

Topic Page: [Gordimer, Nadine, 1923-2014](#)

Definition: **Gordimer, Nadine** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

South African writer. Her works, critical of apartheid, are concerned with contemporary politics and social morality. Among her collections of short stories are *Face to Face* (1949) and *Jump* (1991). Gordimer won the Booker Prize for *The Conservationist* (1974). Other novels include *The Lying Days* (1953) and *My Son's Story* (1990). She received the 1991 Nobel Prize in literature.

Summary Article: **Gordimer, Nadine**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Nadine Gordimer is a Nobel Prize-winner and a preeminent intellectual figure in her native South Africa. Known as a writer of novels and short stories, she became increasingly important as a commentator on South African affairs through internationally published essays and articles during the period of white-controlled rule and the period of change following the release of Nelson Mandela and the election of a non-racial government.

Gordimer was born on November 20, 1923 in Springs, a town close to Johannesburg. Her parents were Jewish immigrants to South Africa: her father was a watchmaker from Lithuania and her mother was born in England. She grew up in the small-town ethos of a segregated mining town. When she was 11, Gordimer's mother took her out of school – alleging a heart ailment – and kept her at home, as a companion, until she was 16. She was taken to a private tutor for three hours a day, and accompanied her mother to tea parties and motherly gatherings; in the evenings she frequently accompanied both parents to dinner parties. Reading and writing became her sources of pleasure. Before being taken into her mother's care she had attended a convent school, and she spent a year in a general program at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1945. That was the extent of her formal education. In 1949 Gordimer married Gerald Gavron, and their daughter Oriane was born in 1950. The two were divorced in 1952, and in 1954 Gordimer married Reinhold Cassirer, an art dealer originally from Germany. Their son Hugo was born in 1955.

Gordimer's writing reflects the tensions of the life she observed in the apartheid state, during both its period of accelerated implementation following the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948 and the period of its replacement by an electoral system not limited by the race of the voter after the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. Her early stories show the belittling effect on whites of the racial privileges of the age. The outwardly benign white protagonists, confronted with the domestic crises of black servants, the needs of itinerant black artisans, and even the desperation of itinerant street robbers, are shown to be emotional victims of their own set of privileges, which inhibit genuine response. In her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), Gordimer evokes the social-political scene of her own small-town origins and contact with the liberal ethos of one group of students at the University of the Witwatersrand. The protagonist attempts both to ignore the racial prejudices of the era and to interact with black contacts. Her sense that South Africa is a battleground from which she may want to escape is balanced at the end of the novel by her assertion she is not running away, but intent on “coming back.”

In her fiction of the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, Gordimer constantly evokes both well-meaning attempts at interracial mixing in an officially separate society and their inevitable failure. *A World of*

Strangers (1958), the short story collection *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (1960), and *Occasion for Loving* (1963) all encapsulate the compromises and one-sidedness of white attempts to ignore both the official, legal rules and the enormous differences of opportunity and freedom in the apartheid state. The Sharpeville massacre of 1960 (in which members of a group of non-violent black protestors were shot down in large numbers by white police) was followed by a declared state of emergency, the arrest without charge of a large number of political figures, and an increasingly repressive series of security laws and rules. The black intellectual renaissance of the 1950s was over, and with it the liberal racial mixing of that era. Gordimer's fiction had shown the illusory quality of white fair-mindedness in the 1950s. Much of her subsequent work deals explicitly with the options for action in an increasingly authoritarian and militarized apartheid state.

In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) the mood is darker, and the consequences of committed white action both tragic and ineffectual. The setting is no longer the world of well-meaning social gestures but one in which violent opposition to the state is examined through the lives of white liberals turned ineffectual saboteurs and more effective black saboteur combatants, personally elusive yet with real (often financial) demands on white support. *A Guest of Honour* (1971 [1970]) is set outside South Africa but continues the investigation of white action in an African setting. The English "guest" returns to the independent African country in which he had been a helpful administrator during the colonial era, recalled from the colony at the insistence of enraged white settlers. In the newly independent state the president, who has invited him back, becomes involved in a struggle with a local rival opposed to the new links to international capital. Once again Gordimer's text investigates the extent to which white action is helpful in a black context. The English guest is killed in a random roadside attack. White political action has been ultimately unimportant, but the change in the white protagonist is seen as an inevitable part of commitment.

