

= The Good Terrorist =

The Good Terrorist is a 1985 political novel by Doris Lessing . It was first published in September 1985 in the United Kingdom by Jonathan Cape , and in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf . The story examines events in the life of Alice , a naïve and well @-@ intentioned squatter , who moves in with a group of radicals in London , and is drawn into their terrorist activities .

Lessing was inspired to write The Good Terrorist by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombing of the Harrods department store in London in 1983 . She had been a member of the British Communist Party in the early 1950s , but later grew disillusioned with communism . Three reviewers labelled The Good Terrorist as a satire , while Lessing called it humorous . Some critics called the novel 's title an oxymoron , stating that it highlights Alice 's ambivalent nature , and that she is neither a good person , nor a good revolutionary .

The Good Terrorist divided reviewers , with some being impressed by the book 's insight and characterization , and others complaining about the novel 's style and the character 's lack of depth . One critic complimented Lessing 's " strong descriptive prose and her precise and realistic characterizations " , but another called the book 's text " surprisingly bland " , and described the characters as " trivial or two @-@ dimensional or crippled by self @-@ delusions " . The Good Terrorist was shortlisted for the Booker Prize , and won the Mondello Prize and the WH Smith Literary Award .

= = Plot summary = =

The Good Terrorist is written in third person from the point of view of Alice , an unemployed politics and economics graduate in her mid @-@ thirties who drifts from commune to commune . She considers herself a revolutionary , fighting against " fascist imperialism " , but is still dependent on her parents , whom she treats with contempt . In the early @-@ 1980s , Alice joins a squat of like @-@ minded " comrades " in a derelict house in London . Accompanying her is Jasper , a graduate she took in at a student commune she lived in fifteen years previously . Jasper became dependent on Alice and followed her from squat to squat . Alice fell in love with him , only to become frustrated later by his aloofness and burgeoning homosexuality . Other members of the squat include Bert , their ineffective leader , and a lesbian couple , the maternal Roberta , and Faye , her unstable and fragile partner .

The abandoned house is in a state of disrepair and is earmarked by the City Council for demolition . To the indifference of the other comrades , Alice takes it upon herself to clean up and renovate the house , and convinces the Council that it is worth saving . She also persuades the authorities to restore the electricity and water supplies . Alice becomes the house 's " mother " , cooking for everyone , and dealing with the local police , who are trying to evict them . The members of the squat belong to the Communist Centre Union (CCU) , and attend demonstrations and pickets . Alice involves herself in some of these activities , but spends most of her time working on the house .

To be more useful to the struggle , Jasper and Bert travel to Ireland to persuade the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to let the CCU join them , but they are rejected . They also take a trip to the Soviet Union to offer their services , but are turned down . The IRA and KGB , however , have begun taking notice of them and start using the house as a conduit for propaganda material and guns . Packages start arriving in the middle of the night , and Alice , to avoid attracting the attention of the police , raises objections . This results in visits to the house by strangers who question the squat 's decision making . After this , the comrades decide to ignore orders , to act on their own , and to consider themselves " Freeborn British Communists " .

Going it alone now , they start experimenting with explosives , and build a car bomb . Alice does not fully support this action , but accepts the majority decision . They target an upmarket hotel in Knightsbridge , but their inexperience results in the premature detonation of the bomb , which kills Faye and several passers @-@ by . The remaining comrades , shaken by what they have done , decide to leave the squat and go their own way . Alice , disillusioned by Jasper , chooses not to

follow him and remains behind because she cannot bear to abandon the house she has put so much effort into . Despite her initial reservations about the bombing , Alice feels a need to justify their actions to others , but realises it would be fruitless because " [o] rdinary people simply didn 't understand " . She acknowledges that she is a terrorist now , though she cannot remember when the change happened .

= = Background = =

Doris Lessing 's interest in politics began in the 1940s while she was living in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) . She was attracted to a group of " quasi @-@ Communist [s] " and joined their Left Book Club in Salisbury (now Harare) . Later , prompted by the conflicts arising from racial segregation prominent in Rhodesia at the time , she also joined the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party . Lessing moved to London in 1949 and began her writing career there . She became a member of the British Communist Party in the early 1950s , and was an active campaigner against the use of nuclear weapons .

By 1964 , Lessing had published six novels , but grew disillusioned with Communism and , after reading *The Sufis* by Idries Shah , turned her attention to Sufism , an Islamic belief system . This prompted her to write her five @-@ volume " space fiction " series , *Canopus in Argos : Archives* , which drew on Sufi concepts . The series was not well received by some of her readers , who felt she had abandoned her " rational worldview " .

