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Nadine Gordimer: 01-24-1986

Nadine Gordimer

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Judith Kitchen

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GORDIMER: "'A Lion on the Freeway."

Open up!

Open up!

What hammered on the door of sleep?

Who's that?

Anyone who lives within a mile of the zoo hears lions on summer nights. The tourists could be fooled. Africa; already; at last; even though he went to bed in yet another metropole.

Just before light, when it's supposed to be darkest, the body's at its lowest ebb. And in the hospital on the hill, old people die. The night opens, a black hole between stars, and from it comes a deep panting, very distinct, and at once very close, right in the ear, for the sound of breath is always intimate. It grows and grows, deeper, faster, more rasping, until a great groan, a rising groan, lifts out of the curved bars of the cage, and hangs above the whole city –

And then drops back, sinks away, becomes panting again.

Wait for it. It will fall so quiet, hardly move in a faint roughness, snagging the air in the ear's chambers. Just when it seems to have sunk, a breath is taken, and it gasps once, pauses, sustaining the night as a singer holds a note, and begins once more. The panting reaches up, up, up, down, down, down to that awful groan.

Open up!

Open up!

Open your legs.

In the geriatric ward where the lights are burning, they take the tubes out of noses, and the saline drip needles out of arms, and draw the sheets to cover faces. I pull the sheet over my head. I can smell my own breath caught there. It's very late. It's much too early to be awake. Sometimes the rubber tires of the milk truck rolled over our sleep. You turned...

Roar is not the word. Children learn not to hear for themselves, doing exercises in the selection of verbs at primary school. Complete these sentences, the cat –, the dog –, the lion – does what? Whoever decided that had never listened to the real thing. The verb is onomatopoeically incorrect, just as the heraldic beasts, drawn by 13th- and 14th-century engravers at second-hand from the observation of early explorers are anatomically wrong. Roar is not the word for the sound of great chaps sucking in and out the small hours.

The zoo lions do not utter during the day. They yawn, wait for their ready-slaughtered kill to be tossed at them, keep their unused claws sheathed in huge, harmless pads on which top-heavy, untidy heads rest. The visualized lion is always a maned male, gazing through lid slats with what zoo visitors think of in sentimental prurience as yearning.

Or once we were near the Baltic, and the leviathan hooted from the night fog at sea. But would I dare open my mouth now? Could I trust my breath to be sweet these stale nights?

It's only on warm summer nights that the lions are restless. What they're seeing when they gaze during the day is nothing. Their eyes are open, but they don't see us. You can tell that when the lens of the pupil suddenly shutters at the close swoop of one of the popcorn-begging pigeons through the bars of the cage. Otherwise, the eye remains blank, registering nothing. The lions were born in the zoo. For a few brief weeks the cubs are on show to the public. Children may hold them in their arms. They know nothing but the zoo. They are not expressing our yearnings. It's only on certain nights that their muscles flex, and they begin to pant. Their flanks heave as if they'd been running through the dark night while other creatures shrank from their path. Their jaws hang tense and wet as saliva flows as if in response to a scent of prey. At last they heave up their two big heads -- heavy, heavy heads -- and out it comes. Out over the suburbs, a dreadful straining of the bowels to deliver itself, a groan that hangs above the houses in a low-lying cloud of smog and anguish.

Oh, Jack! Oh, Jack! Oh, Jack! Oh! I heard it once through a hotel wall -- was alone and listened. Covers drawn over my head and knees drawn up to my fists, eyes strained wide open. "Sleep again," my command, "*Sleep again.*"

It must be because of the new freeway that they are not heard so often lately. It passes, its five-lane lasso close by, drawing in the valley between the zoo and the houses on the ridge. There is traffic there very late, too early. Trucks, tankers getting a start before daylight. The rising spray of rubber, spinning friction on tarmac, is part of the quality of city silence. After a time, you don't hear much beyond it. But sometimes -- perhaps it's because of a breeze -- even on a still summer night there must be some sort of breeze opening up toward morning. Not enough to stir the curtains -- a current of air has brought small, clear, and distant right into the ear the sound of panting.

