Doris Lessing and Isaac Babel

www.LandofGreenPlums.info
Info@LandofGreenPlums.info
## Contents

1. **Introduction** iv  
   1.1 Doris Lessing and Isaak Babel iv  
   1.2 Review iv  

2. **Homage for Issac Babel** 1  

3. **My First Goose** 4  

4. **Appendixes** 7  
   4.1 pink-and-gold Renoir girl 7  
   4.2 Pravda 9  

---

### Abstract

Two stories: *Homage for Isaac Babel* by *Doris Lessing* and *My first goose* by Isaac Babel. Also an introduction and supplementary notes have been added. *My first Goose* has been edited with regard to its original Russian version.
1 Introduction

1.1 Doris Lessing and Isaak Babel

The very first time I heard Doris Lessing’s name was in 2007, the same year that she won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

I got a total sunrise when I read her place of birth: Iran (!?). She is an English author but is born in Iran. Apparently her father used to work in Iran just after world war I.

Then I read her Nobel Lecture, thanks to my favourite magazine: Golstaneh Monthly. What a magnificent lecture!

I was shocked by Doris Lessing’s powerful lecture. I found out that, not only I had been not aware of a marvellous writer, but also a great intellectual. Her lecture, challenged me, lectured me and impressed deeply.

The next step for me was to try to find a book by her. But I could not . . . apparently none of her books was been translated to Persian (or I couldn’t find any).

Then, as always, Golstaneh Monthly helped me: they translated one of her works: Homage for Isaak Babel.

This was another nice sunrise! I love Isaak Babel’s My First Goose. The same story that Doris Lessing mentioned it in her story.

Eventually, in 2009, I read my first book by her: The fifth child; this time in the Library University of Borås.

1.2 Review

I have compared the translated version with the Russian version and made few minor changes. Considering the Babel’s elegant and gentle personality, the story has a surprising turning point.

"Homage for Isaak Babel" has also a turning point, changing an immature and shallow girl to a person who reflects and consider serious matters. The day that Catherine spent with the author and Philip is also a turning point for her life.

But the story is not just optimistic message . . . it gave me the idea that author has an pessimistic perspective on new generation in general. Ironically, Catherine strongly emphasised on her learnt lesson from Isaak Babel’s works: simplicity. Nevertheless, the letter in no way is an example of simplicity! The tone and words of the letter is very formal and complicated (it is more clear to me, considering that English is my second language).
The day I had promised to take Catherine down to visit my young friend Philip at his school in the country, we were to leave at eleven, but she arrived at nine. Her blue dress was new, and so were her fashionable shoes. Her hair had just been done. She looked more than ever like a pink-and-gold Renoir girl who expects everything from life. (Appendix 1: on page 7)

Catherine lives in a white house overlooking the sweeping brown tides of the river. She helped me clean up my flat with a devotion which said that she felt small flats were altogether more romantic than large houses. We drank tea, and talked mainly about Philip, who, being fifteen, has pure stern tastes in everything from food to music. Catherine looked at the books lying around his room, and asked if she might borrow the stories of Isaac Babel to read on the train. Catherine is thirteen. I suggested she might find them difficult, but she said: "Philip reads them, doesn’t he?"

During the journey I read newspapers and watched her pretty frowning face as she turned the pages of Babel, for she was determined to let nothing get between her and her ambition to be worthy of Philip. At the school, which is charming, civilised, and expensive, the two children walked together across green fields, and I followed, seeing how the sun gilded their bright friendly heads turned towards each other as they talked. In Catherine’s left hand she carried the stories of Isaac Babel.

After lunch we went to the pictures. Philip allowed it to be seen that he thought going to the pictures just for the fun of it was not worthy of intelligent people, but he made the concession, for our sakes. For his sake we chose the more serious of the two films that were showing in the little town. It was about a good priest who helped criminals in New York. His goodness, however, was not enough to prevent one of them from being sent to the gas chamber; and Philip and I waited with Catherine in the dark until she had stopped crying and could face the light of a golden evening.

