

# The Good Terrorist Short Guide

## The Good Terrorist by Doris Lessing

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# Characters

Central to the novel's exploration of the ambiguities between politics and practice remains the characterization of Alice Mellings.

Although Alice dabbles in political activism, much of her life is spent supporting her boyfriend's habits, both political and personal, and helping out the latest societal victim whom she encounters, including homeless young mothers with children, lonely elderly neighbors, and even the alley cat. In her boring, middle-class existence Alice desires excitement, and she often indicates a displaced sexual excitement in taking a part in revolutionary methods.

When she feels that she is close to "the real thing," readers are told that "A thrill went through Alice, as when someone who has been talking for a lifetime about unicorns suddenly glimpses one." These narrative comments regarding Alice's whimsical innocence appear throughout the book as she tries to balance maintaining a household and working for the cause.

Clearly Alice struggles against her own mixed feelings about lifestyle choices. As she walks down the street of her newly claimed neighborhood, "full of children, cats, and gardeners," Alice responds with mixed emotions: This scene of suburban affluence and calm provoked in her a rush of violent derision, like a secret threat to everything she saw.

At the same time, parallel to this emotion and in no way affecting it, ran another current, of want, of longing.

As Alice uncovers the others' backgrounds, she discovers both those who come from privileged backgrounds like hers as well as those who have never been a member of privileged society.

Repeatedly, the narrative emphasizes Alice's maternal instincts that come naturally to her, regardless of how much she tries to abide by the group's decision to exist outside of physical comfort. That she immediately recognizes Jim's vulnerabilities as she first enters the house and finds herself actually on the verge of saying, "It's all right, it's okay, don't worry!" indicates this need to empathize with those around her.

Alice's instincts work against Jasper's expectations of her, so she continually turns to him to validate or "authorize" her feelings and actions. This mental domination also manifests itself in his physical treatment of her, as he applies hurtful pressure to her wrists to prompt her to a certain action.

Alice's parents, Cedric and Dorothy, have divorced. Disdainful yet jealous of her father's new young wife and children, Alice begins stealing from him and even willfully but anonymously throws a brick through a window when he refuses her request to cosign for electricity for the house occupied by ten people. After repeatedly appealing to her



parents for money, they are finally showing signs that her and Jasper's demands are affecting their lifestyles. Alice's continued reliance upon her upbringing is best epitomized in her outraged reaction to her mother's selling the house in which Alice grew up. In her outrage, Alice steals all the curtains in the house to make her new abode homier.

Alice rages against her mother's newfound stance to refuse Alice and Jasper more support. Alice unleashes new energy to fight for the cause when she is unwilling to admit that her mother is right when her mother observes that "you spend your life exactly as I did. Cooking and nannying for other people. An all-purpose female drudge."

As much as she resists the urge to be attached to material possessions, Alice remains emotionally attached to the house, which she must now leave as they flee from the havoc the group has caused. She thinks: The house might have been a wounded animal whose many hurts she had one by one cleaned and bandaged, and now it was well, and whole, and she was stroking it, pleased with it and herself . . . she felt that she could pull the walls of this house, her house, around her like a blanket, where she could snuggle, where she could feel safe.

The last paragraph of the book indicates that although she regrets the group's actions that have killed and maimed others, Alice will continue her role as both mother figure and revolutionary: "Smiling gently, a mug of very strong sweet tea in her hand, looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had, perhaps, a bad dream, the poor baby sat waiting for it to be time to go out and meet the professionals."

Alice's vulnerable goodness and the access to such resources as money and material possessions will never make her a "good terrorist."

Although she and Jasper are recognized as a couple and Alice claims her love for him, they do not consummate it. Jasper's bullying Alice for money along with his continued need to bond with others who are looking for trouble create a continual tension that others notice even as Alice attempts to deny it. Bert provides Jasper a partner in crime, and a bond between Alice and Pat, Bert's girlfriend, occurs.

Bert and Jasper represent individuals with an absolute conviction of their own moral superiority. Because they believe themselves to be better practitioners of the cause than the others, they claim leadership rights. Yet their significant others recognize their weaknesses and failed attempts to become true professional supporters of the cause.

Bert and his lover, Pat, also provide a foil for Alice to judge her own relationship.

Pat's choosing to leave Bert rather than overlook his weaknesses provides strength for Alice to recognize the weaknesses in her relationship with Jasper.