Or perhaps the neat whiskey after dinner. The rule is don't drink after dinner. A metabolic switch trips in the brain, "Open up."

Who's that?

A truck of potatoes going through traffic lights quaked us 16 flights up. Slack with sleep, I was impaled in the early hours. You grew like a tree and lifted the pavements. Everything rose, cracked, and split free.

Who's that?

Or something read in the paper, yes. Last night -- this night, in the city late, front page, there were the black strikers in the streets, dockers with sticks and knob-carries. A thick, prancing black centipede with thousands of waving legs advancing. The panting grows louder. It could be in the garden or under the window. There comes that pause, that slump of breath. Wait for it. Waiting for it. Prance, advance over the carefully-tended, please keep off the grass. They went all through a city not far from this one. Their steps are so rhythmical, waving sticks, no spears anymore, no guns yet. They can cover any distance in time. Shops and houses closed against them while they passed. And the cry that came from them as they approached, that groan straining. The right of freedom bending the bars of the cage. He's delivered himself of it. It's as close as if he's out on the freeway now, bewildered, finding his way, turning his splendid head at last to claim what he's never seen, the country where he's king.

[Music]

VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries presents "The Writing of Nadine Gordimer, a Special Return Visit." Now for the Writers Forum, here is Stan Sanvel Rubin, Director."

RUBIN: "Welcome to a very special event, an occasion for the Brockport Writers Forum. Today, January 24th, 1986, is the day of the awarding of the Writers Forum International Award to Nadine Gordimer for her significant and sustained achievement in enhancing understanding between cultures, while maintaining the highest standards of literary art. The award will be presented later today at a special dinner and ceremony. Born in a small mining town outside Johannesburg in 1923, Nadine Gordimer has come to be recognized as South Africa's leading writer. The author of nine collections of short stories, nine novels, and scores of articles, essays, and reviews, Gordimer has received numerous international literary awards and prizes, including the 1984 Nelly Sachs Prize from Germany and the 1985 Malaparte Prize from Italy. Her most recent works include the short story collection "A Soldier's Embrace," the novel "July's People," a reissue of "Selected Stories" in 1983, and her most recent novel "Something Out There," published by Viking Press in 1984. Nadine, it's a great pleasure to have you here today. Welcome."

GORDIMER: "Thank you very much."

RUBIN: "Speaking with us will be Peter Marchant, novelist and Professor of English at the State University College at Brockport, and Judith Kitchen, poet, fiction writer, and critic. Welcome."

MARCHANT: "Thank you."

RUBIN: "Peter has the first question."

MARCHANT: "Nadine, I know that you're some busy woman. There are tremendous demands on your time and energy, political involvement, teaching, speaking, and so on. How are you able to be so prolific with writing?"

GORDIMER: "Well, I don't think that I'm prolific. I regard myself as rather a slow writer. But I suppose I am -- if you look at the books and count them against the years, against my age, I do seem to have written quite a lot. But I never have programs really in mind, you know. A book must take as long as it needs to get itself written. And so far as anything else is concerned, it's really the obligations -- what you might call the political obligations. A writer has a voice. A writer is known. And you can't live in a country like mine and not speak up and speak out. So that's really the only other thing I do apart from writing my books."

MARCHANT: "Do you keep the mornings for writing? Do you have a routine in which you write, certain hours a day?"

GORDIMER: "Yes, I always work in the morning, do my own writing in the morning. But living where I do, I have an increasing burden of correspondence. I have so many letters to write that simply can't be dealt with by anybody else but me. I think writers have very personal letters to write. You have young writers writing to you with problems. You can't just ignore these things. You have people who want to put together anthologies, and if they want to bring in writers from South Africa, they -- who are they going to ask for addresses? They're going to ask me. So all this takes time."

KITCHEN: "I don't have anything to ask yet."

MARCHANT: "Well, let me give you another question. You began writing at the age of nine?"

