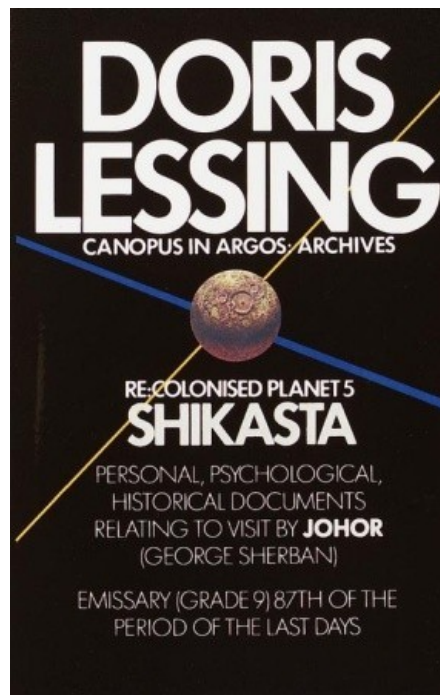




Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta

Doris Lessing

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Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta Doris Lessing

This is the first volume in the series of novels Doris Lessing calls collectively *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. Presented as a compilation of documents, reports, letters, speeches and journal entries, this purports to be a general study of the planet Shikasta—clearly the planet Earth—to be used by history students of the higher planet Canopus and to be stored in the Canopian archives. For eons, galactic empires have struggled against one another, and Shikasta is one of the main battlegrounds. Johar, an emissary from Canopus and the primary contributor to the archives, visits Shikasta over the millennia from the time of the giants and the biblical great flood up to the present. With every visit he tries to distract Shikastans from the evil influences of the planet Shammat but notes with dismay the ever-growing chaos and destruction of Shikasta as its people hurl themselves towards World War III and annihilation.

Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta Details

Date : Published August 1981 by Vintage (first published January 1st 1979)

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Author : Doris Lessing

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From Reader Review Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta for online ebook

David C. Mueller says

This novel is the first of Lessing's classic "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series. It differs from much modern science fiction in that it defies classification. In part science fiction, in part psychological-religious exploration, in part modern doomsday tale, in part pseudo-historical documentation, the story follows the earthly life of George Sherban, human incarnation of the Canopan being Johor. George/ Johor visits a near future Earth where human society is on the brink of total breakdown. Johor/George is depicted on the one hand as scientific observer of humanity and on the other as Prophet trying to help them overcome their worst traits. Lessing's novel in some parts expresses a detachment akin to the science fiction of Olaf Stapledon. At other places, a character is followed in a way similar to those employed by Ursula LeGuin and Dorothy Bryant. Shikasta is a fascinating and troubling story all at the same time. Other novels in "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series include The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five and The Making of the Representative for Planet 8.

Joe says

This is a very depressing book, an alternate take on human history, but I like being miserable so I dug it. It is very well-written and I don't feel it is slow-moving at all. Ms. Lessing does a great job of making such a (seemingly) far-fetched story believable.

One thing--Am I the only person who noticed the similarity to "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson" by G.I. Gurdjieff? The plot and even some of the writing style are so much alike. Since Ms. Lessing was a student of Sufism and Idries Shah I imagine she was acquainted with Gurdjieff's work.

Anyway--recommended for P.K. Dick fans and other dissatisfied, paranoid types. You know who you are!!!

Matt says

Rating 1¾ of 5 stars.

I had to abandon this book!

I read about half of it and skimmed the other half, reading some pages here and there. It just didn't work for me. I was bored almost all of the time. The writing style is way too wordy to me, the sentences too long where they don't necessarily have to be.

I neither found a coherent story, nor any characters to care for, and parts of it is too much of a lecture to me. This, combined with the biblical/mystical/esoteric undertones was enough to finally drop this book.

The first five percent were OK, and I thought it might develop into something interesting, but, alas it didn't.

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License.

Alli says

This was the latest in my Nobel Laureate readings, and I started this one I think back in May. It took me this long to finish it, and if it weren't for the fact that it was part of my challenge this year... I may not have forced myself through it.

I chose this because I thought it was interesting that a Nobel Laureate had written a sci-fi novel, but I've been really careful to NOT read reviews before I read one of these books, since I'm trying to stay open minded. But... I really wish I had chosen a different book. This was practically unreadable, and while I finally figured out sort of where the book was going... it was not a pleasant read. I'm not going to read this ever again.