The Good Terrorist was Lessing 's first book to be published after the *Canopus in Argos* series , which prompted several retorts from reviewers , including , " Lessing has returned to Earth " , and " Lessing returns to reality " . Several commentators have labelled *The Good Terrorist* as a satire , while Lessing called it humorous . She said :

[I] t 's not a book with a political statement . It 's ... about a certain kind of political person , a kind of self @-@ styled revolutionary that can only be produced by affluent societies . There 's a great deal of playacting that I don 't think you 'd find in extreme left revolutionaries in societies where they have an immediate challenge .

Lessing said she was inspired to write *The Good Terrorist* by the IRA bombing of the Harrods department store in London in 1983 . She recalled , " the media reported it to sound as if it was the work of amateurs . I started to think , what kind of amateurs could they be ? " and realised " how easy it would be for a kid , not really knowing what he or she was doing , to drift into a terrorist group . " Lessing already had Alice in mind as the central character : " I know several people like Alice ? this mixture of ... maternal caring , ... and who can contemplate killing large numbers of people without a moment 's bother . " She described Alice as " quietly comic [al] " because she is so full of contradictions . She said she was surprised how some of the characters (other than Jasper , Alice 's love interest) developed , such as the pill @-@ popping and fragile Faye , who turned out to be a " destroyed person " .

= = Genre = =

The Good Terrorist has been labelled a " political novel " by the publishers and some reviewers , including Alison Lurie in *The New York Review of Books* . Lurie stated that as political fiction , it is " one of the best novels ... about the terrorist mentality " since Joseph Conrad 's *The Secret Agent* (1907) , although this was questioned by William H. Pritchard in *The Hudson Review* , who wrote that compared to Conrad , *The Good Terrorist* is " shapeless " . Several commentators have pointed out that it is more a novel about politics than political fiction . In *From the Margins of Empire* : Christina Stead , Doris Lessing , Nadine Gordimer , Louise Yelin called the work a novel about politics , rather than a political novel per se .

The Good Terrorist has also been called a satire . In her book *Doris Lessing : The Poetics of Change* , Gayle Greene called it a " satire of a group of revolutionaries " , and Susan Watkins , writing in *Doris Lessing : Border Crossings* , described it as a " dry and satirical examination of a woman 's involvement with a left @-@ wing splinter group " . A biography of Lessing for the

Swedish Academy on the occasion of her winning the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature described the book as " a satirical picture of the need of the contemporary left for total control and the female protagonist 's misdirected martyrdom and subjugation " . Yelin said the novel " oscillat [ed] between satire and nostalgia " . Academic Robert E. Kuehn felt that it is not satire at all . He stated while the book could have been a " satire of the blackest and most hilarious kind " , in his opinion Lessing " has no sense of humor , and instead of lashing [the characters] with the satirist 's whip , she treats them with unremitting and belittling irony " .

Virginia Scott called the novel a fantasy . Drawing on Lewis Carroll 's Alice 's Adventures in Wonderland in The International Fiction Review , she wrote that " [Lessing 's] Alice with her group of political revolutionaries can be seen as a serious fantasy which has striking parallels to ... Carroll 's Alice " . Both Alices enter a house and are confronted by seemingly impossible challenges : Carroll 's Alice has to navigate passages too small to fit through , while Lessing 's Alice finds herself in a barely inhabitable house that is earmarked for demolition . Both Alices are able to change their appearances : in Wonderland , Alice adjusts her size to suit her needs ; in The Good Terrorist , Alice changes her demeanour to get what she wants from others . Scott noted that at one point in The Good Terrorist , Faye refers to Alice as " Alice the Wonder , the wondrous Alice " , alluding to Carroll 's Alice .

= = Themes = =

The American novelist Judith Freeman wrote that one of the common themes in The Good Terrorist is that of keeping one 's identity in a collective , of preserving " individual conscience " . This theme suggests that problems occur when we are coerced into conforming . Freeman said that Alice is a " quintessential good woman ... the little Hausfrau revolutionary " , but turns bad under peer pressure .

Another theme present is the symbolic nature of the house . Margaret Scanlan stated that as in books like Mansfield Park and Jane Eyre , The Good Terrorist " defines a woman in terms of her house " . Writing in the journal Studies in the Novel , Katherine Fishburn said that Lessing often uses a house to symbolise " psychological or ontological change " , and that here , " the house ... symbolizes Alice 's function in the story " . Yelin described The Good Terrorist as " an urban , dystopian updating of the house @-@ as @-@ England genre , [where] ... England is represented by a house in London " . Writing in " Politics of Feminine Abuse : Political Oppression and Masculine Obstinacy in Doris Lessing 's The Good Terrorist " , Lalbakhsh and Yahya suggest that the house , and the " oppressive relations " in it , reflect the similarly oppressive relationships in the society it resides in .