At the entrance of the cinema the doorman was lying in wait for anyone who had red eyes. Grasping Catherine by her suffering arm, he said bitterly: "Yes, why are you crying? He had to be punished for his crime, didn’t he?" Catherine stared at him, incred-
ulous. Philip rescued her by saying with disdain: "Some people don’t know right from wrong even when it’s demonstrated to them." The doorman turned his attention to the next red-eyed emerger from the dark; and we went on together to the station, the children silent because of the cruelty of the world.

Finally Catherine said, her eyes wet again: "I think it’s all absolutely beastly, and I can’t bear to think about it." And Philip said: "But we’ve got to think about it, don’t you see, because if we don’t it’ll just go on and on, don’t you see?"

In the train going back to London I sat beside Catherine. She had the stories open in front of her, but she said: "Philip’s awfully lucky. I wish I went to that school. Did you notice that girl who said hullo to him in the garden? They must be great friends. I wish my mother would let me have a dress like that, it’s not fair."

"I thought it was too old for her."
"Oh, did you?"
Soon she bent her head again over the book, but almost at once lifted it to say: "Is he a very famous writer?"
"He’s a marvellous writer, brilliant, one of the very best."
"Why?"
"Well, for one thing he’s so simple. Look how few words he uses, and how strong his stories are."
"I see. Do you know him? Does he live in London?"
"Oh no, he’s dead."
"Oh. Then why did you - I thought he was alive, the way you talked."
"I’m sorry, I suppose I wasn’t thinking of him as dead."
"When did he die?"
"He was murdered. About twenty years ago, I suppose."
"Twenty years" Her hands began the movement of pushing the book over to me, but then relaxed. "I’ll be fourteen in November," she stated, sounding threatened, while her eyes challenged me.

I found it hard to express my need to apologise, but before I could speak, she said, patiently attentive again: "You said he was murdered?"
"Yes."
"I expect the person who murdered him felt sorry when he discovered he had murdered a famous writer."
"Yes, I expect so."
"Was he old when he was murdered?"
"No, quite young really."
"Well, that was bad luck, wasn’t it?"
"Yes, I suppose it was bad luck."
"Which do you think is the very best story here? I mean, in your honest opinion, the very very best one."

I chose the story about killing the goose. She read it slowly, while I sat waiting, wishing to take it from her, wishing to protect this charming little person from Isaac Babel.
When she had finished, she said: "Well, some of it I don’t understand. He’s got a funny way of looking at things. Why should a man’s legs in boots look like girls?" She finally pushed the book over at me, and said: "I think it’s all morbid."

"But you have to understand the kind of life he had. First, he was a Jew in Russia. That was bad enough. Then his experience was all revolution and civil war and . . . "

But I could see these words bouncing off the clear glass of her fiercely denying gaze; and I said: "Look, Catherine, why don’t you try again when you’re older? Perhaps you’ll like him better then?"

She said gratefully: "Yes, perhaps that would be best. After all, Philip is two years older than me, isn’t he?"

A week later I got a letter from Catherine:

Thank you very much for being kind enough to take me to visit Philip at his school. It was the most lovely day in my whole life. I am extremely grateful to you for taking me. I have been thinking about the Hoodlum Priest. That was a film which demonstrated to me beyond any shadow of doubt that Capital Punishment is a Wicked Thing, and I shall never forget what I learned that afternoon, and the lessons of it will be with me all my life. I have been meditating about what you said about Isaac Babel, the famed Russian short story writer, and I now see that the conscious simplicity of his style is what makes him, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the great writer that he is, and now in my school compositions I am endeavouring to emulate him so as to learn a conscious simplicity which is the only basis for a really brilliant writing style. Love, Catherine. P.S. Has Philip said anything about my party? I wrote but he hasn’t answered. Please find out if he is coming or if he just forgot to answer my letter. I hope he comes, because sometimes I feel I shall die if he doesn’t. P.P.S. Please don’t tell him I said anything, because I should die if he knew. Love, Catherine.
Savitsky, the commander of the Sixth Division, rose when he saw me, and I was marvelled by the beauty of his gigantic body. He raised his breeches purple, his crimson cap cocked to the side, his medals pinned to his chest—splitting the hut in two like a banner splitting the sky. He smelled of perfume and the nauseating coolness of soap. His long legs looked like two girls wedged to their shoulders in shiny riding boots.

