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Primitive Lessing, Tepid Oates Disappoint

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'Primitive' Lessing, Oates disappoint

Known best for *The Golden Notebook* (1962), an ambitious, innovative novel that chronicles the artistic crises of writer Anna Wulf, British novelist Doris Lessing has in more recent years widened her scope, pursuing epic and mythic themes.

This trend is readily apparent in her new book, *Mara and Dann*, which concerns the climatic and social devastation caused by the onset of a future Ice Age.

Set in Africa, the novel sends its young protagonists across a terrain patrolled by marauding tribes and ravaged by drought, flash floods, and glacial cold. They survive unceasing hardship, yet neither their perseverance nor the plot’s mythic appeal can quite overcome the lumbering pace and leaden prose.

These tactics may be intended to evoke the primitive world the novel depicts, but they are likely to disappoint readers accustomed to Lessing’s more nuanced work.

Less ambitious but more pleasing to read is Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque*. In the more successful stories, Oates captures her
narrators as they obsessively seek to account for the mysterious sounds and apparitions that ominously disrupt their perceptions and routines.

Less successful, however, are those stories that rely upon fairly tepid, trumped-up plots that neither surprise nor frighten. Still, even in these cases, the supple, suggestive prose entices, as when we read that "melting ice dripped in a continuous arrhythmic delirium" ("The Temple") or that skin takes on "the sickly color of curdled milk, fingernails and toenails bruised from within as plums ("Posthumous"). These passages represent Oates at her best and will reward the attentive reader far more than those contrivances the collection serves up as "grotesque."

By Michael Keller, Special for USA TODAY

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