Aubrey says

This work is kin to *Oryx and Crake*, and to a lesser extent *Babel-17*: conservative where it needs to be progressive, progressive where it needs to be informed, and all in all amounting to little more than a done to death rehashing of various mainstream assumptions sprinkled with a few intriguing hints at veritable open fields. The insensate jabbering on and on about the evils of history with nary a holistic breakdown into tiers of intra community issues and intersectional community action *outside* the jurisdiction of the status quo is, I imagine, one reason why liberals are laughed at so much. I expected a history lesson from the back cover description (indeed, I expected much more, given this is yet another Christian writing fanfiction about Jewish people à la *Paradise Lost* and *Joseph and His Brothers*, but where the latter succeeded via specificity and a refusal and/or inability to use the Shoah as narrative fodder, this one bloated itself beyond the realm of redemption), but I did not expect key plot points and climactic turnings to be based on a few proclaimed factoids that were either dramatic oversimplifications, ahistorical applications, or flat out wrong in terms of scientific conjecture. True, that was then and this is now, but now is when I'm making the decision to continue reading this series, and seeing how little I got out of its first iteration, I must say nay.

'White' people have the greatest genetic diversity: false, even with all the expanded boundaries applied to this artificial construct. Whiteness, and race in general, is an incontrovertible biological construct that has veritable and significant impact on the various sciences: false. The concept of blackness related to a specific people is anything more than a convenient aesthetic excuse utilized for commercial purposes whose convenience has evolved alongside its evolving antithesis of whiteness: false. Thus crumbles a great deal of this narrative's final moments, rendering its initial stories of utopia with all its sentimental murmurings about defective pale mutants (nice eugenics there) and hearty brown utopians (noble savage, anyone)? Even without those few obnoxiously persistent fairy tales driving the course of supposedly logical conclusions, we have an outsider's obsession with Hinduism that apparently legally cancels out all the evils of Euro colonialism, a Magical Crazy Person (We never should have locked up the *useful* ones! but they seem to have been the better for it, for what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, of course.), the equating of depending on another to the Absolute Evil of parasitism (As if the eugenics weren't bad enough. It helps that I'm currently playing a video game birthed of a critique of Rand's objectivism, and the bombastic pieces of this narrative that are supposedly in the voice of the Absolute Evil go right along with the repeated warnings against the "parasite" that fill the video games background acoustics), and a complete and utter lack of self-reflection on part of the benevolent alien for which this is all a little scientific experiment. As I've said before, I don't give authors the benefit of the doubt anymore, so if Lessing isn't going to critique her mystical mojo of a seemingly paradisaical ethical system that works only when it isn't questioned, I'll have to do it for

her.

It was exhausting reading Beijing Coma and watching various mechanics of legal courts and political backgrounds put a stop to policies that would have concretely resulted in the outright deaths of increasing numbers of people while carting this around. All those paragraphs glibly rendering those real life discussions and maneuverings and dialectics as worthless actions that said nothing and resulted in nothing, and the only excuse is it's because the participants are young, and therefore know nothing of what is at stake. Again, that was then and this is now, but God's Bits of Wood was published nearly two decades before this, and that seems nearly enough time for it to have been translated and made its way to the hands of an author so seemingly concerned for the generic space of "Africa" and its social movements. If Ma Jian ever read this, he'd probably laugh his head off at the portrayal of those calm and efficient and silently menacing Chinese that frame the last few hundred pages, positive stereotypes doing nothing to reaffirm the humanity of the stereotyped. As such, I'm glad Lessing's dead, else she'd probably have something to say to that group of under-21's who are looking to sue Trump for fucking up the Earth to the point that it will no longer be livable after he is dead while they live on. If this isn't true, she could have least given me something novel to work on instead of repeating all this history I already know about and all these outdated jargon that means as much to me on a logical level as the tooth fairy or the boogeyman. Seeing as how my reading trend has been with Lessing, this might just me getting old and cranky, but considering she's the one writing off those in their mid-20's as doomed to building castles in the sky, what does that make me?

