

Miami Herald Nov. 8, 1992

AFRICAN LAUGHTER

By Doris Lessing

HarperCollins. 440 pp.

One-third of the way through this multi-faceted account of four revisits to her former homeland, Zimbabwe (until 1979, Southern Rhodesia), Doris Lessing issues a warning she never heeds. "To be in love with a country," she advises, "is a tricky business. You get your heart broken even more surely than by being in love with a person."

The Persian-born multiple-Nobel Prize nominee, lived from ages five to 30 in Rhodesia, raised in poverty on her father's unsuccessful farm, before becoming *persona non grata* for opposing minority white rule. She has lived since 1949 in England "because it is quiet and unstimulating and leaves you in peace," a serene setting to compile her massive *œuvre*.

Yet between the lines of *African Laughter* Lessing leaves little doubt that it is Zimbabwe, this struggling land of her youth, for which she feels what some Latins call *querencia*, that sense of place which inspires identification and love.

With a rich weave of styles, from anecdotal to journalistic to philosophical, she blankets her four Zimbabwe visits--1982, 1988, 1989, 1992--with a patchwork of emotions: pain and joy, despair and hope, irritation and devotion.

It becomes easy to understand Lessing's metronomic swings of response. Landlocked as it is amid a southern Africa deep in potential disaster: devalued currencies, failing crops, soaring costs of food and medicine, hetro-sexually transmitted AIDS threatening to wipe out an entire generation and the pernicious political menace of South Africa, Zimbabwe struggles yet survives. It even keeps some weaker neighbors, such as Mozambique, alive.

In the dozen years since Robert Mugabe and Joseph Nkomo's Patriotic Front wrested power from Ian Smith's white regime, Zimbabwe has faced severe challenges.

How would the races get along after power switched from white to black hands? At first, uneasily. Says one white Zimbabwean to Lessing in 1982: "Your precious Africans...they can't get anything right....They're inferior to us, and that's all there is to it." Even many black Zimbabweans agreed. Says one: "The whites are cleverer than us. We need them to stay here and give us jobs." Yet by acknowledging the solid infrastructure the British had erected, Zimbabwe avoided the overhasty shambles some neighbors had made and enjoyed stability while newly empowered blacks garnered technical expertise.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1980s, despite "South Africa's determination that all of the southern part of the continent should remain dominated by the whites," a cultural

transformation evolved. Young urban blacks, for better or worse, adopted some of the behavior patterns they'd observed in whites, and a new generation of whites, more open and democratic than their parents, reached adulthood. Ironically, the worst racism Lessing sees comes from newly arrived Britons who believe previously latent bigotry can bloom in African soil, a phenomenon not unheard of among Northerners who've moved to the American South.

Yet, even as Zimbabwe's society grew more egalitarian, its government grew more corrupt. By 1988, Lessing found both blacks and whites disillusioned. An ever-swelling bureaucracy of young single-party Marxists exhorted socialist ideals even as Eastern Europe demonstrated their failure. Worse, greed threatened to turn Zimbabwe's government into a "kleptocracy" like many of its neighbors. Says one "betrayed lover" of Zimbabwe: "I expected a period of incompetence.... But what I didn't expect was that these bastards would get into power and then not care about anything but feathering their own nests."

A major strength of this book is how Lessing allows dozens of people, like this betrayed lover, to relate their country's story in their own words spun seamlessly into the overall narrative. Their accounts are often inconsistent, but so too is Lessing's, as when she says native Africans had no sense that land could belong to one person rather than another and two pages later tells how the Zulu-offshoot Matabele snatched land from the peaceful Mashona. If her sources often speak in sweeping generalizations, so too does Lessing.

Yet a vividly painted landscape of Zimbabwe emerges in these pages. We see the bush disappearing where once the eland and leopard roamed free. We see African women forming supportive sisterhoods on this most paternalistic of continents where, to Zimbabwe's north, pharonic circumcision of girls is still widely practiced. We see headmasters extort their schools' funds, yet children increasingly seek education. We see much more, all told with love and hope by one of the foremost writers of the past half-century.