

FICTION

# ***Expedition to colony Earth . . .***

## **The Sirian Experiments**

By Doris Lessing (Cape, £6.95)

English fiction has often been criticised for being too narrow and parochial. This, at least, cannot be said of the work of Doris Lessing. She has undertaken one of the most ambitious, profound, and momentous expansions of the modern novel anywhere.

Her themes are nothing less than cosmic evolution and mankind's place in the universe, but she has used them with such skill, such a depth of human compassion and understanding, that at every step what she has to say is compelling and challenging.

The Sirian Experiments — the third novel in her "space fiction" series, *Canopus in Argos: Archives* — is an autobiographical account by a woman named Ambien II.

She is one of the five rulers of the Colonial Service of the Empire of Sirius who has colonised 53 planets and suffers from an "existential crisis". Many of the events described take place on our Earth, a planet shared as a colony between the Sirius civilisation and the superior and even more highly developed civilisation of Canopus in Argos.

The novel is really an account of the painful and gradual ripening into awareness of Ambien II, a "dry, dessicated bureaucrat", who at last develops compassion after taking part over the aeons in Earth's history.

In many aspects of her new work, such as a curious preoccupation with amulets and talismans, Miss Lessing is resurrecting in a science fiction context ideas and attitudes which can only be described as animistic and mystical. If there really is going to be an Age of Aquarius, here is one of its budding prophets.

**ROBERT TEMPLE**



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**Doris Lessing: Ambitious and profound**