
Doris Lessing

The Grandmothers
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Over what period of time were these novellas written?

I wrote these novellas in about a year. It usually takes me a year to do a book. A year or eighteen months.

How do you see the stories linking — thematically and otherwise — to your previous work?

What these have in common is that they were all told to me — the three that are realistic — by the people who thought they were remarkable enough to interest an author. I have been saving them up for years, for the right time. Why was the year before the last the right time? The last one told me, **Victoria & The Straveney**s meant the length was about right. The fourth, **The Reason for It**, I had been wanting to write for some time.

The Grandmothers was told to me some years ago by a man who has been a friend of the two boys, and who envied them and wished he was in their place. But when he approached older women the response was usually on the lines of "Run along, sonny." The convention is that boys are the prey of lustful older women, but usually it is the youngsters who approach the older women. And it is nearly always the older women who end it. But conventional morality has to have its say. I was struck by how the man telling me this tale repeated, again and again, that the women had been cruel to the end of the affairs. I kept asking him, "But what did you think could happen?" They were in their early fifties by then, and they were right to end it before they got too old. But he couldn't see it. "They were all so happy," he kept saying. His view of the thing as ten years of unmitigated bliss did rather influence the writing. Though my view of the story was darker than his. Life seldom comes up with ten years of perfect bliss. This man, my informant, was very funny: he was much older, and was putting past heartaches into perspective.

Victoria & The Straveneys was originally a tale from the United States, and what surprised and interested me, for I hadn't expected it, was that as an American tale, it was about money whereas in Britain it became about class.

The Love Child was told to me over decades. The soldier in question went back and back to the scene of his love, Cape Town, to find his son. He did not find his son, nor meet again with his great love. This story is true I think to wartime loves and losses. Writing it made me remember again that terrible war and how pervasive it was, how it drew in the whole world. Twice, talking about this story publicly, a man from the audience has come up and said he had been in the US navy and my description of that voyage was like something he and his mates had experienced. And in Britain, three times men have come up, after I had finished talking, to say yes, I had described how things were. I got the information about the voyages from the R.A.F., every one of whom had made those terrible trips, and everyone used the words "The worst thing that has ever happened to me."

The Reason for It I suppose will be classified as sci-fi. I very much enjoy writing this kind of tale — historical speculation.

Do you see **Victoria & The Straveney**s and **The Love Child** as optimistic stories?

Optimistic? I don't think in terms of optimism and pessimism when writing a story. I am telling a story. **Victoria & The Straveney**s I suppose is optimistic. **The Love Child** is about a man living inside delusion.

One gets the sense, from reading your work, that you are someone who has a great amount of faith in the role that storytelling can play in affecting moral and ethical change. Where does this faith come from?

The human race has been telling stories since it began. Storytelling began with the songs and ceremonies of the shamans and priests, began in religion, and for thousands of years has been instructing us all. It is easy to see the process in the parables of the Bible. Humanity's legacy of stories and storytelling is the most precious we have. All wisdom is in our stories and songs. A story is how we construct our experiences. At the very simplest it can be: He/she was born, lived, died. Probably that is the template of our stories — a beginning, middle, and end. This structure is in our minds.