

# Nadine Gordimer, a South African writer and anti-apartheid advocate, died on July 13th, aged 90

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Obituary



SHE had a way of looking at you. Even in Stockholm, in demure navy Armani, sitting on the king's right at the banquet for her Nobel prize in 1991, she looked beady. Like a bird, a starling perhaps. Or a puffback from the South African veld, with its loose grey feathers and eyes of flint.

Born in a small mining town east of Johannesburg after the Boer war, Nadine Gordimer was a child of empire. But there was no king and country on which to hang the family dreams, only South Africa. Her father, sent away from Latvia as a young teenager by a family that feared anti-Semitic pogroms, was ashamed of being poorly educated. Her middle-class English mother fretted that she had married beneath her. Ms Gordimer was kept at home from the age of ten, ostensibly because of a heart condition, but really so that her mother could call out the family doctor, for whom she had a weakness.

Thus Ms Gordimer's home life, oppressed by secrets and unspoken longings, and made liveable only by what she called "a certain dour tact", was lonely. Books became her friends. Chekhov and Dostoyevsky taught her the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour, Rilke filled the emptiness that religious faith could not. Proust showed her that sexual longing, so central to adolescent dreams, can be as cruel as it is blissful. Yeats taught her about passion for justice. They all helped her

make up her own mind, and unlike many South Africans at the time, she saw what she was looking at.

Even before the National Party passed its apartheid laws in 1948, blacks and whites were treated differently. That black miners pointed to items they wanted to buy from behind a grille, whereas she and her mother could go into a shop and try on 15 dresses, was something she never forgot. In her 20s she moved to Johannesburg, where she spent a year at the University of the Witwatersrand, long enough to make friends with blacks and with Bram Fischer (the model for the hero of "Burger's Daughter") and George Bizos, two lawyers who represented Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia trial where he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964. Mandela became a lifelong friend: she helped edit the famous speech that opened his defence; he read her work in jail; and when they met again after his release he spoke, not of her writing or his years on Robben Island, but of the discovery that his wife, Winnie, had been unfaithful while he was imprisoned.

In Johannesburg she also discovered the intellectual energy of bohemian, black Sophiatown and, soon after, the freedom of being newly divorced. Sexual liberation, especially for women, would be a central theme of her work. She had been publishing short stories since she was 15 and was not yet 30 when her first novel, "The Lying Days", appeared.

In another time and another place Ms Gordimer might not have become a political writer. But she wrote of life around her, and the life around her was racist. Fiction, reading it and writing it, became synonymous with seeking truth. In 1953 the *New York Times* compared "The Lying Days" with Alan Paton's "Cry, the Beloved Country", which had come out five years before, and said that her book was "the longer, the richer, intellectually the more exciting".

Ms Gordimer's first story for the *New Yorker* in 1954 began the relationship that led to her renown outside South Africa. "Allusions in a Landscape" is a mordant tale about a white suburban housewife and a *wacher*, a Jewish watcher-over of the dead. There are no blacks in it, which is strange but also in a way symbolic. Her novels and short stories about apartheid made her famous, but her writer's eye was more ambitious and far subtler than that.

She could see her way into the lives of men and women, black and white, beyond South Africa's borders to other, independent African countries; even into a post-apartheid South Africa when such an idea was still unthinkable for many. Seamus Heaney called her one of "the guerrillas of the imagination." "The Conservationist" won the Booker prize in 1974.

"The Lying Days", written in the first person and with no plot or denouement, would hardly have been regarded as a novel 70 years ago, except by fans of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. And yet the journey that Helen Shaw, the young white heroine, takes into the hovels of poor Johannesburg displays "the whole panorama of this explosive continent's most explosive corner", wrote one reviewer.

## **Freedom writer**

The arrest of her best friend, Bettie du Toit, and the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 sharpened her political courage. She joined the then-illegal African National Congress (ANC), and for a while she and her second husband sheltered the ANC's president, Albert Luthuli, Africa's first Nobel laureate. Three of her books were banned. She spoke out fiercely against censorship, both before and after apartheid ended, and helped found the Congress of South African Writers, to which she gave part of her own Nobel prize money.

Asked what she had been searching for in the 70 or more authors she read as a judge of the Man Booker international prize in 2007, she replied, quick as a flash: "Illumination." It was what she sought to convey in her fiction. Hers was writing that helped people look each other in the eye.