Jim and Phillip represent the typical male victims of a patriarchal society. As a young black man, Jim cannot maintain a job because of white supervisors' assumptions and suspicions of him. Business for the effeminate Philip will never be successful because others will hire him and then exploit him financially and ultimately psychologically.



The characterizations of Roberta and Faye allow Lessing to explore how the most radical feminists who practice lesbianism fit into the political group with varying success. Unlike this norm-bending couple, the conventional couple of Mary and her fiancé, Reggie, provide a springboard for Alice and the other party member's disgust and disdain for a materialistic, middle-class way of life.

The occupants of the flat next door continually attract the flat dweller's interest.

Comrade Andrew and the others represent the serious terrorists that Alice and the others wish to be.

Although Zoe and her husband are minor characters, they provide proof of how Alice continues to rely upon other responsible adults to support her and Jasper. Although they disapprove of Jasper, Zoe continues to perpetuate the relationship by giving in to Alice's requests for money. This aging couple who remain happily married and sexually fulfilled also acts as a foil for Alice to compare her own relationship to Jasper.



## Social Concerns

Doris Lessing's once active membership with socialist organizations provided her with the necessary background to develop believable interactions among a large cast of characters who occupy a soon-to-bedemolished London communal squat house.

Fighting against capitalism and bourgeois attitudes, these characters may be ineffectual but still maintain a dignity to change the practices of the hegemony. This determination appears repeatedly in how they handle the sewage problem they encounter in the house by rolling up their sleeves, digging a hole, and disposing of it. A sharp contrast appears with how the enforcers of the bureaucracy, the police, respond to the presence of excrement. Rather than actively find a way to dispose of it, they disgustedly criticize the occupants about their living conditions. According to Lessing, the crux of the problem, however, is that whoever takes over power will enforce his or her ideas and exhibit fascist tendencies.

The dialogue and narrative comments regarding unspoken body language effectively depict the splintering of a group's common goals caused by personal interests and conflict between personalities. Ironically, as the individuals attempt to abandon personal needs and motivations for the good of the cause, they will ultimately work against one another to satisfy many of those same personal needs and desires.

Many of the minor characters appear to function not only as mirrors and foils for the main character's development but as a springboard for Lessing to itemize the current hegemony's list of victims—including blacks, lesbians, and effeminate males—who remain vulnerable in both the capitalist society and the smaller group fighting against it.

Lessing also tackles how much is determined by one's environment. As hard as someone might try, to completely break away from his or her upbringing is difficult. Alice's characterization most clearly embodies the ambiguities between what one feels, whether because of temperament or upbringing, and how one thinks he or she should feel. Alice's interest in acquired dialects, a narrative strategy used to provide the reader information about the other characters as much as to reveal Alice's character, depicts this tension between what an individual projects and what one wishes to project. That Alice recognizes both Faye and Roberta hide their once-privileged backgrounds they have chosen to abandon indicates the need for individuals in the group to hide who they really are. Alice also recognizes that Bert, like Jasper, projects a different dialect to cover his "soft," privileged background. Jim, a young black character, who has never been privileged, resents the ease that these others acquire a place and status in the squat first discovered by him.



# Techniques

Lessing masterfully develops the careful balance between honest, outright dialogue between the characters and instinctual reactions more often exhibited through body language that depict the eventual breakdown of any group that tries to maintain solidarity. Most often readers are told how Alice sizes up someone to determine what they are trying to hide, particularly how their dialect unwittingly reveals their upbringing. In a conversation with Comrade Andrew, the narrative moves from describing the interaction to Alice's thoughts: They stared at each other. Across a gulf.

Not of ideology, but of temperament, of experience. She knew, from how he had said, 'there is nothing wrong with a comfortable life,' that he felt none of the revulsion she did. On the contrary, he would like such a life. She knew this about him; how? She did not know how she knew what she did about people. She just did.

Repeatedly these unarticulated feelings about one another play a part in a character's decisions and actions. Alice recognizes, for example, the fragility of the group after celebrating Jim's employment: The four went back to number 43, in a close, tender group, Jim as king, as victor, and, unwilling that the evening should be lost, they sat around the kitchen table, sentineled by the yellow forsythia, and could not bear to part.