Several critics have focused on the theme of motherhood . In " Mothers and Daughters / Aging and Dying " , Claire Sprague wrote that Lessing often dwells on the theme of mothers passing their behaviours onto their daughters , and how the cycle of daughters fighting their mothers permeates each generation . The British novelist Jane Rogers said that The Good Terrorist " is as unsparing and incisive about motherhood as it is about the extreme left " . She stated that motherhood here " is terrible " : Alice 's mother is reduced to despair continually yielding to her selfish daughter 's demands ; Alice mothers Jasper , and has a similar despairing relationship with him . Rogers added that motherhood is depicted here as a compulsion to protect the weak , despite their propensity to retaliate and hurt you .

Feminist themes and the subjugation of women have also been associated with The Good Terrorist . Scanlan indicated that while many of the comrades in the book are women , they find that political activity does not elevate their position , and that they are " trapped in the patriarchy they despise " . Yelin suggested that although Lessing ridicules the male members of the CCU and their role playing , she is also critical of the female members " who collude in male @-@ dominant political organizations and thus in their own oppression " . But with the book 's allusions to Jasper 's homosexuality , Yelin added that Lessing 's " critique of women 's infatuation with patriarchal misogyny and their emotional dependence on misogynist men " is muted by homophobia and the " misogyny pervasive in patriarchal constructions of (male) heterosexuality " . Lalbakhsh and Yahya

noted that Lessing depicts Alice as a " typical housewife " who cares for her family , in this case , the squat , but is " ignored and neglected " . They concluded that Alice 's fate is sealed because , according to the British socialist feminist Juliet Mitchell , women are " fundamental to the human condition " , yet " their economic , social , and political roles ... are marginal " .

= = Critical analysis = =

Several critics have called *The Good Terrorist* 's title an oxymoron . Robert Boschman suggested it is indicative of Alice 's " contradictory personality " , that she renovates the squat 's house , yet is bent on destroying society . In *The Hudson Review* , George Kearns wrote that the title " hovers above the novel with ... irony " . The reader assumes that Alice is the " good terrorist " , but that while she may be a good person , she is " rotten at being a terrorist " . Writing in *World Literature Today* , Mona Knapp concluded that Lessing 's heroine , the " good terrorist " , is neither a good person , nor a good revolutionary . She knows how to renovate houses and manipulate people to her advantage , but she is unemployed and steals money from her parents . When real revolutionaries start using the squat to ship arms , she panics , and going behind her comrades ' backs , she makes a telephone call to the authorities to warn them . Knapp called Alice " a bad terrorist and a stunted human being " . Fishburn suggested that it is Lessing herself who is the " good terrorist " , symbolised here by Alice , but that hers is " political terrorism of a literary kind " , where she frequently disguises her ideas in " very domestic @-@ looking fiction " , and " direct [ly] challenge [s] ... our sense of reality " .

Kuehn described Alice as " well @-@ intentioned , canny and sometimes lovable " , but as someone who , at 36 , never grew up , and is still dependent on her parents . Yelin said Alice is " in a state of perpetual adolescence " , and her need to " mother everyone " is " an extreme case of psychological regression or failure to thrive " . Greene wrote that Alice 's " humanitarianism is ludicrous in her world " , and described her as " so furiously at odds with herself " because she is too immature to comprehend what is happening and her actions vary from being helpful to dangerous .

Boschman called Lessing 's narrative " ironic " because it highlights the divide between who Alice is and who she thinks she is , and her efforts to pretend there is no discrepancy . Alice refuses to acknowledge that her " maternal activities " stem from her desire to win her mother 's approval , and believing that her mother has " betrayed and abandoned " her , Alice turns to Jasper as a way to " continue to sustain her beliefs about herself and the world " . Even though Jasper takes advantage of her adoration of him by mistreating her , Alice still clings to him because her self @-@ image " vigorously qualifies her perception of [him] , and thus proliferates the denial and self @-@ deception " . The fact that Jasper has turned to homosexuality , which Alice dismisses as " his emotional life " , " suits her own repressed desires " . Kuehn called Alice 's obsession with the " hapless " and " repellent " Jasper " just comprehensible " , adding that she feels safe with his gayness , even though she has to endure his abuse .

