

## Gordimer's battle is now ours



A keen ironist, Nadine Gordimer might have smiled had she heard the ANC spokesperson this week lamenting her death, saying it was “ironic” that the author of *July’s People* (1981), an apocalyptic depiction of revolution, died in the month of July.

I was expecting a follow-through with a recollection of the Gauteng education department’s removal of *July’s People*, a matric set work, from the curriculum in 2001.

The set-work evaluators’ findings, that the novel was “deeply racist, sexist and patronising”, went viral and Kader Asmal, then minister of education, apologised profusely for the “pedagogically unsound and anti-intellectual” judgment.

How had it been possible for an evaluation committee to think it fit to transform itself into a bunch of censors, the Gauteng education MEC, Ignatius Jacobs, asked.

The incident hit an obvious nerve: Gordimer’s three novels, *The World of Strangers* (1958), *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) and *Burger’s Daughter* (1979), were banned under apartheid, along with a collection of poetry by black writers edited by her.

### **State secrets**

In 2011, Gordimer and fellow writers, including André Brink and Zakes Mda, took up the cudgels against the Protection of State Information Bill.

Last year, she wrote: “The pious charge that the press exaggerates the intention behind the Protection of State Information Bill is in itself a subtle form of censorship.” She said the public interest defence

clause built into the Bill was “a lifebelt for justice. It is surely in the public interest that we must be aware of all that affects if not determines the circumstances of our communal life, ‘that’s to be plainly said’.”

She was adamant that, for the area and borders of “public interest” to be set, it should go to the Constitutional Court “for the ears of those who hear and have the mouths to speak for the justice still to fulfil in peace, entrenched in our Constitution, the suspended revolution”.

The warm tributes from the presidency, the arts and culture ministry and Parliament celebrated the life of a national treasure, a daughter of the soil and a “petite giant”, focusing on her anti-apartheid activism through art and culture, almost to the exclusion of her consistent and fearless criticism of events in her post-1994 novels and writing.

Gordimer never took her eye off the ball: she was writing the same story, she said, of the ravages of colonialism and its aftermath.

### **ANC member**

She was unequivocal that her literature served her politics under apartheid and her support of the ANC, becoming a member under Nelson Mandela when the movement was unbanned.

She was always aware that the state lacked imagination and had never traded her own for “the hair shirt of the party hack”. And she believed it was a loyal duty to criticise the state when it fell foul of its commitments to the social compact it made in the Constitution.

Her last novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), may express reproach – “it’s never been so bad” – or an injunction not to procrastinate. It was Gordimer’s last shot with no holds barred – she mentioned the arms deal, named names and blamed the prevailing -masculinist powers for the corrupt and parlous state of the nation, marred by violent crime and political expedience, amid continuing inequality.

In *No Time Like the Present*, the country’s fragility amid apparently unresolvable contradiction spurs Steve Reed to set in motion plans to “take the plane for Perth”.

Gordimer was always going to confront the truth. The truth is not beautiful, but the search for it is, she famously said.

### **Truth in fiction**

She was never going to write an autobiography and her truth was to be found in her fiction, she said. Her debut, *The Lying Days* (1953), anticipated the realisation of this truth. Its epigraph was taken from WB Yeats:

“Through all the lying days of my youth/ I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;/ Now I may wither into the truth.”

It was premature, she noted before her death, as she was only 28 at the time. This week, its realisation has come.

Her novels track a progression from liberal humanism to a radicalism in which humanism is never compromised. Gordimer wrote “an alternative history”. This dealt with the private life, with the influences of the historical and socioeconomic climate on individual lives.

She delved into family life in all its complexity, probing love and betrayal, riveted by the forces of attraction between people and their invariable consequences.

As a witness to the history of South Africa that spanned the whole of apartheid, from 1949 when she published her first book, *Face to Face: Short Stories*, until the publication of *No Time Like the Present*, she exposed the ignorance, the sham, the humbug and corruption that underpinned relationships both public and private.

### **White identity**

She thrashed out the issue of white identity, attempting to determine whether there would be a place for whites in the new South Africa, and echoing fellow writer Wally Mongane Serote’s injunction to whites to shut up and listen.

Gordimer’s post-1994 novels continue to examine the excruciation of the transition and “fiction’s morality”, exploring and examining contemporary morals. *The House Gun* (1998) continues the theme of white dependence relinquished to a black man begun in *July’s People*, when the Smales submit to the authority of their manservant, July, at the outbreak of revolution.

In *The House Gun*, when the Lind-gards, a middle-class, liberal couple, discover their son has murdered someone in a crime of passion, they hire the services of Hamilton Mot-samai SC, a Fort Hare graduate and civil rights lawyer who went into exile, to defend him.

But the inversion of the old order does not necessarily bring credibility to white liberals, who are trapped in an unwieldy transition and the fruits of liberation remain out of reach, as we witness in Motsamai’s return in *The Pickup* (2001).

A freedom fighter, he is now a kindred soul of investment banker Nigel Ackroyd Summers and his pretentious wife. Motsamai also perpetuates colonialism by refusing to welcome the illegal economic migrant, Abdu, the boyfriend of their daughter Julie.

Julie cannot wait to flee the “bourgeois xenophobia and the patronage of the past” and marries Abdu, accompanying him to the unknown Arab country of his origin when his job as a grease monkey in South Africa ends.

### **States of imbalance**

*The Pickup* deals with the familiar themes of people loving and working in states of imbalance under the dire conditions imposed by harsh laws. It explores the notion of home, belonging and choice and,

through Gordimer's particularly piercing lens, pushes us to confront once again the notion of responsibility.

*Get a Life* (2005) is, among other things, about South Africa's -threatened ecology, the draining of the wetlands and the dangers of nuclear capability. It is also about love and the quest for self. It describes various "states of existence", in the face of sometimes -terrible surprises.

Paul Bannerman (35) has thyroid cancer. The treatment he has received has made him radioactive for a time. An ecologist, he is quarantined in his parental home, away from his wife and their small son. The Bannermans have realised their parental responsibility without flinching, in a story that unfolds 10 years into democracy in a South Africa that is tainted by corruption.

Gordimer said in an interview that this "ugly history" lives on in books, in the unquestioning dedication of Primrose, the servant now referred to as the housekeeper.

"In *Primrose*, we have a whole history ... That is what fiction does that fact cannot do. We see it in her attitudes and even her name, which has historical connections."

These unresolved historical connections continue to bind us to an uncertain future, which Gordimer explores in *No Time Like the Present*. She has left us with a powerful gift: an injunction to take up the task she left off and to continue to speak truth to power.

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### **She used her pen to liberate**

Mum Nadine Gordimer's passing records the end of an illustrious and well-lived literary era.

And an indictment of some of the mainstream media's shoddy work. Evidently, most so-called commentators seem not to have read her more than 15 novels and 250 short stories and essays, let alone the blurbs.

The most insightful short biography is by Maureen Isaacson, which I commissioned for the book *The Women's Freedom March of 1956* in 2006.

Wrote Isaacson: "Despite an extensive public profile, she remains essentially a storyteller – incisive, precise, unprohibited by the strictures of gender and race."

Mum Gordimer, whom I knew for more than 30 years, was inspired in her novel *July's People* by Antonio Gramsci, who wrote prophetically from fascist Benito Mussolini's prisons.

*Hamba kahle Mum Nadine. Give our regards to all who used a pen as a weapon of liberation. – Mothobi Mutloatse*