GORDIMER: "Roughly, yes."

MARCHANT: "Wow! What were you -- what did you do then? Well, I think we had a choice, as I remember, at school to write an essay or to write a poem. And I don't know why I decided to write a little poem. I think it was a very bad poem, and I've never written a good one. But that's the first thing I remember writing. And then I used to compose entire newspapers, I suppose modeled on a weekly paper, "The Rag" as we called it, in the small town where I lived so that I would invent weddings, engagements, openings of municipal buildings, and things like this. And actually draw the columns of the newspaper and draw what would be the photographs. That's how I really started. But I didn't turn into a journalist after all."

MARCHANT: "You have a wonderful eye for detail, and obviously a great relish in what people wear, and how they live, and the rooms they live in, the foods they eat, and their mannerisms. Right, you always had that."

GORDIMER: "Always. As a child one of the things I enjoyed doing, and was encouraged by adults to do for their amusement, I used to mimic people. And I was really rather good at it. I could -- I had a parrot-like ability to mimic an accent or a way of speaking. And so sometimes when my mother's friends were there I would be mimicking other friends. I now think it was rather an unpleasant thing, but I enjoyed the limelight. Fortunately, these instincts to show off, I was also a dancer and did some amateur acting. They all fell away, and whatever this projection of the imagination was and this ability to observe people closely that all writers must have become concentrated on the writing quite early on."

RUBIN: "As the story you read just before the introduction, "A Lion on the Freeway," from "A Soldier's Embrace," indicates, you have a particularly strong ear for rhythm -- rhythm of the English sentence and the language. Would you say anything else about where you think that comes from or what informed that beyond--"

GORDIMER: "I think that that strictness comes from the discipline of the short story. I taught my -- when I was teaching myself to write, it was the short story that I was teaching myself to do. And I think that my first two novels lacked narrative power, because I knew how to condense, but I didn't know how to make these links properly. So that the first novel seemed to tend to fall into segments that didn't quite knit. But the discipline, the getting to the essence of things, looking for the significant detail when you're going to pen a character or a place -- that comes from the discipline of the short story."

MARCHANT: "'The Jungle' had a big effect on you when you were 14? Or is that just journalism?"

GORDIMER: "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*?"

MARCHANT: "Yes."

GORDIMER: "Well, not -- it didn't have any effect on me as a writer. It had an effect on me as a human being. I -- it was, I think, the first thing I read that made me think about where I was living and the way we were living in this small town. In particular because I lived in this gold mining town, and there were very big mines all around us. And about a mile from our house was an enormous compound, as we call

it, a barracks where the black mine workers who came from all over Southern Africa lived. They had no wives and children with them. Nothing much has changed. They were migrating laborers as they are now. This iniquitous system was already in place. But I then began to think about them not just as "mine boys" who had been brought there to do their labor, who spoke incomprehensible languages, but as workers and as people who were living in a really inhuman way. And I think this came from reading about the conditions in the stockyards. I began to understand how people can be used as units of labor."

MARCHANT: "Well, do -- did you start asking awkward questions in your family, at school?"

GORDIMER: "No, certainly not at school. I went to a convent school, and I can't remember any questions of this nature coming up. There were no black children there, and there was no -- nobody ever dreamt of saying, "Why aren't they?" It's very difficult, I think, for children brought up in that atmosphere, because your parents are your model. We know that from our own children. It's, indeed, a tremendous responsibility. And it's both touching and frightening. And one thought that life is as presented to one by one's parents. And there were these divisions. I went to an all-white school. The library that meant so much in my life for a small child -- when I was a small child, that was segregated. No black could enter that library. The cinema, a great treat. I saved my pocket money, went every Saturday afternoon to the movies. No blacks in the movie house. I simply thought this is how it is, just the way the sun rises in the morning and sinks at night."

MARCHANT: "Was there a moment of sudden consciousness?"

