

On Domestication in Marian Engel and Doris Lessing

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Published only three years apart, Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976) and Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) share the same conceit: a middle-aged woman finds herself alone for a summer and tries to understand herself. Engel's Lou is called from her dusty archive to catalogue a 19th-century library on an island in northern Ontario. But that task is soon replaced by her fascination with—and intimate desire for—a bear that lives on the island. Lessing's Kate Brown is plucked from her comfortable life to be a translator at a conference on food production. With her family scattered around the world pursuing their own pleasures for the summer, Kate takes on more responsibility with the organization before moving on to increasingly isolated experiences in Spain and London.

The title Lessing gave to the Massey Lectures she would give in Canada a decade later—*Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*—could be applied to each of these novels, especially if “we” means “women.” In both women must break down before they can break through. These terms are Lessing's, of course, but Engel's scenario importantly supplements the dilemma of female identity presented in Lessing's. Lou “breaks through” more definitively than Kate; Lou understands herself better than Kate does because her self-understanding comes via a destruction of the self, a shattering experience of animal otherness.

My point here is not to judge one of these books in the terms of the other. Instead it is to show that the one clarifies tendencies already present in the other. Reading *The Summer Before the Dark* through *Bear* means we can finally appreciate its most enigmatic motif—Kate's repeated dream of rescuing a seal. We glimpse Lessing's own recourse to animality. *The Summer Before the Dark* ends at the London zoo. But *Bear* thrillingly points the way to the wilderness beyond its gates. These novels ask: how to avoid domestication without perpetrating it on others? The journey from the zoo to the island, from England to Canada, redefines domestication in light of the most radical challenge to it.