dignity as he moves to help her. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been described as a woman's novel, but I believe that Atwood's perspective — and indictment — is more widely reaching: it is a tale of virtue and power, of claustrophobia and outrage, of the importance of story-telling and the possibility of individual redemption, of women *and* men and the perverse, inhuman creatures they become in a world that outlaws the emotional life. Offred has a cushion in her room on which is embroidered "Faith"; throughout the novel she wonders what became of the cushions embroidered with the words "Hope" and "Charity." She is taught that Gilead is "within" and Aunt Lydia instructs the Handmaids to be silent and unseen for "To be seen — is to be — penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable." But Offred knows that to be impenetrable is to be invulnerable and to be invulnerable is to be inhuman and incapable of love. Atwood gives us hope when she shows that Offred's faith in human love enables her to endure; she chills us when she shows in the Epilogue that this essential quality of the Handmaid is not even noticed by the historians and anthropologists of the year 2195. If the novel does not close on a note of abject despair, it certainly ends on one that is enigmatic and dissonant. When at the end of his talk the lecturer asks his audience: "Are there any questions?," the answer must surely be that yes, *The Handmaid's Tale* raises many questions — both ominous and disturbing.

Doris Lessing

THE GOOD TERRORIST

Doris Lessing. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985 (Canada: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Kitty Mattes

Anyone who has ever cared enough about a political issue to carry a sign about it will find some or all of *The Good Terrorist* offensive. Lessing treats us to characters who go to demonstrations for fun, call everyone they dislike "fascists," and get adolescent thrills out of blowing things up. She makes activism look ridiculous.

Most of the story is told from the point of view of a thirty-six-year-old child named Alice, though there are inconsistent lapses when we see her through the author's eyes, as in the last words when she is "poor baby." Alice takes over a condemned house in London with all the bourgeois homesteading passion her revolutionary group disdains. None of them recognizes the discrepancy, including Alice. The group includes her homosexual boyfriend, Jasper, lesbians Faye and Roberta, a black man named Jim, and two heterosexual couples, one of which is "the other kind," that is, working middle-class as opposed to unemployed anarchist. The story begins when they take over the house and ends when they leave it.

Events include methods both cunning and desperate to acquire money, strategies to stop demolition of the house, encounters with mysterious communists next door (who may or may not be professional revolutionaries), a futile attempt to join the IRA, some demonstrations and a couple of bombings. But emotions overshadow events -- emotions and relationships. Alice is constantly in tears of either rage or frustration. She rants against her parents and "the fascist capitalist system" in the same breath and tone. Every time she needs something she goes to one of her parents (who live separately). Most of the time they deny her requests and she screams "fascist capitalist!" at them, but they obviously love her and are dazed with hurt. If Alice were sixteen, it would not be quite so pitiful, but she is, as a family friend puts it, "a case of arrested development."

Simply, as a political novel *The Good Terrorist* is a failure. It fails to make a statement or indicate an ideological direction of any kind. The ridicule heaped upon its central characters hardly qualifies as persuasion. It can't begin to compare to Lessing's brilliant series, "Children of Violence," the Martha Quest epic that pays powerful respect to political commitment, nor to her *Memoirs of a Survivor*, about the relentless rending of all social fabric in the wake of an unnamed global catastrophe. As a crusader, Lessing has been replaced by Nadine Gordimer, whose *Burger's Daughter*, for example, chronicles resistance in contemporary South Africa in as intense and steady a light as Lessing's early works.

But then, *The Good Terrorist* is not a political novel. It is a sort of reverse Bildungsroman, a Peter Pan tale about not growing up. As Wendy, the child-mother of Never-Never Land, Alice is persuasive. The story from this angle becomes a grotesque portrait of the female as nurturer and caretaker. As her mother tells Alice near the end, "...you spend your life exactly as I did. Cooking and nannying for other people. An all-purpose female drudge."

Indeed, the central image of the novel is Alice's house, a presence of more consequence than any one of the characters, looming over all the action. The story begins with it: "The house was set back from the noisy main road in what seemed to be a rubbish tip. A large house. Solid." By far the most important room in this momentous house is the kitchen; the action that takes place there makes all the connections. And central to the kitchen is Alice's soup, with which she endlessly nourishes everyone. The house inspires Alice with bravery and even a certain passion, but this reader found it difficult to care about Alice, or any of the characters for that matter. They are all absurd and pitiful.

Did Doris Lessing know what she was doing? Did she know that she was creating a caricature of woman's role as child/nurse, or did she believe she was exposing the dangers of communist conspiracy? In any case, what a pity that she chose to belittle political activism. There are better things to do, and she is still a superb writer. It's as if someone with an exquisite voice were to sing "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall:" on one level it would be beautiful.