

Over the River and Through the Wood

Doris Lessing was born eighty years ago in a country, Persia, that no longer exists. At the age of five, her parents brought her to South Africa, and she departed that country for England in 1949, leaving behind two husbands and her two children by her first marriage. With the success of her breakthrough novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1954), Lessing was to become emblematic of the liberated (and alienated) woman of the post-War era. Devoid of humor, a dogmatic believer in the perfect righteousness of her every caprice, a Marxist and a Freudian ideologue when those were the fashion, a feminist *avant la lettre* (if one discounts the legions of “New Women” of the 1890s and after), and, in her mature years, the New Age priestess of a misty melange of Sufism and Save-the-Whale liberalism, Lessing has been there and done that more thoroughly than any living female writer of her generation.

Her new book opens with an “Author’s Note” that “*Mara and Dann* is a reworking of a very old tale . . . about an orphaned brother and sister who had all kinds of adventures, suffered a hundred vicissitudes, and ended up living happily ever after. This was the oldest story in Europe.” Surely, reading her novel one comes increasingly to feel that we are in familiar territory, as the orphans set off on a journey that will take them the length of Ifrik (Africa) during a new Ice Age some six or seven millennia hence. While “Yerrup” lies blanketed under glaciers, Ifrik has become an ecological and cultural wasteland of parched savannahs and boggy tundra, inhabited by tribes squatting in the ruins of twentieth-century civilization and by a much altered fauna that includes giant man-eating scorpions and downsized elephants.

This landscape will be familiar to all readers of science fiction. There have been a dozen future Ice Ages, from John Christopher’s *The World in Winter* to Robert Silverberg’s *Time of the Great Freezes* and literally hundreds of novels depicting a devolved humanity trying to puzzle out their own lost history, including such five-star classics as Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and John Crowley’s *Engine Summer*. Lessing herself has already written an earlier New Ice Age novel in her *Canopus in Argos*

Review of *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, by Doris Lessing.

series, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, but there is no reason why she should not revisit a congenial idea so long as the Muse of the Novel is with her.

Sad to say, that's not the case. The world of *Mara and Dann* is constructed from recycled plots (abduction narratives, bodice-ripper suspense, an interminable Tolkien-like Symbolic Journey, and a denouement revealing the orphans to be Princess Shahana and Prince Shahmand of the royal blood) and landscapes uniformly generic and befogged. Thus, a crucial river voyage is described in these terms: "Han was keeping a closer watch than usual. Her eyes were always on the move, first one bank, and beyond it to the savannah, then the other bank, then ahead, as the river turned a bend, and behind, from where they had come."

Imagine four hundred pages of such lackluster travel notes, and imagine a cast of characters all as indistinct as that river, and you will have some sense of the longeurs of *Mara and Dann*. Lessing's admirers might wish to point out that character, plot, and poetic evocations of place were never the author's long suit, that she is a novelist of ideas. Not this time. Lessing's parable decodes as a homily against war (cruel and meaningless), men (cruel if left without a woman's nurturing direction), and "Yer-rup" (cruel and doomed, if left without, etc.). The villains are routinely witless, incapable of articulating their own (false) ideas, and the good guys show their stuff by ever and again engaging in a Big Hug. Like this:

Mara left Dann, and climbed up on Daima's lap and put her arms around her neck. This made Daima cry harder, and Mara cried, and then the little boy began tugging at Mara's legs to be lifted up, and soon both children were on Daima's lap and they were all crying.

Perhaps the most dismaying aspect of *Mara and Dann* is the poverty of its language. It is written as though to accommodate the needs of someone learning to read English as a second language. Few novels of this length can have a more limited vocabulary. In the first chapters, when Mara is only seven and we see the world through her eyes, there is a riddling aspect to this linguistic exigence. Thus, during a wholly improbable flash flood, one to rival Noah's deluge, we are told that "another wall of water was coming down. It was not as high as the others, but enough to push in front of it boulders and dead animals, the big ones with trunks and big ears and tusks." Now what might these big animals be, with their trunks and tusks? Elephants perhaps? Have Mara's people lost the word for elephant while still speaking of trunks and tusks? This is riddling at

the level of a bedtime story for preschoolers, and it is typical of Lessing's narrative sophistication throughout.

It may be, to give her benefit of the doubt, that the author never intended the book for adult readers, nor yet for "young adults," in the parlance of publishers who regard teenagers as semi-literate. The only readers I can imagine who would not find the book patently simple-minded would be those age ten and younger. Yet the bodice-ripping passages of the later chapters would not recommend themselves to the very young:

Here they were, Mara and Dann, with scarcely more between them than they had had when they first set out far away down in the south. They saw the tears running down their faces, and then they were in each other's arms, comforting, stroking, holding hot cheeks together; and this passion of protectiveness became a very different passion and their lips were together in a way that had never happened before. They kissed, like lovers, and clung, like lovers, and what they felt announced how dangerous and powerful a thing this love was.

This is, by any standard of measurement, sorry stuff, and I can think of no other way to account for the book's across-the-board shortcomings than to suppose that Lessing has lost her edge in the way that cruel Father Time has decreed to be the fate of all mankind, and womankind, too. She has, after all, entered her ninth decade. Few writers are ever granted so long a run. Perhaps a veiled caveat emptor should suffice in such cases, as it did for the later, symptomatic novels of Iris Murdoch. But Lessing's determination to add to her oeuvre, come what may, is actually the one interesting aspect of *Mara and Dann*, for hers will surely be a common case as more and more novelists survive into their emeritus years and beyond. Writers do have an advantage relative to dancers, opera singers, and athletes in terms of not being forced into early retirement. Often, of course, they fade away into a twilight of memoirs and moral pronouncements. Those who can teach do, often with distinction. But while there are fingers to type, and the will to persist in an established habit, what better way to defy devouring time than to enter the consoling dreamscapes of a novel?

Caveat emptor.