Knapp stated that while Lessing exposes self @-@ styled insurrectionists as " spoiled and immature products of the middle class " , she also derides their ineptness at affecting any meaningful change . Lessing is critical of the state which " feeds the very hand that terrorizes it " , yet she also condemns those institutions that exploits the working class and ignores the homeless . Knapp remarks that Lessing does not resolve these ambiguities , but instead highlights the failings of the state and those seeking to overthrow it . Scanlan compared Lessing 's comrades to Richard E. Rubenstein 's terrorists in his book *Alchemists of Revolution : Terrorism in the Modern World* . Rubenstein wrote that when " ambitious idealists " have no " creative ruling class to follow or a rebellious lower class to lead [they] have often taken upon themselves the burden of representative action " , which he said " is a formula for disaster " .

= = Reception = =

Critics have been divided on *The Good Terrorist* . Elizabeth Lowry highlighted this in the *London Review of Books* : " [Lessing] has been sharply criticised for the pedestrian quality of her prose ,

and as vigorously defended ". The Irish literary critic Denis Donoghue complained that the style of the novel is " insistently drab ", and Kuehn referred to Lessing 's text as " surprisingly bland ". Lowry noted that the English academic Clare Hanson defended the book by saying that it is " a grey and textureless novel because it ... speaks a grey and textureless language " .

Freeman on the other hand called the book a " graceful and accomplished story ", and a " brilliant account of the types of individuals who commit terrorist acts ". Writing in the Los Angeles Times Freeman described Lessing as " one of our most valuable writers " who " has an uncanny grasp of human relationships ". In a review in the Sun @-@ Sentinel , Bonnie Gross described the novel as " rewarding reading " and Lessing 's " most accessible " book to date . She said it is the author 's " strong descriptive prose and her precise and realistic characterizations " that makes this book " remarkable " . Gross felt that while some of the male characters are not that strong , the female characters are much better developed , particularly Alice , whom she found memorable .

Amanda Sebestyen wrote in The Women 's Review of Books that at first glance the ideas in The Good Terrorist appear deceptively simple , and the plot predictable . But she added that Lessing 's strength is her " stoic narrat [ion] of the daily effort of living " , which excels in the way she describes day @-@ to @-@ day life in a squat . Sebestyen also liked the book 's depiction of Alice , who " speak [s] to me most disquietingly about myself and my generation " . In a review in off our backs , an American feminist publication , Vickie Leonard called The Good Terrorist a " fascinating book " that is " extremely well written " with characters that are " exciting " and " realistic " . Leonard added that even though Alice is not a feminist , the book illustrates the author 's " strong admiration for women and their accomplishments " .

Writing in The Guardian , Rogers described The Good Terrorist as " a novel in unsparing close @-@ up " that examines society through the eyes of individuals . She said it is " witty and ... angry at human stupidity and destructiveness " , and within the context of recent terrorist attacks in London , it is an example of " fiction going where factual writing cannot " . A critic in Kirkus Reviews wrote that Alice 's story is " an extraordinary tour de force ? a psychological portrait that 's realistic with a vengeance " . The reviewer added that although Alice is " self @-@ deluding " and not always likeable , the novel 's strength are the characters and its depiction of political motivation .

Donoghue wrote in The New York Times that he did not care much about what happened to Alice and her comrades . He felt that Lessing presents Alice as " an unquestioned rigmarole of reactions and prejudices " , which leaves no room for any further interest . Donoghue complained that Lessing has not made up her mind on whether her characters are " the salt of the earth or its scum " . In a review in the Chicago Tribune , Kuehn felt that the work has little impact and is not memorable . He said Lessing 's real interest is character development , but complained that the characters are " trivial or two @-@ dimensional or crippled by self @-@ delusions " .

The Good Terrorist was shortlisted for the 1985 Booker Prize , and in 1986 won the Mondello Prize and the WH Smith Literary Award . In 2007 Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for being " part of both the history of literature and living literature " . In the award ceremony speech by Swedish writer Per Wästberg , The Good Terrorist was cited as " an in @-@ depth account of the extreme leftwing squatting culture that sponges off female self @-@ sacrifice " . Following Lessing 's death in 2013 , The Guardian put The Good Terrorist in their list of the top five Lessing books . Indian writer Neel Mukherjee included the novel in his 2015 " top 10 books about revolutionaries " , also published in The Guardian .

= = Publication history = =

The Good Terrorist was first published in September 1985 in hardcover in the United Kingdom by Jonathan Cape , and in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf . The first paperback edition was published in the United Kingdom in September 1986 by Grafton . An unabridged 13 @-@ hour audio cassette edition , narrated by Nadia May , was released in the United States in April 1999 by Blackstone Audio . The novel has been translated into several other languages since its first publication in English in 1985 , including Catalan , Chinese , French , German , Italian , Spanish and Swedish .