Over and over again, people who have been kept on the move mentally, always having to defend and sharpen and refine their perceptions of events, will suddenly find themselves in a spotlight focussed on them by the many publicity machines, will be made national figures, will be frozen, in fact, in public attitudes. Again and again, valuable people become neutralised, made into—often—figures of fun, at the least lose their impetus, their force.

Zanna says

First read January 2005

This book does three ambitious things.

1. It takes the Old Testament of the Bible as inspiration for its mythical geo-historical content, but instead of an angry bearded guy in charge, it has a super-advanced utopian-collectivist space-travelling civilization colonising Earth and then struggling to maintain a shadow of hope and stability through thousands of literally star-crossed years when the unfortunate planet is fed on and influenced by another, evil space-travelling civilization.
2. It attempts to realistically predict the Old-Testament apocalypse playing out some time in the immediate future with the disintegration of most the structures of international organisation, collapse of Europe, rise of China, epidemics, famine, culmination in World War III, and the aftermath. Lessing actually bothers to imagine the details
3. It does these things while breaking and rebuilding the form of the novel. The principle subtext to the plot, coarsely outlined above in points 1 and 2, is a nuanced but severe indictment of the crimes of European and especially English imperialism. Its condemnation of wanton, wasteful, greedy, arrogant, careless behaviour, and the uncomfortable plea (one that cannot be reasonably made by a White person, and is accordingly made very un-reasonably here) to the systematically oppressed peoples of the Earth not to slaughter White people

in revenge, could have been the subject of a sanctimonious essay.

There is nothing of the essay about *Shikasta*. There is no author voice. The book presents itself as 'documents relating to visit by Johor...' and much of it is narrated by this Johor, emissary, envoy, agent of Canopus, the benevolent interstellar coloniser of Earth. That he is an unreliable narrator is reiterated several times. He often speaks of being 'affected' by 'emanations' and circumstances on Shikasta, and 'The Archivists' who narrate the various extracts from Canopean official documents comment on Johor's judgement. The Archivists are not reliable either. For one thing, they are concerned with the broad sweep of events on a global scale, and for another Johor and other agents' reports criticise them for their imperfect understanding of local conditions.

When Johor is incarnated, Christlike, as George, we know we can't rely on him as we know he will not 'remember' being Johor, his life experience will affect him, and we have already seen one of his colleagues wander from the path planned for him by Canopus. In fact, George might have been the best choice of narrator for the time of the 'Last Days', but Lessing abandons direct narration altogether at this point and instead has the last 200 pages worth of events unfold through a variety of documents, principally the diary of George's (yes, of course unreliable) younger sister.

Perhaps most importantly, we are not made to assume that Canopus represents Lessing. Canopus is concerned that the 'White races' escape extermination because they are 'genetically useful' animals for the overall health of the species. This 'eugeneticist' stance, revealed only towards the end of the book, casts a slightly sinister shadow over Canopus' return to power over Earth.

Finally, I will comment on the picture painted here of human beings, through multiple sources and events. It is a dim one. We are weak, foolish and highly suggestible animals, neither wise and kind enough to build our own geometrically pleasing anarchist utopia (Johor calls power hierarchies 'the Degenerative Disease') without the vital flow of substance-of-we-feeling (fellow-feeling) from Canopus, nor wicked and stupid enough to build our own hell (the present state of humanity on Earth) without the influence of an evil parasitic influence feeding on violence and waste.

It was as if I had been given the task of telling someone in perfect health that he would shortly become a moron, but that he must do his best to remember some useful facts, which were a...
b.... c...

so says Johor of the time when the ancient, utopian civilisation began to collapse. The best a Shikastan can do is struggle to thrive and support her brothers and sisters against all the odds, and wait for the return of Canopus.

This premise of human dependency is problematic for me, but I think it contains its own negation - since the book is **actually** written by a Shikastan. Lessing asserts the unreliability of all her narrators, allowing a space for the weak-human thesis to be a colonial misunderstanding of the colonised.

Manny says

My favorite quotes from this book both come from the introduction:

"*Shikasta* has as its starting point, like many others of the genre, the Old Testament. It is our habit to dismiss the Old Testament altogether because Jehovah, or Jahve, does not think or behave like a social worker."

"I do think that there is something very wrong with an attitude that puts a 'serious' novel on one shelf and, let's say, *First and Last Men* on another."

And, indeed, the overall effect is rather as though Olaf Stapledon had rewritten the Bible with a little help from E.E. Doc Smith and Michael Moorcock. We learn that the Earth's history is bound up with the shifting fortunes of a war between two galactic empires: Canopus, the good guys, and Puttiora, the bad guys. An accident occurred a few thousand years ago, since when the Puttiorans have been doing alarmingly well and the Canopeans have been fighting a desperate rearguard action. It's a bit of a mess, though there are good passages every now and then. I like the defensive way the Canopeans react to the Earthpeople's complaints about how they've been abandoned by their heavenly leaders. "We've regularly sent people to guide and comfort them! Well, except for a brief period during the last fifteen hundred years."

But now they've got their act together, and Emissary Johor incarnates as the mortal human George Sherban. Much of what we find out about Sherban comes from his sister's account. I didn't completely buy him as a Christ-figure - it's been done too often, and Lessing doesn't bring enough new ideas to the table - but there are a couple of great moments. One in particular, when she's watching Johor/George working his guts out to try and save our miserable souls. She quietly observes

There were days when he was so tired he wasn't beautiful any more.

I don't know about you, but that sends shivers down my spine.

Ted Child says

I don't recommend this book. Actually I don't think it should have ever seen print. Don't get me wrong, I like slow, deep books with profound spiritual and political messages, especially if their science fiction. I don't recommend this book for one reason: it is inexcusable boring. Let me explain. I liked the three page introduction, where Lessing makes some important comments about science fiction. The first half of the novel, a retelling of the Old Testament with SF elements, is kind of interesting and kind of boring. The second half, set in the near future as the planet experiences a global catastrophe, is not interesting and unbearably tedious. I have never before understood the saying, "bored to tears," until I had actual moisture welling in my eyes from boredom. It was like a physical revulsion to this level tediousness. The last twenty pages were a force of will. My wife asked me why I was so irritable and snappish all the time. Didn't Lessing have a friend or a well-meaning editor to politely mention that she shouldn't inflict the world with this extended exercise in sadism? Even as an introduction to an extended series (It's interesting that the jacket cover has summaries of the then-unpublished second and third books) this is a failure. The ending is the most bathetic ending, and not in a good, Kafka-like way, that I have ever had the experience to read. Reading Le Guin's review before I thought she was being overly harsh but now I think she was much too polite. Any profound spiritual or political message is lost on me since I just refuse to believe that any message of importance could be this boring.

Corie Ralston says

I've read some critics's reviews of Shikasta which suggest that the book is different from most science fiction in that it has well developed characters and a deeply meaningful plot. (!) Of course, the critics still hated the fact that Doris Lessing "demeaned" herself by writing science fiction at all, so I guess no one can win. I really wanted to love this book because it is so highly regarded and a friend of mine loved it, but those were

in fact the only reasons I finished it. The first hundred or so pages can be summed up as: "People suck.". Oh, and by the way, "People suck." Not much plot except that aliens have seeded earth with humans, who live in perfect harmony with themselves and the animals, and then different aliens interfere and make people suck. So humans seem to be eternally torn between mysterious good and evil forces, and they just can't help themselves from succumbing to the evil forces. Sound a lot like religion? This was so obvious in the book that it must be what Doris Lessing intended, but I have to admit I don't really like that take on humanity. There was an interesting bit in the middle where a plot and characters suddenly developed. There were lots of scenes of people communicating using the SOWF (substance-of-we-feeling), which meant that they were "tuned in" to each other and that helped them be good people and not go over to the dark side. I actually kind-of liked that. (Apparently Lessing meant to draw parallels with the Sufis here.) But overall, it was a very difficult read, and while it cataloged very well all of our social ills, it ultimately didn't enhance my understanding of what it means to be human and how we can learn to treat each other better.

Nathan Titus says

This is absolutely the most janky book I have ever read.

from the 1st Dictionary of Nate:

janky--JANE-key (adjective); 1: thrown together at random; patchwork. 2: containing multiple elements, many of which contradict each other, and some that are mutually exclusive 3:top-heavy; lurching randomly in every direction at once 4:aspirations beyond achievement, and/or aspirations that are impossible to achieve 5:distinctive in being completely psychotic 6:something designed over the course of eons by a lunatic chimpanzee with his hair on fire who is in the constant process of attempting to lift himself up by his nonexistent shoelaces while simultaneously swallowing himself whole

Let me say that I like janky things. They are fun to try to grasp, even though grasping them is by their nature impossible. I can't give this book 5 stars, though, because I just can't take a single word of it seriously. Alice in Wonderland for very patient adults. Aliens didn't just build the pyramids--they built the rest of the planet, too!