Alice was already thinking: Yes, tonight you'd think we'll all be friends for life, we could never harm each other, but it could all change, just like that! Oh, she knew, she had seen it all. Her heart could have ached, could have dragged her down, but she did not let it, was keeping that lump of a heart on a short, cruel chain like a dangerous dog.

By using this technique Lessing indicates her belief that humans interact with one another based more on personal instinct than ideologies.

Furthermore, the imagery reflects Alice's conflicting desires. Much of this narrative serves to foreshadow the breaking up of the group camaraderie. Certainly Lessing chooses the short-lived forsythia to reinforce the ever-changing dynamics of life.

At times the omniscient author provides the remaining details to support regular tensions between the communal members of the squat. For example, when Faye protests the growing number of housemates in the squat who are not active in the political organization, the narrator tells us that Roberta chimes in, "allying herself with Faye out of love. Actually, as the others knew, she agreed with them, did not need the furious condemnation that Faye had to use as fuel to keep going." Usually, however, the narration is steered by Alice's point of view.



# Themes

Questioning the moves and motives of the bureaucracy underlies not only the political stance of the group but their general outrage. Repeatedly Alice responds in varying degrees of anger to the senseless decision to not only tear down the unoccupied house, but to make it unfit for occupation by cementing over the commodes and water pipes. Her initial response is cursing, full of the energy of hate. In some corner of her mind, she could not believe that anybody, particularly not a member of the working class, could obey an order to destroy a house. In that corner of her brain that was perpetually incredulous began the monologue that Jasper never heard, for he would not have authorized it: But they are people, people did this. To stop other people from living. I don't believe it. Who can they be? What can they be like? I've never met anyone who could.

Group members question not only the motives of the bureaucracy but also those of one another as the common group of comrades splinters into little factions that support or work against one another. Alice's attempts to reclaim the house are met with various degrees of enthusiasm by the individuals who reside there as housemates. As members of the Communist Centre Union, a small core of the dwellers of the reclaimed flat, who as amateurs desperately want to become professional terrorists, attempt to communicate with the Irish Republican Army to become an active arm of its terrorist practices. When that association does not succeed, they quickly look for a new connection, this time in Russia.

The amateur attempts to be a practicing terrorist are full of misguided understandings prompted by fictional film and book characters. Few of the occupants seem to grasp much of Lenin and Marx's writings, including Alice. When they finally do take more radical action than picketing and practicing civil disobedience, Bert, the informal but recognized leader reads Lenin: The law should not abolish terror; to promise that would be self-delusion or deception, it should be substantiated and legalized in principle, clearly, without evasion or embellishment. The paragraph on terror should be formulated as widely as possible, since only revolutionary consciousness of justice and revolutionary conscience can determine the conditions of its application in practice.

The group's interpretation of this good terrorist action will appear in the form of a bomb, and all of the remaining occupants actively take on roles. As plans go awry, however, innocent people are maimed and killed, including Faye. Ironically, the same group that saved her from an attempted suicide must witness her inability to escape from the automobile planted with the bomb.



# Adaptations

Blackstone Audio Books released an audio book version of *The Good Terrorist*, read by Nadia May, in 1999.

# Key Questions

The varying degrees of political activism within one small group of individuals practicing a common set of goals provides opportunities for much discussion and debate.

1. What is the significance of the title in the story?
2. What character is the best example of Lessing's term "good terrorist"?
3. What character operates as a foil for Alice? How do his or her actions act as a contrast to Alice's actions?
4. How accurately does Lessing depict the Communist groups of the time?
5. Although they are minor characters, why are the roles of Mary and Reggie essential?
6. What is the relationship between Alice and Jasper?

## Literary Precedents

A number of contemporary authors have explored the breakup of active political groups. However, Lessing's book remains groundbreaking. Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's work appears not only as essential reading material for the serious "professional" but as necessary background to the understanding of the Communist philosophies. It is telling that Alice admits that she holds the men in high regard but has not really read their works.

## Related Titles

A number of Lessing's novels deal with the splintering relationships among a common group of political activists for the Communist cause. The Golden Notebook contains a lengthy novel within a novel by character Anna Wulf that depicts the breaking up of a group as their personal agendas and personalities conflict. Anna and her friend Mollie's participation in the cause has weakened as individual differences cause splintering. Her series Canopus in Argos: Archives also addresses issues of individuality versus the group's common ideologies.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994