GORDIMER: "I don't think so. I think one might invent that afterward, but I don't think it really happens that way. My mother was -- felt unhappy, and she -- well, she felt guilty about the way blacks lived. And her way of dealing with this was to say quite often when she saw them maltreated or deprived, which one really saw all the time. She would say, "Well, you know, I mean, they are human beings, after all." So she was beginning to think not of black people as cyphers. And she herself did good things like starting -- she was one of a small group of women who started a Christian clinic in the black ghetto near our town. But she didn't take it a step further. She didn't realize that it was the social order that was responsible for the condition of the people that she pitied."

KITCHEN: "Coming at this from another angle, last week's New York Times quotes you on a party that you had overheard people speaking about, and then says, "But maybe when I was 25 I wouldn't have made all these judgments. I would have gone home and written a short story about the party." And I'm wondering if this youthful writer that you've just been describing, do you feel time is running out? That the ways of art are long, and your country and you can't wait, or?"

GORDIMER: "No, I think I was speaking rather regretfully then, because as I've got older, so much has happened around me, and of course, has changed my consciousness. I hate using these psychologically- and politically-loaded words, but I can't think of anything else. So that something -- I'll give you an example. When I was about 18 years old, I wrote a story called "The Kindest Thing to Do," which is some -- in some old collection of mine. And it's about a child who finds a pigeon that has obviously been shot by some kid with a catapult. And it's injured, and it's suffering badly. And you can't put this in a cage and feed it, as children will do, and nurse it back to life. So the child is faced with the fact of watching it suffering or killing it. And the child takes off his shoe and then bangs it on the head with a shoe. When I think of that -- when I looked at that story for some particular reason a little while ago, I realized that what I was doing there was thinking about the responsibility that we have for life and death, that we can

actually kill somebody. We can take life away. And I think that was my first confrontation with this moral problem. But I had no idea that I was doing anything as highfalutin as that. But I think I was. I was dealing with life and death."

MARCHANT: "But you said you taught yourself to write short stories. Who were your teachers? Did you go back to the English 19th century? Dickens?"

GORDIMER: "I read truly omnivorously. I can remember distinctly winning an essay prize. We have all sorts of strange imports in South Africa. We used to have -- the Welsh had organized an eisteddfod. And we had one every year. I suppose it started with the Welsh miners in the coal mines. And I discovered that there was a literary and essay competition. And despite the fact that I had all these other interests, the dancing, etcetera, etcetera, at this time, I wrote my essay and sent it off, and it won the prize in that section. And the prize was a book token. And I suppose because it was a great thrill for me, I've never forgotten the books that I bought with this token, *Gone with the Wind* and Pepys' diary. And it didn't seem to be an odd combination at all. But when it comes to -- I say I taught myself to write -- what short story writers and what novelists was I reading? Well, I think like most people who write stories, without Chekhov, without de Maupassant, without Eudora Welty in my case, and there I now say with some hesitation, I suppose without Hemingway, I couldn't have found my way to my own voice."

KITCHEN: "Could we look a little closely at the last two collections of short stories and just talk about them a little bit? The -- they -- the story that you read at the beginning was from "A Soldier's Embrace." "Something Out There" is just recently out. And these books -- these stories seem to me to be moving -- they seem to have some other underlying themes that seem to be new. One I would say would be the sense of betrayal, not only white against black, but black versus black, white versus white, a sort of sense of urgency in these stories. Could you talk about them a little?"

GORDIMER: "Well, when I was reading the proofs of "Something Out There," the latest collection, I was absolutely stunned by this, because I realized that there is an obsession with betrayal in the stories in that book. Even the one about the couple in Europe, "Sins of the Third Edge," it's all about different forms of betrayal, political, sexual, in every field. "Siblings," the one about the children --"

KITCHEN: "Right."

GORDIMER: "-- that's in "Soldier's Embrace," isn't it? Anyway, I seem to have been obsessed by this. And I asked myself why. Well, I think that in the last few years it's been so much in the air at home. That, at home, you just never know really to whom you are talking. You're among friends, and then you may discover later that there was somebody there who was indeed not a friend. The most extraordinary things have happened. I have two young friends. He's a lawyer, and so is she. And they're people who work terribly hard in the liberation movement. And the young man, who was so close to them that he was best man at their wedding, turned out to be really a master spy. He's been -- was principle witness in a number of very important cases. They had no idea. He had their total confidence."