I liked this book, despite how difficult it was to read. But I have incredibly bizarre tastes, and I like to think about things that almost anyone else would consider way to outlandish for contemplation. If you don't have an incredibly fierce dedication and a love for being totally lost, I wouldn't bother.

A. Dawes says

I enjoy Doris Lessing and I enjoy speculative fiction. Somehow though, the combination had a tragic outcome. An attempt to be clever that fails in an impenetrable epistolary mess. If you want great epistolary spec-fic, try The Prestige by Christopher Priest instead. If you want great Lessing, read anything by her that's realist. Ignore this novel. Erase it - if you can - from you memory because Lessing was actually a super talented writer.

Simon says

I really wanted to like this but it was just too dull. I really wanted to finish this but life is too short. I got

nearly two hundred pages in and just found myself dreading reading time because I knew I would have to pick this up.

There's no plot for the reader to follow. There are no characters for the reader to engage with. There is no point to this narrative other than to show how stupid and corrupt humanity is. Yeah, well, I already know that and this is not what I call entertainment.

This is my first book by Doris Lessing and I wouldn't necessarily rule out another of her books; the prose was fine. I would just need to make sure that whatever else she wrote was not like this.

Nora says

I think I'm just reading the wrong Doris because I know people love her but this was the boringest thing ever. Just a dull froth of myth + sci fi. IT'S EARTH THE PLANET IS EARTH OMG. Hated it. Forget why I started it. Not finishing it.

Beatriz says

No pude terminarlo. Cuando iba por el tercio del libro (que se me hizo eterno) decidí abandonarlo. No quise seguir perdiendo el tiempo en una lectura que no va conmigo porque, siendo honesta, el libro no es malo, su planteamiento es bastante interesante. Propone que la evolución de la vida en los planetas es controlada por tres milenarios imperios galácticos rivales, quienes, a través de pequeñas intervenciones, en equilibrio con los diferentes eventos astrales, van dirigiendo el destino de las especies. Cada uno de los imperios tiene diferentes características que, por supuesto, imprimen en los planetas y que en ocasiones, entran en conflicto desbaratando el plan que uno u otro pudiera tener.

A pesar de lo anterior, debo reconocer que la lectura se me hizo muy pesada y poco motivadora. Los sucesos se van desarrollando con tanta pasividad, que se siente que no se avanza, casi podría compararla con el concepto de evolución, tan usado en la novela (los efectos de las intervenciones que realizan los imperios sólo se ven reflejados cientos, o incluso, miles de años después). Tampoco ayuda el hecho de que prácticamente no hay diálogos, ya que casi todo el libro está escrito simulando el informe del emisario de uno de los imperios.

Tampoco es un misterio que Shikasta es la Tierra (de hecho, en la edición que leí está explícito en su contratapa) y en ese contexto, la lectura se transforma en un informe de la evolución de nuestro planeta a través de la mirada de los intervencionistas de otros planetas que luego, bien podrían ser los profetas que se nombran en los escritos de diferentes religiones. Ese toque pseudo religioso tampoco me gustó.

Paul Kieniewicz says

I know that a book is exceptional if I've read it more than once. More than twice, and it has to be extraordinary. Doris Lessing's Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta (the first in a series known as Canopus in Argos) is one of those. Known for her extensive corpus of mainstream, left-leaning fiction, Shikasta represents her first foray into science fiction., and into mysticism. Her die-hard fans hated her new direction and hoped it wouldn't last. She'd already tried their patience with Briefing for a Descent into Hell a non-

linear novel that explores the the mind of a man whom everyone agrees is insane. At the end of the book, the reader is left asking, is there such a thing as sanity?

And now Shikasta, a view of the Earth's history that suggests the presence of cosmic influences on our race for good and ill. To enjoy the book, you have to excise everything the book may remind you of: Von Danniken, L. Ron Hubbard, 2001-A Space Odyssey.