Gordimer's international reputation was clearly growing. In 1961, a year after its release, her *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* won the W. H. Smith Literary Award in the United Kingdom. *A Guest of Honour* won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in the UK and the Central News Agency Literary Prize in South Africa. *The Conservationist* (1974) won the Booker-McConnell Prize in the United Kingdom and a second Central News Agency Literary Prize.

In *The Conservationist* she returns to South Africa, but not to the white, English-speaking suburbs and their threatened good intentions. The protagonist, Mehring, is a realist, a city industrialist who has acquired a farm as a place to escape the stress of his competitive city life. He sees himself as one who is attached to his piece of land but without the qualms and self-righteousness he sees in the liberal delusions of his former mistress and the political views of his son. But Mehring's sense of ownership is undermined not only by the constant presence of black laborers, but also by the discovery of an unidentifiable black corpse on the land itself. The white police bury the corpse in a shallow grave and depart. Now Mehring has a disturbingly alien presence actually in his land, as opposed to merely passing over it like the motley band of indigenous people. His sense of unease is heightened when the corpse is washed up by heavy rains and is once again on his territory. Emotionally uneasy, Mehring goes abroad to escape the anxieties of his country-estate fears. The aridity of his daily world of possessions and ownership has constantly been contrasted in the text with the natural reality of the land itself and the simple lives of the indigenous people who live on it. When the black people of the farm re-bury the nameless corpse, Gordimer conveys a sense of social harmony in the ceremony for the unknown man.

Burger's Daughter (1979) deals with a new view of the political struggle. The ineffectual fears and

prejudices of the white characters on the surface of the land in *The Conservationist* are replaced by the presence in the text of both political engagement and the lingering tensions of inherent white privilege, even among the politically committed. The central character is the daughter of a well-known white communist who dies while still serving a life sentence in prison. After Lionel's death, Rosa sets out to create her own identity beyond the South African world of political allegiance, commitment, and risk in which she has been willingly involved; she is sick of the endurance of pain and fear required by lives like those of her father. The contradictions between, on the one hand her inherited world of commitment and endurance, and on the other the privileged daily circumstances of being white drive her to leave Lionel's world. She acquires a passport and moves to the south of France, where she lives a pleasant but relatively aimless private life that is disrupted on a visit to London when she meets an old childhood friend, the son of a black activist. In London the classic divisions of the inherited racial privileges and disadvantages of their native land reassert themselves. The black father of the former friend is now, unlike Lionel, forgotten. Rosa's attempts to re-enter childhood intimacy are seen as condescending; his angry new status is that of a form of black consciousness that provokes her into an attack that further reveals her condescension. His bitterness and her guilt are crude examples of the impossibility of her continuing the easy, relatively trivial life of her French sojourn. Rosa returns to South Africa, understanding that she cannot defect. The novel ends with her in prison and the country embroiled in the 1976 Soweto uprising begun by black children protesting new apartheid schooling regulations. Addressing her dead father, Rosa thinks of the sublime qualities in his life, because he – like the black children in revolt – knew a form of elation.

Burger's Daughter is realistic, and its settings are recognizably part of the mood and aura of the era of composition. In the works written after that novel Gordimer frequently creates speculative plots dealing with imagined situations and contexts. There is the same local verisimilitude in descriptions and settings, but the events themselves, although closely observed, are placed in a future context. *July's People* (1981) is set in an "interregnum": an imagined time of increasing turmoil as a revolutionary war grips South Africa. That predicted scene of the collapse of established apartheid control is used to illustrate the coincident collapse of white moral authority. A white couple leaves their Johannesburg home as the urban war reaches their area. With their children and the black servant, July, they flee to July's small black village. In that new context, the children adapt easily to their restricted circumstances. The father tries to retain the symbols of his former white identity, but crucial items like his shotgun and the family vehicle become increasingly communal. It is the liberal and formerly benign white mistress who has most difficulty adapting to the new relationship with July, the faithful house servant who, she finally realizes, has an identity quite different from the one she had created for him. This discovery – that July's evaluation of himself is independent of her – materializes in an angry exchange when he speaks back to her not in her language but in his, which she cannot understand. The cultural authority of the old regime – along with the identities it has supported – has collapsed.

