

# Gordimer accused of censorship

She is a giant of literature and symbol of free speech, a writer who stayed South Africa during apartheid to fight for liberation by chronicling human relations under an evil system. Her novels earned a Nobel prize and a reputation as the symbol of restless white conscience.

But on Friday Nadine Gordimer stood accused of censorship and hypocrisy by killing what would be the first biography about her, because passages suggested a tart tongue and bitterness about colleagues.

Ronald Suresh Roberts told the *Guardian* newspaper he was shaken by how a subject he revered turned on him after a seven-year collaboration intended to produce a sympathetic biography of her life and work.

The 80-year-old's objections led to publishers in the United States and Britain dumping the manuscript. "She is supposed to represent Freedom of Speech but she wanted complete control, tsar-like, which would have turned the manuscript into pious crap."

He supplied letters from Bloomsbury Publishing in London and the New York -based Farrar, Straus and Giroux which lavished praise on his book but made publication conditional on the approval of Gordimer, whose novels and short story collections they publish.

Both publishers dropped the biography after she objected.

Roberts said the Nobel laureate objected to his quoting a letter from the 60s in which she revealed disdain for Ruth First, a fellow anti-apartheid activist who was subsequently assassinated by a Letter Bomb

"I keep thinking of points to score off the silly bitch," the letter allegedly said.

The biographer also said she was unhappy that he mentioned her feelings about the apparent failure of another writer, Doris Lessing, to congratulate her on the Nobel: "I suspect she thought it didn't seem sufficiently Olympian." In fact Lessing had congratulated her but the letter had been mislaid.

Roberts, a Trinidad-born writer based in Cape Town, said a close relationship which included lengthy interviews and full access to archives soured when Gordimer read the manuscript last year and instructed editors in New York and London to amend it. "I thought she would rise above the occasional discomfort in the manuscript. But it was weird vanity stuff she objected to."

Contacted by phone at her house in Johannesburg, Gordimer declined to respond to the allegations. "I really can't comment on it. I've nothing to say. It's a private matter."

The author of *July's People* and *Burger's Daughter* is celebrated for nuanced dissections of human nature but seldom discusses her Private life. Her children live abroad and her husband died in 2001, leaving her alone in a house designed by the Victorian architect Herbert Baker.

She told the *Guardian* last year the biography would be authorised if she liked the final draft.

"My idea of biography is concentration on the work, not whether [the subject] eats eggs for breakfast, or if he's a good lover or not."

Roberts said the 700-page tome did focus on her work and was a positive portrait of a literary master. He showed a faxed letter from Gordimer's daughter, Oriane, which called the manuscript "very, very interesting and a joy to read".

A letter from the New York editor, Jonathan Galassi, said he was favourably impressed with its sensitivity, style and insight.

"I don't know anything of her reaction yet, but my own hunch is that she too—once she absorbs the shocks that being written about so intently must give rise to—will ... be glad about what you have done."

After learning his hunch was wrong Galassi wrote again to say the manuscript was "in the shallows with no sense of the actual current" and needed extensive rewriting. He was unavailable for comment on Friday.

In a letter last month Liz Calder, a publisher at Bloomsbury, said the biography was in many ways a brilliant book. "For Bloomsbury, however, it is not a publishing proposition, given the fact that it no longer has the authorisation of Nadine Gordimer. I am very sorry about this but I am sure you will understand the problem for Nadine Gordimer's own publishers."

In a statement yesterday Calder said the contract was for an authorised life of their star writer, and that it was no longer authorised.

Books by Gordimer, whose routine is to write from 9am to lunchtime on a portable typewriter, sell better abroad than at home and she remains one of the world's most prestigious novelists.

Roberts claimed the publishers succumbed to "Faustian leverage" from a woman who made her name speaking out: "It's a perverse irony; it's beyond hypocrisy."

Titled *No Cold Kitchen*, a pun on the subject's ability to withstand critical or political heat, the book will be published in South Africa early next year but Roberts said he had yet to find new publishers in the US and Britain.

South Africa's literary giant

Nadine Gordimer, the daughter of Isidore and Nan Gordimer, was born on November 20 1923 in Springs, South Africa. She was educated at a convent school and studied English at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She has lived all her life in South Africa, and has one son and one daughter. She was a writer under successive apartheid regimes

Her books depicted the brutal reality of apartheid, and several were banned. Her 13 novels include *A Guest of Honour* (1971), *The Conservationist* (1974), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *July's People* (1981), *My Son's Story* (1990), *The House Gun* (1997) and *The Pickup* (2001)

Her short stories include *Friday's Footprint* (1960), *Not for Publication* (1965), *Livingstone's Companions* (1972), *Some Monday for Sure* (1976), *A Soldier's Embrace* (1980), *Something Out There* (1984), *Jump* (1991), and *Loot* (2003)

Her awards include the Nobel Prize for literature (1991), Italy's Primo Levi prize (2002), and the Commonwealth Writers Award (2002). She has 14 honorary degrees from universities including Harvard, Yale, Cambridge and Oxford

Asked about an autobiography, she said: "Never. I am much too jealous of my privacy. It's all one has, in the end, whereas anyone's biographer has to make do with what's somehow accessible, by hook or by crook" - *Guardian Unlimited*

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