

We must make do without Nadine Gordimer



“Let me be forgotten.” Nadine Gordimer gave this reply in a Guardian Q&A two years ago when asked how she would like to be remembered. This is unlikely to happen. And did she mean this, or was this a touch of the well-known, often-noticed Gordimer asperity coming through in response to a really invasive question? Or one that was too hard to answer?

Despite her considerable fame, manifested not least in winning the Booker prize (1974, for *The Conservationist*) as well as the Nobel prize for literature in 1991, the question of how her work and literary reputation will survive has been debated for at least two decades in the academic world with re-readings and re-visions, especially by South Africans who have not always appreciated her as well as they might have.

But at this moment her death has left a huge gap in our lives, even for those who have not read her. She was one of the old guard, one of the stalwarts who stood against apartheid; her life and work of considerable significance in South Africa and the wider world. She certainly held up quite a bit of the sky.

She published her 15th and last novel, *No Time Like the Present*, in 2011, and took an active role in public life until very recently.

Always an opponent of censorship, she added her voice to the outcry against the “secrecy Bill”, she gave a moving and challenging lecture on Chinua Achebe at the M&G Literary Festival in 2013, and at the same festival the previous year shared the stage at the Market Theatre with her old friend Wally Serote.

Little mossie

This occasion was the last time I saw her in person; I was struck by how small she seemed, slender, even frail – birdlike, but nothing glamorous, just a little mossie.

Despite this, she had a confident presence and a sharp, engaged manner, and there was nothing frail about her intellect.

I also enjoyed her plain, flat, Jo'burg accent – unpretentiously South African. A girl from Springs after all, a bleak mining town now in the Ekurhuleni Metro.

Her physique and her speaking voice were remarkably at odds with the amazing power of her voice in the written word, often intensely cerebral as well as poetic in cadence and image.

How she made the transition from her safe, sequestered, certainly very white childhood to the stage of world literature as one of the foremost critics of apartheid has been written about elsewhere, but by the 1960s she was already friends with lawyers George Bizos and Bram Fischer, defence lawyers for Nelson Mandela and others in the Treason Trial.

Though she was not close to Fischer, she based her novel *Burger's Daughter* on his story.

Best response

Years later she recalled how his daughter had reacted to it: “‘This was our life.’ And nothing more. I knew this was the best response I should ever have to that novel. Perhaps the best I should ever have in respect of any of my fictions ... She was conceding that the novelist may receive, from the ethos those lives give off, a vapour of truth condensed, in which, a finger tracing upon a windowpane, the story may be written ...”

This vindication of her work must have pleased Gordimer, and it should do the same for those in South Africa who are still willing to find overt politics in a novel. Indeed, how is it possible to think there is any novel that does not exist in a political context?

Gordimer was unwavering in her commitment to speaking out against racial (or any other kind of) oppression. But she retained her independence and she was, in her last novel, unequivocally clear about the things she thought had gone wrong under the ANC government.

She worked hard to promote young black writers through the Congress of South African Writers. But her friendships and influences extended much further than our borders; her work as the vice-president of PEN International brought her into contact with many luminaries.

Old friends

In her story *Dreaming of the Dead*, she conjures a gathering of old friends in Somewhere that, in the way of dreams, is a Chinese restaurant in New York: the friends are Edward Said, Anthony Sampson and Susan Sontag.

They are expecting a fourth to turn up (her late husband Reinhold Cassirer?). How familiar she was with them, how affectionately she describes their rather odd clothes, how perceptively she elucidates their complex identities.

After a long and complicated conversation, the lunch comes to an end: "How shall we do without them? They're drifting away, they're leaving the table ..." May she be there with them in that Somewhere of Sontag's favourite restaurant.

But how shall we do without her? At least we have her many writings to set us a standard, to wake us up, to inspire us.

In the words of Sontag: "A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibilities, of what human nature is."

All those who follow in Gordimer's footsteps telling our stories should read her now.

Jane Rosenthal, author of the novel *Souvenir*, reviews mainly fiction for the *Mail & Guardian*. She was a judge for the M-Net English Fiction award and the winner of a Thomas Pringle award for her reviews.

"Nadine Gordimer had the extraordinary talent of writing exquisitely about the awful circumstances in which South Africans lived under apartheid, in a way that resonated with readers around the world." – Desmond Tutu

"She was an inspiration to all writers facing seemingly insurmountable odds within their own societies or facing a choice between risky truth-telling and personal comfort. It's difficult to imagine the history of the South African novel, indeed of the 20th-century political novel, without her." – *Margaret Atwood*