He smiled at me, smacked the table with his whip, and picked up the order which the chief of staff had just dictated. It was an order for Ivan Chesnokov to advance to Chugunov-Dobryvodka with the regiment he had been entrusted with, and, on encountering the enemy, to proceed immediately with its destruction.

"...the destruction of which," Savitsky began writing, filling the whole sheet with his scrawl, "I hold the selfsame Chesnokov completely responsible for. Noncompliance will incur the severest punitive measures, in other words I will gun him down on the spot, a fact that I am sure that you, Comrade Chesnokov, will not doubt, as it’s been quite a while now that you have worked with me on the front...."

The commander of the Sixth Division signed the order with a flourish, threw it at the orderlies, and turned his gray eyes, dancing with merriment, toward me.

I handed him the document concerning my assignment to the divisional staff.

"Carry out the order!" the division commander said. "Carry out the order and have this man sign up for all the amusements except for those of the frontal kind. Are you literate?"

"Yes, I can," I answered, bristling with envy at the steel and bloom of his youth. "I graduated in law from the University of Petersburg."

"So you’re one of those little powder puffs!" he yelled, laughing. "With spectacles on your nose! Ha, you lousy little fellow, you! They send you to us; no one even asks us if we want you here! Here you get hacked to pieces just for wearing glasses! So, you think you can live with us, huh?"
"Yes, I do," I answered, and went to the village with the quartermaster to look for a place to stay.

The quartermaster carried my little travelling trunk on his shoulder. The village street lay before us, and the dying sun in the sky, round and yellow as a pumpkin, breathed its last rosy breath.

We came to a hut with garlands painted on it. The quartermaster stopped, and suddenly, smiling guiltily, said, "You see we have a thing about spectacles here, there ain’t anything you can do! A man of high distinguishing they’ll chew up and spit out- but ruin a lady, yes, the cleanest lady, and you’re the darling of the fighters!"

He hesitated for a moment, my trunk still on his shoulder, came up very close to me, but suddenly lunged away in despair, rushing into the nearest courtyard. Cossacks were sitting there on bundles of hay, shaving each other.

"Fighters!" the quartermaster began, putting my trunk on the ground. "According to an order issued by Comrade Savitsky, you are required to accept this man to lodge among you. And no funny business, please, because this man has suffered on the fields of learning!"

The quartermaster flushed and marched off without looking back. I lifted my hand to my cap and saluted the Cossacks. A young fellow with long, flaxen hair and a wonderful Ryazan face walked up to my trunk and threw it out into the street. Then he turned his backside toward me, and with uncommon dexterity began emitting shameless sounds. "That was a zero-zero calibre!" an older Cossack yelled, laughing out loud. "Rapid-fire!"

The young man walked off, having exhausted the limited resources of his artistry. I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up the manuscripts and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my trunk. I took them and carried them to the other end of the yard. A large pot of boiling pork stood on some bricks in front of the hut. Smoke rose from it as distant smoke rises from the village hut of one’s childhood, mixing hunger with intense loneliness inside me. I covered my broken little trunk with hay, turning it into a pillow, and lay down on the ground to read Lenin’s speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern, which Pravda had printed. The sun fell on me through the jagged hills, the Cossacks kept stepping over my legs, the young fellow incessantly made fun of me, and the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me. I put away the newspaper and went to the hostess of the house, who was spinning yarn on the porch.

