



The Grandmothers: Four Short Novels

By Doris Lessing

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In the title novel, two friends fall in love with each other's teenage sons, and these passions last for years, until the women end them, vowing a respectable old age. In *Victoria and the Staveney's*, a young woman gives birth to a child of mixed race and struggles with feelings of estrangement as her daughter gets drawn into a world of white privilege. *The Reason for It* traces the birth, faltering, and decline of an ancient culture, with enlightening modern resonances. *A Love Child* features a World War II soldier who believes he has fathered a love child during a fleeting wartime romance and cannot be convinced otherwise.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The latest by the prolific Lessing is a collection of four novellas that vary considerably in quality, with the best of them, "Victoria and the Staveney's" and "A Love Child," showing her at the top of her very impressive form. They are both at once intimately detailed yet infinitely expansive in their suggestions of a lost world only recoverable by a profoundly observant writer. In "Victoria" a young London black woman of charm and great fortitude survives and transcends the hardest of all assimilations: acceptance by a free-thinking, liberal white family. The shades of racial and social subtext here are evoked with a sure hand that even a Zadie Smith could envy. "A Love Child" powerfully evokes a strange aspect of a familiar time: a terrible ocean voyage, during WWII, by a hapless British regiment sent to the Far East to help protect India against Japanese invasion. James Reid, a young conscript, puts ashore in South Africa in the course of this nightmare voyage and embarks on a liaison that transforms the rest of his life. The detail and almost hallucinatory power with which an era and an ethos are recaptured are Lessing at her best, comparable to Ian McEwan's amazing war scenes in *Atonement*. The other stories are on a much lower level. The title story is about an odd relationship between two older women and each other's young sons; it is an original idea, but curiously lame in the telling. And "The Reason for It" is one of those peculiar tales in the SF/fantasy genre that Lessing does well enough, but that never seem to be quite her m, tier. Still, the two prize pieces here are well worth the price.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

The subtitle of this collection of stories—"Four Short Novels"—announces their ambition: each unfolds over decades, tracking with dispassionate precision how youthful notions come to define, and even defeat, a life. Two women seal their friendship by seducing each other's teen-age son; an aged counsellor recounts the decay of a mysterious ancient civilization ruled by a handsome but foolish despot; an impoverished black girl bears the child of a middle-class white boy, and is welcomed by his self-consciously liberal family. Lessing's scathing intelligence ranges widely, but her tales tend to wobble under the weight of her ideas. She is at her best in the final story, which extends from England to the outposts of empire in South Africa and India during the Second World War. A British soldier has a brief affair with an officer's wife, and in later years becomes obsessed with the idea that he might have fathered a son, a possibility that appears to him as the key to the life he should have led.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Fans of Lessing will find her trademark themes, times, and places in *The Grandmothers*. In these stories, as in her previous novels and memoirs, Lessing successfully captures the joy and pain of the human condition. This collection, coming from a writer nearing the end of her career, is impressive but uneven. Readers will find four very different and appealing narratives, from a surprising story about parental relationships to a dark comedy about social inequalities. Critics generally agree that "A Love Child" and "Victoria and the Staveney's" are the two standout works; the title story received poor reviews for its incredulous plot and flat language. For Lessing fans, push on; for novices, this isn't the place to start.

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