Lessing is more mystical. You can tell that she has read Sufi writings extensively. Shikasta, the name that Canopus gave to our planet, means the stricken one. The sick planet. Long ago when giants lived on our planet, things were different. Human evolution was being accelerated by a link established with the advanced civilization of Canopus. Then something went wrong. It's a story as old as Adam and Eve but unlike in the biblical story where the blame is laid on the woman who ate an apple, Lessing removes the element of guilt from humanity. What happened was a disaster --- the word meaning a stellar misalignment. Nothing that our ancestors are responsible for. Canopus sends its agent Johor to help our stricken race. He can do nothing except to evacuate those ready to leave everything behind, and leave the others to thousands of years in spiritual darkness.

We skip to our post-modern age, a time of deep economic depression when our civilization is disintegrating. Johor returns to salvage what can be saved before a nuclear holocaust decimates the Earth's population. This time he's born of human parents. Canopus agents are born like us, except that they retain the memory of their origin. When they're finished with their job, they shed their bodies by committing suicide. Then there are agents who, just as the rest of us, have forgotten who they are. The book climaxes in a mock trial on capitalism where Johor is the prosecutor and an amnesiac agent plays the defense. The trial awakens memory in the amnesiac agent. As expected from Lessing, the novel contains some obligatory socialist philosophy, but it doesn't dominate the action.

Lessing delivers her vision of the loss of an ancient relationship with cosmic powers, dark ages and the future recovery of what was lost. She develops the vision further in subsequent books in the series.

Kevin J Mackey says

I read this book shortly after it was first published. I've since finished re-reading it in its eBook form.

It was hard. But then, Lessing's "Briefing for a Descent into Hell" was hard, and worth the trouble.

Shikasta was then, and remains, a book of huge scope. It runs across all of human history, adding in pre-history and moving forward beyond today and into the future.

As I read it I fancied I discovered echoes of "The Four-Gated City", the final book in Lessing's Children of Violence series. I still found that in the second reading.

What I did take away from the book this time, however, is the thought that Lessing didn't, at the time, have much faith in us humans, in our societies. True, the book ends with paradise being rediscovered, recreated. but only through outside agency - the Canopeans. Of course, the book's contention is that our descent into the unhealthy societies we live in is also due to outside agency, outside influence - that of Shammat.

Still, the feeling that we are unable to build societies that function well permeates the book. I disagree with the premise, but I still, even after a second reading, regard the book as masterful.

Mikael Kuoppala says

The first volume in Doris Lessing's praised sci-fi quintet is a truly curious piece of literature. I almost hesitate to call "Shikasta" a novel, due to its erratic structure. Lessing's style here brings to mind Virginia Woolf, early Jack Vance and most of all William S. Burroughs. It's much like "The Naked Lunch," even though its sci-fi setting creates a bit more congruence between the individual stories, manifesto's, apologies and philosophical as well as mythological deconstructions the whole of the book is composed of.

There are a lot of familiar aspects of anthropological science fiction present, but this time the culture examined isn't an imagined one but our very own human civilization. I'm still not sure if that's commendably sharp and direct or just simplistic and easy. After all, the power of speculative fiction lies in its ability to analyze cultural phenomena taken out of their politically bound context, hopefully resulting in unbiased and fresh conclusions.

There are enough original thoughts and themes in "Shikasta" for several books; it's packed with innovation and wisdom. But there are so very many obvious and underwhelming ingredients present alongside all the good stuff that even the most ingenious sparks of creative force are diluted and fail to impress with their full potential. And the fact that the book is a collection of fictional reports, often authentically dry, makes it a bit heavy.

Even though some of the chapters are very interesting and entertaining- and Lessing's talent as a storyteller is apparent on many pages- the lack of coherence disrupts the novel as a whole. I guess one could even say that readability isn't one of "Shikasta's" numerous virtues.

Still, after all the criticism I must state that I found this odd acquaintance a surprisingly pleasant and satisfying read. It will probably be very hard to find a book that equals this magnitude of dry weirdness. Worth trying out, if you dare.

Jos says

Shikasta is the first of five volumes in Lessing's Canopus in Argos cycle. Lessing herself calls these books space fiction and explains that this genre (i.e. a type of science fiction) in her eyes is unjustifiably maligned and provides the opportunity to think beyond boundaries.