In *Something Out There*, a collection of short stories published in 1984, Gordimer continues her trend of examining possibilities for a turbulent South African world, and in the novel *A Sport of Nature* (1987) she imagines both a finally liberated country in the south and the liberating actions of the white South African protagonist, married first to an African National Congress official, who is assassinated, and then to an African general in an imagined African state. The tone of this later fiction has changed from that of Gordimer's early and middle period. In later works she constantly suggests the compromising nature of liberal values in the corrupt world of an apartheid South Africa ruled by force. For example, in *A Sport of Nature* the protagonist, Hillela, is both effective in the public realm and at the same time self-

assured and committed to action at any cost. This combination is politically successful but at times unsettling. The tone changes as Gordimer shifts from an examination of the personal costs in white liberal reactions to a more detached representation of the attitudes that make political change occur.

Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 and negotiations began to produce a new constitution. In this period of change the personal truths Gordimer investigated throughout the apartheid era and the complexity of reactions against white rule are no longer her main concern. In *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), many of the stories are pointed examples of the current situation; others depict the stresses of the period of change. In the novel *My Son's Story* (1990) the protagonists are mainly non-white, and the novel explores the nature of the determined political role of such political activists. *None to Accompany Me* (1994) deals with the effectiveness of the newly political wife of a long-serving male activist in the Movement. And as the struggle is taken over by newcomers, Vera Stark, a white lawyer working on resettlement of previously evicted black residents, decides to leave her former home and live as a tenant with a black colleague. The explicit symbolism of such a phrase is typical of the emblematic element in Gordimer's later work.

Nadine Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, and that international recognition coincided with the opening up of legitimate negotiation on the form of the new South African state. Gordimer depicts the problems of random violence and crime as the new society throws off the authoritarian aura of the white regime but inherits the major inequities of the past. *The House Gun* (1998) acknowledges the new regime's inheritance of a violent legacy. A white couple struggles to accommodate the trial and conviction of their son, who has shot his former homosexual lover after the lover slept with the son's current female partner. The middle-class parents find themselves in a situation similar to that of countless black parents with children on trial and in prison. In *Writing and Being* (1995), which collects her 1994 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, Gordimer points to the need to understand the era of apartheid in order to understand the present.

In *The Pickup* (2001), the racially mixed world of the trendy young is explicitly part of the new South Africa. The protagonist, enjoying the social freedoms denied by the laws of the previous generation, has her life altered by meeting an illegal Arab immigrant who – after repairing her car – is admitted to her cafe world. She marries Abdul and is surprised at his positive reaction to her influential circle of relatives and friends. She joins him in his deportation to his desert homeland, where she finds a sense of community and identity that prevents her from joining her husband in his search, ultimately successful, for immigrant status in the West. She prefers life in the desert to another round of humiliating, immigrant dirty work for Abdul in the United States. *The Pickup* is stark in its use of the liberated white South African scene as a viewpoint – through a privileged white person – on the international plight of immigrants from the developing world.

Gordimer's most recent work takes the history of the struggle for change in South Africa as a given and depicts the human complexities in the new state with a more detached perspective than that of the texts dealing with the apartheid state. At the same time the prose is frequently more condensed than in the classic apartheid texts. *Loot and Other Stories* (2003) contains a mixture of stories set in and outside South Africa, and in *Get a Life* (2005) the new, multiracial society is merely a fact of the South African scene. The issues dealt with in the novel are environmental. Personal health threatened by radioactive treatment is the central issue in the first part of the book, and in the second the health of the environment, threatened by development projects of many kinds, becomes the main concern. Gordimer's style is more choric in this novel than in her previous work as she links the personal threat

of the opening with the environmental threats of the second part of the book.

The latest collection of short stories, *Beethoven was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), has little of the direct political commentary of Gordimer's early and middle work. The characters in the fiction deal with personal and emotional issues in recognizable situations but are treated in terms of conflict, love, and desire. Although intrinsically part of the scene, the major political changes in South Africa are not the central feature of her latest work.

SEE ALSO: The City in Fiction (WF); Coetzee, J. M. (WF); Humor and Satire (WF); Politics/Activism and Fiction (WF); The Publishing Industry and Fiction (WF); Queer/Alternative Sexualities in Fiction (WF); Realism/Magic Realism (WF); Southern African Fiction (WF)

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