that on second thought, she was not as surprised “because this has been going on for something like 40 years,” referring to the number of times she has been mentioned as a likely honoree. “Either they were going to give it to me sometime before I popped off or not at all.”

After a few moments, Ms. Lessing, who is stout, sharp and a bit hard of hearing, excused herself to go inside. “Now I’m going to go in to answer my telephone,” she said. “I swear I’m going upstairs to find some suitable sentences, which I will be using from now on.”

Although Ms. Lessing is passionate about social and political issues, she is unlikely to be as controversial as the previous two winners, [Orhan Pamuk](#) of Turkey or [Harold Pinter](#) of Britain, whose views on current political situations led commentators to suspect that the Swedish Academy was choosing its winners in part for nonliterary reasons.

Ms. Lessing’s strongest legacy may be that she inspired a generation of feminists with her breakthrough novel, “The Golden Notebook.” In its citation, the Swedish Academy said: “The burgeoning feminist movement saw it as a pioneering work, and it belongs to the handful of books that informed the 20th-century view of the male-female relationship.”

Ms. Lessing wrote candidly about the inner lives of women and rejected the notion that they should abandon their lives to marriage and children. “The Golden Notebook,” published in 1962, tracked the story of Anna Wulf, a woman who wanted to live freely and was, in some ways, Ms. Lessing’s alter ego.

Because she frankly described anger and aggression in women, she was attacked as “unfeminine.” In response, Ms. Lessing wrote, “Apparently what many women were thinking, feeling, experiencing came as a great surprise.”

Although she has been held up as an early heroine of feminism, Ms. Lessing later disavowed that she herself was a feminist, for which she received the ire of some British critics and academics.

Ms. Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in 1919 in what is now Iran. Her father was a bank clerk, and her mother was trained as a nurse. Lured by the promise of farming riches, the family moved to what is now Zimbabwe, where Ms. Lessing had what she has called a painful childhood.

She left home when she was 15, and in 1937 she moved to Salisbury (now Harare) in Southern Rhodesia, where she took jobs as a telephone operator and nursemaid. She married at 19 and had two children. A few years later, feeling imprisoned, she abandoned her family. She later married Gottfried Lessing, a central member of the Left Book Club, a left-wing organization, and they had a son.

Ms. Lessing, who joined the Communist Party in Africa, repudiated Marxist theory during the Hungarian crisis of 1956, a view for which she was criticized by some British academics.

When she divorced Mr. Lessing, she and her young son, Peter, moved to London, where she began her literary career. Her debut novel, published in Britain in 1949, was "The Grass Is Singing," which chronicled the relationship between a white farmer's wife and her black servant. In her earliest work Ms. Lessing drew upon her childhood experiences in colonial Rhodesia to write about the collision of white and black cultures and racial injustice.

Because of her outspoken views, the governments of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa declared her a "prohibited alien" in 1956.

When "The Golden Notebook" was first published in the United States, Ms. Lessing was still unknown. Robert Gottlieb, then her editor at Simon & Schuster and later at Alfred A. Knopf, said it sold only 6,000 copies. "But they were the right 6,000 copies," Mr. Gottlieb said by telephone from his home in New York. "The people who read it were galvanized by it, and it made her a famous writer in America."

Speaking from Frankfurt during its annual international book fair, Jane Friedman, president and chief executive of HarperCollins, which has published Ms. Lessing in the United States and Britain for the last 20 years, said that "for women and for literature, Doris Lessing is a mother to us all."

Ms. Lessing's other novels include "The Good Terrorist" and "Martha Quest." Her latest novel is "The Cleft," published by HarperCollins in July. She has dabbled in science fiction, and some of her later works bear the imprint of her interest in Sufi mysticism, which she has interpreted as stressing a link between the fates of individuals and society.

Lynn Bryan, a friend of Ms. Lessing, spent some time at the author's home on Thursday as flowers arrived, Champagne was served and the phone rang off the hook. Ms. Bryan said she asked Ms. Lessing why she thinks she won the prize this year.

"I don't know," Ms. Bryan said the author replied. "I am genuinely surprised because they rejected me all those years ago."

The phone rang again, Ms. Bryan said. It was another friend, whom Ms. Lessing was to meet that evening at a Chinese restaurant. She apologized and told him she couldn't. She had just won the Nobel Prize.

Motoko Rich reported from Frankfurt and Sarah Lyall from London.