

Anti-apartheid writer Nadine Gordimer dies

OBITUARY



By the time she won the Nobel Prize in 1991, at age 68, Nadine Gordimer had 10 novels, nearly 20 collections of stories or essays and innumerable pieces of journalism to her name.

She published her first stories as a child, and an early collection came out in Johannesburg in 1949.

In 1951, the *New Yorker* accepted a story of hers, and other prestigious British and American publications followed. Her first novel, *The Lying Days*, was published in London by Victor Gollancz in 1953.

Gordimer wrote about her childhood in Springs, then a mining town on the East Rand outside Johannesburg, only relatively late in life. She remembered the spectral presence of black workers on the margins of her world, and a burgeoning awareness of difference; she recalled also a kind of class struggle waged between her parents – her arty, upper-class mother and her lower-class father.

She grew up reading the great realists of 19th- and early 20th-century fiction, and later would continue to cite the Russians in particular (Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dostoevsky) as her “masters”, but she also developed a fine eye and sophisticated taste for the best in all the literature she encountered.

Emerging literature

She was among the first to try to take account of the emerging literature of the rest of Africa, in *The Black Interpreters* of 1973. Arriving in Johannesburg in 1948, Gordimer is remembered as a sylph-like figure with a fierce intelligence and great energy. After the success of her novels, *A World of Strangers* (1958) and *Occasion for Loving* (1963), she travelled widely (as she did throughout her life) and often wrote about other places, but it was South Africa or its neighbours – such as the unnamed post-independence African country in *A Guest of Honour* (1970) – to which she always returned in her fiction.

And her fiction, as she often said, especially when declining to write an autobiography, was the truest thing she could write. In the first big academic study of Gordimer’s work, *History from the Inside* (1986) by Stephen Clingman, the critic placed Gordimer’s work along a path of growing awareness of South Africa’s social and political crisis under apartheid, and what that meant for individuals – black and white – who lived there.

Clingman discerned a movement from an early, hesitant liberalism to a much more radical and outspoken political sensibility. The Clingman thesis is simplistic in some ways, and has been challenged, but Gordimer in her fiction did stride forward resolutely toward the future — even if it was unimaginable, and had to remain a tantalising silence, as it famously did in the ending of *July's People*, one of her greatest novels.

Gordimer's politics may have become more radical, doubtless in response to the worsening situation in late-apartheid South Africa, but her fiction was always more complicated than the "political" tag would allow.

If she was seen (both here and abroad) as an "anti-apartheid" writer, this perception belied the layers and ambivalences produced by the protagonists of her fiction as they engaged with political action — and, thereby, with the fundamental problem of human agency in the world. In her delicately devastating novella *The Late Bourgeois World* (1965), Gordimer depicts her white, middle-class, female protagonist lying in bed contemplating her recent political action, with this refrain in her head: "Afraid, alive, afraid, alive ... "

From the late 1950s, when she befriended Nelson Mandela and other young black leaders and took in the ambivalent delights of Sophiatown, to the late 1990s, when she was already critiquing the ANC government, she grasped life with both her questing mind and what can only be called a direct physical sensuality.

The sexual passages in her fiction are surely among the finest of the 20th century, something for which she is underrated, though she acknowledged DH Lawrence as a forebear long after his star had waned.

She was committed to more forms of liberation than just the political. That made her, too, a paradoxical kind of novelist. Those who noted the spare grace of her short stories and found her substantial 1970s novels hard to get through wondered whether she wasn't really a "writer of sensibility" at heart, yet one who had been turned to the crass brutality of politics unwillingly by the horror of apartheid. Even her baggiest novels, however, use the realist novelist's penetrating eye alongside the deep feeling of Romanticism and the spiraling self-interrogation of the great writer of inner consciousness.

Disdained to go into exile
Gordimer won the James Tait Black Memorial prize for *A Guest of Honour* in 1971 and the Booker (now the Man Booker prize) for *The Conservationist* in 1974. After that, she was one of the leading Anglophone novelists and commentators, and the 1991 Nobel seemed inevitable by the mid-1980s.

By then, she was involved in grassroots political-literary organisation, being a patron of the Congress of South African Writers for several years, as well as a frequent speaker at gatherings of the United Democratic Front. Internationally, she was pretty openly an ANC supporter even when it was banned in South Africa, yet she disdained to go into exile.

Her works were serially banned by the apartheid regime, from *July's People* onwards, but that only made her more famous. After the Nobel, and after apartheid ended and a new era began, Gordimer's sentences began to lose some of their Proustian length and twisting nuance and to become, instead, fractured and note-like. To some readers, later works such as *The Pickup* (2001) seemed the efforts of a novelist no longer able to connect the disparate strands of the worlds she observed.

Yet her critical work ranged as widely and was as sympathetically penetrating as ever, up to and including such essays as one of the last before she died, for this newspaper, condemning the government's proposed "secrecy Bill".

Her verbal discourse was still sharp, as an on-stage chat with her old friend ANC stalwart and litterateur Wally Mongane Serote at the *Mail & Guardian* Literary Festival two years ago showed. Robbed at her home at age 82, and asked what she felt during the robbery, she said: "One grabbed me and had his arm across me. It was a muscular, smooth arm and I thought, 'Shouldn't there be a better use for these hands, this arm than robbing an old woman?' What a waste of four young men."

Gordimer married art dealer Reinhold Cassirer in 1954; he died in 2001. Gordimer is survived by two children, Hugo and Oriane.

Source: