

Writing by the flash of fireflies



Many readers are better acquainted, and more comfortable, with Nadine Gordimer's short stories than with her novels, preferring the short-fiction's less elaborate, more concentrated aspect.

In the short stories Gordimer's pen is at its most lucid, establishing this often-underrated text form as a handsome, disciplined and far-reaching genre in its own right. I once asked her how she knows whether the germ of a narrative will grow into a novel or a short story, and she replied: "I just know."

Throughout the creation of her prolific oeuvre, the publication of short-story collections is never far behind the birth of the novels. But, while some thematic and stylistic commonalities may interweave between her two chosen forms, she differentiates them thus: "The novelist may juggle with chronology and throw narrative overboard: all the time his characters have the reader by the hand, there is a consistency of relationship throughout the experience that cannot and does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness. Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of - the present moment."

The immediacy and selectiveness of her short fiction captures a vision bigger than the seeming limitations of its vehicle - it is particularly drawn to the complex manifestations and dynamics of power, within and between individuals, between men and women, between communities, between ideas, between epochs. Intimate spaces are permeated with -histories that cannot be shirked.

Gordimer once commented in a televised conversation with Susan Sontag that in South Africa "even the most private aspects of life are penetrated by the effects of politics". But this claim does not inhibit her self-avowed primacy of commitment to the exigencies of her craft. What better container for the elegant interplay between private and public than well-crafted short fiction?

Like the novels, Gordimer's short fiction moves through history as she does, mirroring her personal-political engagements every step of the way. Her consummate 1972 collection, *Livingstone's Companions*, which shares the decade with novels *A Guest of Honour* and *The Conservationist*, and her book of literary criticism, *The Black Interpreters*, reflects her exploration in the 1970s of her own identity as a white African.

With the tide of anticolonial movements sweeping down Africa and with black consciousness and the labour movement gaining ground at home in South Africa, Gordimer's short fiction in the late 1960s and 1970s moves into the physical-existential identity of Africa and -Africans. From crocodiles to glimpses of alien but seductive African cities outside an airport window, the writer's pen travels through and into a continent's humid horizons, dense beauty, and broken promises.

What more brilliantly sensuous post-colonial moment than this scene when cynical war-zone journalist Carl Church registers both the deracination and culpability of the white settlers at the graves of *Livingstone's Companions* (in the title story of this collection): "It must have been hell to die here, in this unbearable weight of beauty not shared with the known world, licked in the face by the furred tongue of this heat."

Here as elsewhere, sex operates analogically with race. When Church meets the owner of the hotel for the first time, he observes: "But this one had been out in the sun for twenty years. Ugly bright blue eyes, cheap china. Her dead hair tossed frowsily. He thought, tender to his own past: she's horrible."

Whether she is horrible or not, Church's eventual rapacity towards her mirrors her own rapacity towards the land: "My graves, on my land." The waning sexual allure of an ageing woman, whom Gordimer does little to rescue from the reader's, and her own, condemnation, runs parallel to the growing redundancy of white dominion. Quietly down at the vast lake, a lone black fisherman hauls in his nets, undeterred by the decline of the death wish-ridden white family on his land.

Gordimer retrieves the story for lyricism, and with echoes of Joseph Conrad, at the end: "They all looked back, these dead companions, to the lake, the lake that Carl Church ... had had silent behind him all the way up; the lake that, from here, was seen to stretch ... as far as one could see, flat and shining, a long way up Africa."

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