

**PRESS RELEASE**

**DORIS LESSING 100 exhibition**

13 September 2019 – 9 February 2020

**Press View:** 13 September 2019 11:30am-1:30pm



*Doris Lessing at her typewriter, c.1950 © Paul Popper, photographer*

This Autumn, a new exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia (UEA) presents a revealing exploration and reappraisal of the life and work of Nobel laureate Doris Lessing (1919–2013), one of the most celebrated and extraordinary writers of the twentieth century. A fascinating selection from Lessing's extensive personal archive, held in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at UEA, will be on display for the first time, giving unprecedented insight into Lessing's life.

The exhibition investigates her Communist activities in Africa and London, her move away from Communism, her activism in the Afghan war, her studies of Sufi mysticism, and her obsessions with the promise of space travel and the horror of nuclear war. The objects on display show how the dramas of her political and spiritual life became the backbone of her

powerful and enduring novels, including *The Golden Notebook*, the *Children of Violence* series, and many more.

The exhibition uses visual art and objects, alongside private correspondence and working papers, to explore the unfamiliar or forgotten aspects of Lessing's life as well as iconic works that shaped her legacy. Original files from The National Archives charting MI5 and MI6 surveillance of Lessing will be on display, as well as objects and documents that provide a fresh context for understanding her forays into science fiction.

The Sainsbury Centre's exhibition will bring together material that has never been exhibited before. Lessing's trustees in consultation with Lessing's official biographer, Patrick French, who has privileged access to the Doris Lessing Archive at UEA, have agreed the release of previously embargoed material, for use exclusively within the exhibition. These letters shed new light on Lessing's life as a writer, highlighting key influences and preoccupations that shaped her work. This includes intimate journals from the period in which Lessing wrote her most famous work, *The Golden Notebook*.

Taken together, this exhibition offers an unprecedented, intimate look into the remarkable life of one of the twentieth century's greatest writers.

Exhibition Curators: Paul Cooper, Dr Matthew Taunton and Dr Nonia Williams, Justine Mann  
Project Curator: Monserrat Pis Marcos.

[scva.ac.uk](http://scva.ac.uk)

[dorislessing100.org/exhibition](http://dorislessing100.org/exhibition)

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## Notes to Editors

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Images for press available on request.

## **Exhibition summary**

The exhibition takes the visitor into Lessing's Africa and her early life in Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), it follows Lessing's move to London as a single parent, armed with just £10 and a suitcase containing a first novel typescript. With declassified files from the National Archives, it reveals explosive details of Mi5 and Mi6's secret surveillance of Lessing while a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The exhibition charts Lessing's withdrawal from Communism and her activism in Afghanistan. It explores her enchantment with Sufi mysticism, her fascination with both the incredible potential and the threat of new technology and her writing of space fiction.

Finally, it interrogates Lessing's most famous novel, *The Golden Notebook*, by revealing for the first time intimate journals and notebooks Lessing kept during its writing, where she worked out its ground-breaking structure and captured details of her relationships with her American lover, Clancy Sigal, who was the inspiration for the character, Saul.

Material from the British Library and The National Archives and The National Portrait Gallery, Magnum Photos combine to make this a compelling adventure through the life of a writer of staggering intellectual breadth and artistry.

## **Doris Lessing 100 events**

Margaret Drabble, Lessing's close friend, will be in conversation with Professor Christopher Bigsby on 12 Sep at an event at the Sainsbury Centre Modern Life Café. This event includes access to the exhibition. Please visit <http://dorislessing100.org/registration> for more information.

Rachel Cusk, Lara Feigel and Emma Claire Sweeney in conversation with Dr Nonia Williams reflecting on Lessing's legacy for women writers, in the days after what would have been Lessing's 100th birthday. This event includes access to the exhibition. Please visit <http://dorislessing100.org/registration> for more information.

## **About Doris Lessing**

Doris Lessing was born in Persia (present-day Iran) to British parents in 1919. Her family then moved to Southern Africa, where she spent her childhood on her father's farm in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). When her second marriage ended in 1949, she moved to London, where her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, was published in 1950. The book explores the complacency and shallowness of white colonial society in Southern Africa and established Lessing as a talented young novelist.

She is now widely regarded as one of the most important post-war writers in English. Her novels, short stories and essays have focused on a wide range of twentieth-century issues and concerns, from the politics of race – which she confronted in her early novels set in Africa – to the politics of gender, which led to her adoption by the feminist movement, to the role of the family and the individual in society, explored in her space fiction of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

## **About the British Archive for Contemporary Writing**

The British Archive for Contemporary Writing (BACW) builds on the University of East Anglia's international reputation for creative writing, the status of Norwich as a UNESCO City of Literature, and UEA's strong links with writers of world renown through its international literary festivals and links with the British Centre for Literary Translation and the National Centre for Writing based in Norwich. Our collections are available to students and scholars and to interested members of the public by prior arrangement.

## **About the Sainsbury Centre**

The Sainsbury Centre one of the most important public university art galleries in Britain. Designed between 1974 and 1976, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts was the first major public building designed by now renowned architect Norman Foster. It was opened in 1978 at the University of East Anglia (UEA) with the support of one of the nation's great philanthropic families, Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury who donated their extraordinary art collection which includes works dating from prehistory to the late twentieth century from across the globe. A radical new building by Norman Foster was designed to house the collection and was his first public work.

# SAINSBURY CENTRE



The Sainsbury Centre holds one of the most impressive art collections outside of the national institutions. It includes a significant number of works by modern masters of European art such as Pablo Picasso, Edgar Degas, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Jacob Epstein, Jean Arp, Chaïm Soutine and Amedeo Modigliani. There are major holdings from Oceania, Africa, the Americas, Asia, the ancient Mediterranean cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome, as well as medieval Europe. Alongside the permanent collection, it hosts a range of exhibitions in the largest suite of temporary exhibitions galleries in Eastern England.

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