

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR THE FIRST TIME

NADINE GORDIMER:
A SPORT OF NATURE
David Philip 1987

Ever since *The Lying Days* there has been a strong millenarian, not to say apocalyptic, strain in Nadine Gordimer's fiction. The apocalypse is never directly encountered; rather, moments of vision, but we are left inside history, even in *July's People*, where the apocalypse is ambiguously survived. The first two novels find release in escape, but from *Occasion for Loving*, the commitment of Ms Gordimer's confrontation with South Africa has deepened. Only in Mehring's ironic departure at the end of *The Conservationist* is escape contemplated again. In the more recent works, the commitment takes her heroines deep into the heartlands of South Africa; prison in *Burger's Daughter*, the "homelands" in *July's People*.

A Sport of Nature, so its epigraph from the O.E.D. tells us, signifies an organism "which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type . . . a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way." The title describes the novel's heroine, Hillela, who is Jewish, suburban, colonial, white, South African, a creature of Apartheid who survives, mutates into Azania. Hillela is, scientifically speaking, an emergent, a phenomenon not predictable from its pre-constituent elements, and thus an earnest of hope for white South Africa.

This, then, is a prophetic novel. Hillela is named for a Zionist grandfather (other Jewish connotations of her name are also significant), but abandoned by her mother for a Mocambique night-club dancer, and begins her education at a private boarding school for girls in what was, then, Salisbury, whence her father is a salesman. But when Hillela oversteps the bounds of discretion by bunking out with a "coloured" boy, she is expelled and sent to live in the home of her liberal Aunt Pauline in Johannesburg. Pauline and her lawyer husband Joe are responsible for Hillela's moral and political education; her rich Aunt Olga takes on her training in taste and deportment. Hillela seems to follow a path (which leads, among other places to guitar-playing in coffee bars) between

Pauline's Saturday literacy classes for blacks and Olga's fashionable shops. But the expulsion lays down the pattern of Hillela's career, a sequence of transgressions, orphanings and exiles which extend and re-constitute her "family". From adolescence Hillela's focus of transgression and growth is sexual: she leaves Pauline's house after making love with her cousin Sasha; she leaves South Africa in the company of her male journalist lover, who is ostensibly fleeing the Special Branch. (He is said, later, "almost certainly" to have been a "double-dealer".)



In exile, Hillela's exuberant sex life gradually synchronises with her political commitment. On Tamarisk Beach, East African meeting ground of political exiles, a "member of the command" is among the men "far from their wives and likely to be so for many years, with whom she slept." After a more extended liaison, with a Belgian ambassador (recounted in a chapter called "The Diplomatic Bag") she marries Whaila, a commander in Umkhonto we Sizwe. With their daughter, Nomzamo, named for Mrs Nelson Mandela, they constitute what Hillela calls "the rainbow family". Her commitment (ambiguously personal-political) is only intensified after Whaila's murder, and Hillela becomes an agent of the liberation struggle (a term Gordimer fights shy of), managing arms and food from Europe and the U.S. to Africa, promoting her cause in the other direction. Having resisted the temptations of marriage to an East Coast Ivy-league liberal brownstone executive, Hillela becomes one of the wives (but the only mistress?) of General Reuel, leader of a black African state, and, at his side in the novel's last chapter, returns triumphantly to "Whaila's Country", to appear on a dais in a Cape Town stadium at South Africa's liberation celebrations. The sexual and the political come together, so to speak, in the last moments of the story, as "Cannons ejaculate from the Castle."

Hillela's story is intricately set in a pattern of south African political events of the immediate past (post-1948) and possible future. Set against Hillela's pilgrimage in exile is the progress of her cousin and first(?) lover, Sasha, who becomes a Trade Union worker, serves a jail sentence, takes up armed resistance and ends the novel in exile in Holland.

Ms Gordimer, then, tries to take Hillela's story through and out of history into prophecy. In that sense, she has written again the story of which she has written many versions before. But Ms Gordimer has also said that **A Sport of Nature** is a story she has always wanted to write. For a reader attuned to the compulsion, the duty and the scruple of Ms Gordimer's fiction, summed up for me in these words from **The Conservationist**,

Distress is a compulsion to examine minutely – this anguished restless necessity, when something can't be undone, when there's nothing to be done, to keep going over and over the same ground . . .

what seems to be the indulgence of **A Sport of Nature** may come as a surprise. The politics of the novel strike me sometimes as possibly either naive or cynical.

Hillela is a sixties child before her time; wise in what Yeats called "the wisdom of the body", she is described by others as free, instinctive, innocent. She can believe nothing without experiencing it herself ("through your skin"). For her "everything happens for the first time". Yet, private as all her motives seem to be ("her assurance so provocatively perfect"), "No history of her really can be personal history . . ." The most striking manifestation of this in the novel is Hillela's sexual behaviour; she "loved men", we are told by the ambassador, "as one is allowed

to say a man 'loves women'". Her political trajectory is identified with her sexual career. This has seemed, I gather, distasteful to some readers, who have read Hillela's life as saying something like "Free love leads to liberation".

The air of mystery about Hillela, which Gordimer conveys in a narrative method that implicates rumour, news and anecdote, covers or embodies, I would guess, a deep fantasy for the author. Ms Gordimer has always had a tendency towards a romantic attitude to sex (memorably expressed in **Occasion for Loving** and **A Guest of Honour**) and there is, I imagine, a degree of writerly indulgence in Hillela's story, which suggests that instinct and telling the truth in bed will eventually win out politically. This seems naive but is in a sense what is imaginatively available to Ms Gordimer, and Sasha's idea, which the author seems equally to endorse, that "the dynamic of real change is always Utopian" recalls the Rick Turner of **The Eye of the Needle**. There is even to-day (and perhaps especially in the AIDS era) something deeply subversive of both bourgeois and revolutionary morality in the faith that energizes Hillela's sexual pilgrimage.

As I read it, **A Sport of Nature** is not hedged about with metafictional ironies. There are moments of writerly self-consciousness; as when Hillela says 'I went to a court once and there was another kind of talk, another way of words dealing with things that had happened . . .' And in this novel's version of S.A. history Rosa Burger and Nelson Mandela are equally real presences. For the theory of discourse, that is as it should be, but for Ms Gordimer, I would guess, the narratable world exists in a way that it doesn't for her littoral fellow-craftsperson, J.M. Coetzee. In the end, the story tells against its teller. In this novel, the author imagines again the survival of revolution, but as **Burger's Daughter** leaves Rosa in the prison-house of fiction, so **A Sport of Nature** leaves Hillela (and Sasha) in exile.

It is a fascinating book, full of rich detail, yet letting it all hang out.

Footnote

In Part Two, "A Voyage to Brobdingnag", of his **Travels**, Swift's Gulliver is identified by the King's Scholars as

. . . **Relphum Scalcoth**, which is interpreted literally **Lusus Naturae**: a Determination exactly agreeable to the Modern Philosophy of Europe: whose Professor, disdainful of the old Evasion of **Occult Causes**, whereby the Followers of **Aristotle** endeavour in vain to disguise their ignorance; have invented this wonderful Solution of all Difficulties, to the unspeakable advancement of human knowledge.

Swift's criticism may be applicable to **A Sport of Nature**, and its heroine Hillela, whose instinctive (sexual political trajectory is set against the uncomfortable sequence of choices of Sasha. But there are many young South Africans like Sasha, who have made oppositional political choices on rational grounds; and have given up comfort and career for social principles.

A tribute to Alan Paton will appear in the next issue of Reality.