

Nadine Gordimer: Tough questions for herself



In a 2003 piece, collected in *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (Bloomsbury), Nadine Gordimer wondered about “the questions journalists don’t ask” — and went on to conduct a self-interview composed of those questions. Here are some of those questions and answers.

What is the most important lack in your life?

I’ve lived that life in Africa without learning an African language ... So I’m deaf to an essential part of the South African culture to which I’m committed and belong.

What’s the best compliment you’ve ever been paid?

When I was, years and years ago, on a camping trip on a farm, I was bitten by ticks that had brushed off the long grass I’d been walking through. When I complained of this, the old and very unattractive farmer said: “If I was a tick, I’d also like to bite you.”

What is the most demeaning thing said about you as a writer?

My eight-year-old son, when asked by a schoolfriend what his mother’s job was, said: “She’s a typist.” True, I was in my study typing some fiction or other at the time; I overheard, through my window, his judgment in the garden.

You were awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature at the hands of the king of Sweden. Do you look back on that as the best moment in your life?

Best moment? Reinhold Cassirer and I had just married, and were at a party in London. He had gone out to find a friend in an adjoining room. I found myself standing beside a woman I didn’t know, both of us amiably drinks in hand. He appeared in the doorway. She turned aside to me and exclaimed excitedly, “Who’s that divine man?” I said: “My husband.”

While writing, do you take drugs, smoke marijuana or drink alcohol to beef up your creative imagination?

Only a double Scotch, hours after my writing day is over.

Insights that shaped reality

At the presentation of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature to Nadine Gordimer, Professor Sture Allen, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, said:

“Art is on the side of the oppressed, Nadine Gordimer says in one of her essays, urging us to think before we dismiss this heretical idea about the freedom of art. If art is freedom, she asks, how could it exist within the oppressors? ...

“Conveying to the reader a powerful sense of authenticity, and with wide human relevance, she makes visible the extremely complicated and utterly inhuman living conditions in the world of racial segregation. She feels political responsibility, and does not shy away from its consequences, but will not allow it to affect her as a writer: her texts are not agitatorial, not progandistic. Still, her works and the deep insights she offers contribute to shaping reality.”

Desmond Tutu, then archbishop of Cape Town, told the New York Times: “She’s an outstanding artist, has a way with words but more than anything else she has had this tremendous commitment and caring about people, caring about justice.”

Gordimer commented on the prize: “I had been a possible candidate for so long that I had given up hope.”