Essentially, the five books together represent nothing less than a holistic view of Earth and mankind. The planet Shikasta is clearly recognizable as Earth. Canopus is the home planet of a superior, almost transcendental civilization influencing Shikasta's development in the best possible way. Sirius hosts another more materialistically orientied space age civilization that will be thematized in the third volume. The antagonist of all these cultures is the Puttiora system with its rogue planet Shammat trying to destroy all positive efforts and draining energy and wealth from Shikasta.

This first volume is written from the view of Canopus. It's an odd assortment of direct reports, mostly from the envoy Johor but also in the form of memorandums, letters or entries from history books. It tells the whole history of Shikasta (Earth) from its beginning to a period in the future. Canopus first helps in the development of higher life forms by migrating species from one of their colonies, by building cities according to a structure of invisible energy flows and by establishing a direct 'energy channel' between Canopus and Earth, thereby transferring knowledge and guiding the development. Changes in the cosmic constellation interrupt this channel almost completely, with Shammat draining what is left. In effect, Shikasta enters a long era of regression that ends in a century of wars and finally WW III.

By creating these galactic entities, Lessing models each of them as an epitomization of human traits. Canopus incorporates everything mankind should aim for. Shammat is the embodiment of evil. Without adherence to superior motives, mankind will sink into barbarism. The whole of Lessing's convictions see the light of day. Her belief in diversity and equality is obvious. At the same time, I recognize some ideas which might be considered opposite to this belief. Extraordinary people are supposed to take the lead, not necessarily in a democratic way. Interestingly, the Chinese take over dominance in this history of Earth from the Western cultures. Quite farsighted for 1979 when China was not much more than the poor brother of USSR. I also recognize some esoteric tendencies in her writing when it comes to the 'energies'.

A very interesting start into the cycle, proposing an 'alternative history' of Earth. I'm curious to learn more about the different planets, civilizations and ideas.

Kersplebedeb says

I first read Shikasta fifteen years ago, and found it fantastic but very difficult. Rereading it now I felt differently, it was both a lot easier but also a lot less impressive.

A white woman who grew up in Zimbabwe back when it was Rhodesia became a Nobel laureate in literature last year. Amongst her reactions were something like "what took you so long" and "my science fiction was my most important work."

Shikasta is the first book in Lessing's science fiction series, and it is very much a long, at times moving at times embarrassing examination of colonialism, oppression, and what Christians (of which Lessing is not one) would term the "fall from grace". This is not a zippy action tale, there is no clever word-play or mind bending concepts, rather this book is Lessing's indictment of all of human history, and of human beings' propensity to hurt and mistreat one another and the world we live in. It climaxes with an actual trial in which the "white race" stands accused of all the crimes of euro-imperialism, and ends with most of humanity being killed in some kind of war, the few survivors returning to a state of grace as "Shammat" (Lessing's stand-in for the Devil) retreats from the planet.

There's lots in here, but not a lot which is great. Some descriptions are quite evocative, the build-up in which we are introduced to Shikasta (that's the alien's name for Earth) prior to the fall from grace, all this is very well done, though with a lot of loopy politics.

I feel bad giving this book three stars - it really felt like several books within one volume, and the first third (describing Shikasta's fall from paradise, so to speak) and the last sixty pages (basically from the Trial on) were four-five star material (and I rarely give five stars) - unfortunately what came between, the case studies and Rachel Sherban's journal, were more like one-two star material.

This book is not one I would recommend to most people. You have to have high tolerance for a kind of shameless self-righteousness and earnestness normally associated with teenaged angst. I consider myself to have much less problem with that stuff than most people, but still at times I felt embarrassed for Lessing.

On the other hand, it is an interesting period-piece, both ahead of its time and also mired in how things looked thirty years ago. In many ways the world is following pretty much the path Lessing prophesied, in some ways it seems even worse off.

Nathaniel says

This book is so terrible that I added a new shelf: "refused-to-finish". It has managed to supplant Red Mars by Kim Stanley Robinson as the worst book I've had the misfortune to encounter (and this includes Breaking Dawn!).

The main problem with this book is that the writing is bad. Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize in literature for this series, so I had high hopes that at a minimum the prose would be good. It's not. Not even a little bit. There have been precisely two moments in the 156 pages I read where the writing rose to the level of "not bad". The rest was tortuous monotony.

The second problem with this book is that it thinks it is being clever when it is really not being very clever at all. The central conceit of this book is that all the stuff from the Bible is actually literally true, but misunderstood. So, for example, the Giants mentioned in Genesis were actually a different breed of alien brought from another planet to act as mentors for the indigenous humans. The long life-spans from the genealogy sections of the Bible? Also true: but humankind has been devolving horrifically due to a shortage of "substance-of-we-feeling" which I did not make up and which is often referred to in the book as SOWF (I didn't make that up either). The Flood happened literally, although the rain lasted for "nearly 2 months" instead of 40 days, and although Noah escaped by going to a very high mountain instead of building a boat. Sodom and Gomorrah? Burned to cinders by space lasers.

What all this means is that so far the first 156 pages of the book have been an incredibly tedious reimagining of the history of Earth told by someone who doesn't realize that the "shaggy God" cliché is, in fact, a cliché. Wikipedia: "A shaggy God story is a minor science fiction genre characterized by an attempt to explain Biblical concepts with science fiction tropes." Now you might say, "But this book was written in 1971! Surely it wasn't a cliché then!" In fact, the term was coined in 1965 and the cliché was a cliché long before that. Now maybe Doris Lessing had never heard the term and was completely unfamiliar with the trope, but the most charitable thing you can possibly say is that she ignorantly recycled a very well-trod genre cliché and then did a very poor, unimaginative, and boring job of it.

Which brings me to the last part of why I've decided to set this book aside and turn over a new leaf in the book of my own life, a leaf that reads on the reverse side: "Nathaniel will now feel not shame but *pride* for refusing to finish truly awful books and rating them on Goodreads anyway." The entire ideology Lessing apparently admires is ignorant and reprehensible.

I give her some credit for trying to be non-partisan in her writing and for criticizing the left along with the right in her meandering and semi-coherent polemic, but the fact is that it's possible to be non-partisan and *worse* than partisan. I didn't know this until now, so I guess that's one thing that I've learned from this book.

Her entire ideology is some frightful all-or-nothing choice between total individualism, self-interest and greed and absolutely losing oneself in the collective we (remember that "substance-of-we-feeling"?). The majestic Canopeans (who play the role of God with thinly veiled patience, slumming it as mere deities for the sake of their troublesome human charges) put the service of the Greater Good above all else, to the point where they choose where to live based on where they can do the greatest good irrespective of friendship or family. This could be a morally fraught and emotionally charged aspect of their culture, were it not conveyed with such mind-numbing lack of imagination. "Sorry, mom, I have to go to Square City where everything is made of squares because I just really have the essence of that Shape in me, and I'm not in tune with the vibrations of this Circle City where everything is a Circle." That's not an exact quote, but the city names and overall concept is. It's not that you *couldn't* make something like this up it's just that--if you cared about your readership--you *wouldn't*.

Aside from being banal and ignorant of history, science, economics, and common sense her ideology is frankly *evil*. She is outright in favor of eugenics, totalitarian rule, and mass slaughter in the name of ideological purity. Because she envisions SOWF (that's "substance-of-we-feeling", if you tried to forget) as a kind of literal substance (like Midi-chlorians from Star Wars, but so much worse) there's a blatant belief in austere population control and the world gets remarkably better off after a thermonuclear war reduces the world's population by 99%, so that the survivors have enough SOWF to be getting along with. (There's no apparent trace of irony to someone who spends endless pages castigating rampant materialism basing her entire ideology on having enough physical stuff to go around, and culling the excess population if necessary to keep it that way.)

Look, some of her politics I find rather personally reprehensible. I think even pro-choice people would cringe at lauding someone who "had three abortions, because the men did not seem to her to be originally enough minted from the human stock to make their progeny worthwhile". I mean, "safe and legal" is one thing, culling the genetically inferior is another.

But there's a reason I listed my political problems last. First: they are pretty universally bad. Not many folks are really going to stand up and clap for the eugenics movement. Secondly: you have to wade through terrible writing and awful cliches just to get that far.

So that's why I've written this long, extensive review. So that you won't have to.

Because, and trust me on this, it's not worth it.
