I love you Doris May Lessing

Gloriana St. Clair
On November 17, 2013, Nobel prize winner Doris May Lessing died at age 94. For the last fifty-six years I have been an avid reader of her novels and have been molded as a woman by her insights into the human condition. For the decade of my life as an Osher study leader, I have known that when Lessing died I would teach a course on her work as an homage to her. I had always assumed that in the six sessions, the class would do an introduction focusing on some of her thoughts about writers and writing and then read her five volume *Children of Violence*.

Ironically, the copy of *Children of Violence* I read in the 1970s was borrowed from the Citadel library in Charleston, South Carolina. For the Citadel, a men’s military school, to have the city’s only copy of this feminist masterpiece must have been the work of that famous Charlestonian, Stephen Colbert’s mother.

In a further irony, locating copies of her work continues to be a challenge even though most of her work lies on the web in Google books perversely behind a copyright-induced and publisher-constructed wall. All of these circumstances gather to inspire me to write some letters as a part of my homage. One of these is addressed to her literary executor, one to local libraries, one to the members of my planned Lessing homage class, and one to Doris May.

Dear Doris Lessing Literary Executor [Sir Michael Holyroyd]

This week, I taught a group of twenty eager learners in an Osher Lifelong Learning course on great novels revisited. Fifteen of us had a spirited discussion of *Diary of a Good Neighbor* and *If the Old Could*. Both of these brilliant books spoke forcefully to this crowd—eighteen women and two men from ages 64 to 91. Five participated less fully because they could not obtain copies of the books.

Both books have been scanned as part of the Google Books Project and sit on the web readily available to eager readers worldwide. Lessing’s publishers, however,
retain the copyright so that they can continue to profit from the work. I would estimate that the estate gains only about 10% of the income generated from her corpus while the publishers retain the other 90% while bearing only negligible costs and risks.

Access can build reputation. One of the most effective actions you can take to ensure that Lessing’s reputation continues to grow is to make sure that her work is available on the web. As one of those who worked to realize the digital future, I can assure you that what the publishers may be telling you is propaganda to protect their profit.

Lessing chose to publish these two titles pseudonymously in order to illustrate the difficulties that unknown authors suffered from publishers. The generosity of spirit represented in that act could now be repeated if the estate were to deposit these two works, and in fact, all of her work in public domain.

Lessing wrote to create a better world. Technology now makes it possible for her work to be read on cell phones and other mobile devices in the most remote villages of the world. Children there could learn from her lessons about peace and violence, gender and identity, self respect and despair, pain and pleasure, the present and the future. Machine translation and distribution make massive worldwide reading and education possible.

Her genius is for the ages and for the world. As copyright laws continue to proliferate and prolong publisher control (few authors retain their rights), most of her work might be smothered for a hundred years or longer. If you as executor were to place her work in public domain, you would bring her contributions to understanding the human condition into parity with those of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Homer. Her voice, a woman’s voice, is desperately needed there.

Because I have collected Lessing works for over fifty years, I was able to go to my bookshelf for my copy of The Diaries of a Jane Somers, The Diary of a Good Neighbor, and If the Old Could. Some class members borrowed copies from libraries. This week, all of the copies in Pittsburgh libraries were in use. One person sat in a rare book room for six hours to read Diary of a Good Neighbor and
waited ten days to receive a purchased second hand copy of *If the Old Could*. My first editions were placed on library reserve for reading by other class members, one was loaned to a neighbor, and one was mailed to a friend.

When I do the homage in the fall, I would like to avoid these publisher created contortions. I have decided that rather than teach *Children of Violence*, I am going to teach five of her works about women falling in love... *Summer before the Dark, If the Old Could, The Sweetest Dream, Love, Again, The Grandmothers*. If the estate does not have the wisdom to put her corpus into the public domain, could you at least make sure that all of her works are available in electronic format. Works in electronic format are used many times more actively than those in print only.

Lessing was a revolutionary, though she mocked their foibles. Please make her wisdom available to the world by putting her work into the public domain so that all the children she cared about so passionately can benefit from her insights.

To be continued
Dear Pittsburgh area librarian

This winter, several students in Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Carnegie Mellon University have had difficulty in locating copies of books needed for the courses they were taking. When they have come to the library, they have been told that the books did not exist and/or that they were not available.

My fifty plus years of experience as a librarian causes me to offer these practical suggestions:

- Search OCLC Worldcat and/or Amazon and/or the web before you declare a book non-existent. Doris Lessing’s *The Diaries of Jane Somers* and Joyce Cary’s *To Be a Pilgrim* do exist.
- Use interlibrary loan. Beyond the city’s network of interlibrary lending, the state of Pennsylvania has an easily accessible, relatively fast and inexpensive network, called Palci. Beyond that, the international network of libraries has OCLC Worldcat database and interlibrary loan.

These resources were created before the Google Books scanning project, which brought over 20 million books to the web. Because some publishers are withholding books from distribution electronically to assuage their fears about revenues, readers need to continue to access physical copies. The systems mentioned above were created to optimize the use of books internationally. Until the digital future of libraries is more thoroughly realized, we librarians need to make sure that we are getting print copies into the hands of readers.

The famed Indian librarian Ranganathan (1823 to 1901) preached that books and readers belong together. Among his five laws are three that apply to this situation:
• Books are for use.
• Every reader his [or her] book.
• Every book its reader.

If your library has policies that stand between books and their readers, please rewrite them. If your staff members do not know about the resources mentioned above, please educate them.

Worldwide we librarians believe that readers and books belong together. Let us strive to make Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania succeed in the global effort to achieve this outcome.

Dear Osher student:

I invite you to join me in my personal homage to Nobel Prize-winning author Doris May Lessing, who died on November 17, 2013. This course will explore five of her novels in which a woman of a certain age falls in love. We will begin with one or two of her essays/conversations/interviews about writing and then read five works: Summer Before the Dark (1973), If the Old Could (1984), Love, Again (1996), The Sweetest Dream (2001), and The Grandmothers (2003). On your own, you may wish to watch the 2013 movie Adore, a hot version of one of the stories in The Grandmothers. Men are welcome to this love fest with love although I admit that the more endearing and admirable characters are likely to be women.

Dear Doris May

My mother’s name was Doris Mildred. You honored your mother by writing Alfred and Emily and by your many recollections of her in your autobiography. You also honored your mother in naming one of your most difficult characters, Maude in Diary of a Good Neighbor, after her.

Doris Mildred and my father Glen Leroy gave me a privileged life in which I was able to get an excellent education, have a satisfying and distinguished career as a librarian who helped achieve the digital future of libraries, and grow as a compassionate being. Doris and Glen made me the person who could and would read almost all of your works.
You made me much stronger and more self-actualized than I would have been without your influence. I learned lesson after lesson and passed those lessons on to others by teaching your work. Now I am communicating with your literary executor so that the powerful influence you had in my life can be made available to others around the world.

Thank you for your life and your work. Many philosophies and religions teach that compassion for others is essential to a better world. Again and again, my compassion grew from reading your stories. My love for you is a part of the great love you portrayed in the world.