

The Grandmothers

Four Short Novels

DORIS LESSING

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For the five decades she's been writing, Doris Lessing's books have been pivotal for many readers, among the high points around which the rest of our reading has swirled. In the 1970s, when I needed precisely what they contained, I read her novels *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). The first was realistic and praised by feminists; the second a turning point, the last in the Children of Violence series, a move into future fiction. But those descriptions are inadequate: All Lessing fiction, regardless of genre, deals with political issues and a woman's role in society, among other themes. Whatever political or literary camp has sought to claim her, Lessing has demurred. It is the very thing Martha Quest, heroine of the Children of Violence series, complains of at the beginning of *The Four-Gated City*: "The trouble is, you have to choose a slot to fit yourself to, you have to narrow yourself down for this stratum or that."

Born in Persia (Iran) to British parents on October 22, 1919, Lessing moved to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) at five years of age. She left formal education at 13, moved to the rubble of postwar England in 1949, and has lived there ever since. Her parents were World War I survivors, and Lessing was a young adult during World War II. Communism was a pervasive force in the intellectual life of her youth, and Lessing is one of that era's most acute observers. She left the communist movement in the 1950s, was prohibited from visiting Southern Rhodesia and South Africa in 1956, became associated with Idries Shah and Sufism in the 1960s, visited Pakistan and wrote about the Afghan Resistance to the Soviets in 1986, returned several times to Zimbabwe, and, in 1992, wrote a book about the enormous changes then under way there.

Lessing witnessed key events of the 20th century, and now, in the 21st, continues to write, and at 84 has published *The Grandmothers*. It is good work. She has not lost her touch. A collection of four short novels, each in the neighborhood of 60-120 pages, *The Grandmothers* explores new variations on familiar Lessing themes.

The central character of "Victoria and the Staveney" is a poor black girl who has a child by the son of a middle-class, white London family. What happens when the child, Mary, is introduced to that middle-class world is the subject of this story. In a foreshadowing moment, Victoria, as a small child herself, has a chance encounter with the Staveney, after which they take her home for the night. Ready to put the little girl to bed, the older brother observes her "white knickers" and thinks "how pretty on that dark skin. He didn't know if this was a politically correct thought or not."

Such self-conscious moments, in which people try to do the right thing in a society rife with racial and class inequalities, suggest a gentle mockery of whites for their socially conditioned, unexamined attitudes. Discovering her son is Mary's father, Jessy Staveney reflects, "I have always wanted a black grandchild."

Forty years ago, Molly, in *The Golden Notebook*, fumed, "this

damned class-ridden country." Now, Victoria senses that her daughter might leave the neighborhood permanently. When the Staveney offers to send Mary to a good school, Victoria's friend predicts, "They'll get Mary away from you, but that's not how they'll see it."

"The Reason for It" is a future fiction tale, the history of a civilization's flourishing and decline. The story's narrator is the last of a group of elite rulers. Young people don't know who he is, or was, and don't remember anything about the traditions he mentions. In two generations, the best of this society has been forgotten. "The Reason for It" is a nutshell of classic Lessing themes: the quest of the individual for understanding of self and life (for instance, Martha), the whimlike changeability of human social conditions, and our inability to stop such downward spirals, however aware we may be of the decline.

"Love child," at 118 pages, needs either a good edit or an expansion to novel status. A meandering tale whose central events are a long time in coming, it begins in 1938 with a young man's intellectual awakening: falling in with the Young Socialists, talking about the war in Spain, the cause célèbre of the times, vegetarianism, pacifism, and conditions of poor workers in third-world countries. Though it's no longer fashionable to call oneself a Communist, it seems the causes of young leftist radicals have changed little.

Once World War II begins, the young man joins the army and is sent to India via Cape Town, where the romance of his life occurs. His attempt after the war to find the child he is certain was born of this romance, and his struggle to find himself, are the core themes of this story. Despairing after one futile effort, he cries, "To know you're living the wrong life, not your own life, that is a terrible thing."

The title story features two women, close friends, who fall in love with each other's teenage sons and carry on these relationships for years. From one perspective, it seems a self-indulgent old woman's fantasy; from another, it pushes the limits of social acceptability, as Martha Quest did in *A Proper Marriage*, when she refused to be cast as a traditional wife and mother and, like Lessing herself, left her children to pursue a career as a writer and activist. May-to-December romances between older men and younger women don't raise eyebrows, but the nearly incestuous intimacy of the relationships in "The Grandmothers" does.

Lessing's keen observation of human interaction, in all its complexity, with its constant failures of communication, is one of her greatest gifts and shimmers here as sharply as ever. The bitter laugh of an old woman that begins "The Grandmothers," an outburst of despair, is heard by a young woman as evil mockery, and so lives are torn apart. Lessing's subjects are the stuff of the ages, her questions the queries of all humankind, ones we need wise women like her to raise repeatedly. While the narrator in "The Reason for It" struggles to make sense of his own crumbling civilization, another civilization is uncovered, and people muse:

Once there was a fine city here, under where we are now. And what is to stop it all happening again? ■

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