"Hostess" I said, "I need some grub!"

The old woman raised the dripping whites of her half-blind eyes to me and lowered them again.

"Comrade," she said, after a short silence. "All of this makes me want to hang myself!"

"Goddammit!" I muttered in frustration, shoving her back with my hand. "I’m in no mood to start debating with you!"

And, turning around, I saw someone’s sabre lying nearby. A haughty goose was waddling through the yard, placidly grooming its feathers. I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck lay stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird.
"Goddammit!" I said, poking at the goose with the sabre. "Roast it for me, hostess!"
The old woman, her blindness and her spectacles flashing, picked up the bird, wrapped it
in her apron, and hauled it to the kitchen.
"Comrade," she said after a short silence. "This makes me want to hang myself." And
she pulled the door shut behind her.
In the yard the Cossacks were already sitting around their pot. They sat motionless,
straight-backed like heathen priests, not once having looked at the goose.
"This fellow will fit in here well enough," one of them said, winked, and scooped up
some cabbage soup with his spoon.
The Cossacks began eating with the restrained grace of muzhiks who respect one
another. I cleaned the sabre with sand, went out of the courtyard, and came back again,
feeling anguished. The moon hung over the yard like a cheap earring.
"Hey, brother!" Surovkov, the oldest of the Cossacks, suddenly said to me. "Sit with
us and have some of this till your goose is ready!" He fished an extra spoon out of his
boot and handed it to me. We slurped the cabbage soup and ate the pork.
"So, what are they writing in the newspaper?" the young fellow with the flaxen hair
asked me, and moved aside to make room for me.
"In the newspaper, Lenin writes," I said, picking up my Pravda.
"Lenin writes that right now there is a shortage of everything." And in a loud voice,
like a triumphant deaf man, I read Lenin’s speech to the Cossacks. The evening wrapped
me in the soothing dampness of her twilight sheets, the evening placed her motherly
palms on my burning brow. I read, and rejoiced, waiting for the effect, rejoicing in the
mysterious curve of Lenin’s straight line.
"Truth tickles all and sundry in the nose," Surovkov said when I had finished. "It isn’t
all that easy to wheedle it out of the pile of rubbish, but Lenin picks it up right away, like
a hen pecks up a grain of corn." (Appendix 2: on page 9)
That is what Surovkov, the squadron commander, said about Lenin, and then we went
to sleep in the hayloft. Six of us slept there warming each other, our legs tangled, under
the holes in the roof which let in the stars.
I dreamed and saw women in my dreams, and only my heart, crimson with murder,
screched and bled.
4 Appendixes

4.1 pink-and-gold Renoir girl

Pierre-Auguste Renoir was a famous French painter (1841-1919). His style was Impressionism (for more information about his life, you can read this [wikipedia entry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre-Auguste_Renoir)).

He is famous for his portrayal of feminine beauty.

Figure 2: In the meadow

![Figure 2: In the meadow](image)

Figure 3: Girls at the Piano

Although, he is a great painter, his works are usually based on and show the Petit bourgeoisie and yuppie class. His works, always look shallow to me (a perfect life!), nothing like Picasso’s [Guernica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica).
Nevertheless, the very nice and sofisticated film: Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain has many references to the Renoir’s following painting:

![Figure 4: Luncheon of the Boating Party](image)

Figure 4: Luncheon of the Boating Party
4.2 Pravda

Pravda (Russian word for: the truth), is one the most important newspaper in 20th century. It was the lead newspaper of communist party of U.S.S.R. from 1912 to 1991. Although originally it was brought up to fame by Leon Trotsky and his colleague (e.g. Adolf Joffe), later it became the main newspaper of Bolshevik (later communist party of U.S.S.R.) party. It was closed down in 1991 though its old employees, produce an online version of it (Pravda online).

It should be noted that here, the cossack’s used the word "the truth" as a paronomasia to the newspaper.

Figure 5: Lenin reads Pravda