KITCHEN: "So the "Something Out There" is really something in there?"

GORDIMER: "Yes."

MARCHANT: "You astonish me by saying that you didn't realize that until you got the galleys."

GORDIMER: "Hmm, because the stories in -- when I publish a collection of stories, they've usually been written over perhaps three, four, five years -- usually nearer to five. And I haven't read them in sequence, or I haven't read them all together. I might have read an odd one at a reading, but I haven't looked at them. And then I see what I've been doing. I've been obsessed by the subject, and I've been exploring it from different viewpoints and how it affects different people, because I think in a society like ours, one of the things that happens to us -- it happens to me and it happens to subjects that I'm writing about -- is that there is a kind of actual distortion of sensibilities, just as when a baby is born, its head is finally formed in the birth canal as it comes out. So by living there, your personality and your perceptions are constantly under these pressures that shape you."

RUBIN: "I'd like to bring you back for a moment to the formal question. You write short stories, as we've established, and you write novels. And they come out one after another. What are your varying commitments to the two forms? What are the kinds of truth that each, for you, can get at?"

GORDIMER: "I don't think there's any difference in the kind of truth, but I think I tend now to write fewer stories, slowly, and indeed with some sadness to feel that I'm -- slowly have been neglecting the short story -- I've written fewer than before -- because the themes that interest me are becoming more and more complex, perhaps because life is becoming more and more complex -- the life of the -- the life around me that I -- from which I draw my sustenance and my subject."

RUBIN: "So you can't deal with terribly complex themes in the short story form? Or is it simply a matter of number of characters and development?"

GORDIMER: "No, no. It's a matter of the layers of the thematic layers. Even in my stories, I'm not satisfied with a one, direct layer. But I've found that, you know, it's really like peeling an onion. Once you begin to invent an alternative life for somebody -- I mean, a type of person, once you begin to find -- to try and find out why they are as they are, what has happened to them, you're just going deeper, and deeper, and deeper, and deeper. And sometimes it seems the story doesn't give you enough space for that."

RUBIN: "You are, it seems to me, particularly in your more recent work, an absolute master of what isn't said, what doesn't appear onstage. Could you comment on that? Are you -- do you ever re-read a story, and -- well, you just answered that, if you find something you didn't realize was in there. But how conscious is this kind of reticence or control? What isn't explicit?"

GORDIMER: "Well, that's just the way I write. It happens -- it's not something that I cut out afterward. Indeed, sometimes I have to go back and think, "Well, now you have been -- you have held back so much there, you -- you've given so much breathing space, have you -- to the reader, will the reader will make that jump? Particularly in a novel of *Man the Conservationist* where I decided, "To hell with it. I'm not explaining anything." And if they're -- if it's full of unfamiliar terms and unfamiliar situations, I'm not going to put in any kind of authorial direction, that it must carry itself or not."

KITCHEN: "The recent novel, *July's People*, of course, is sort of a visionary novel. Are you happy with it? Is it something that you feel really reflects what you actually think will happen? Or were you just playing with the future and --"

GORDIMER: "I wasn't. I was playing with the present. I was looking at what we were doing in South Africa that could very likely bring about that kind of consequence. And since that -- in the few years

since it's written, of course many of the things that seemed like science fiction then have begun to happen. And it's not because I'm a seer or a prophet, but because it was there. We've been doing things that would bring this about."

MARCHANT: "I find this a theme running through your work, condemnation of detachment. The wishy-washy liberal -- who I feel myself to be much of the time -- not wanting to make life unpleasant. Not wanting -- if this -- that runs through your work. And it's as if it's a self-condemnation, too. You're spurring yourself to be involved. Am I right?"

GORDIMER: "Well, you're right that it is a self-condemnation. I am often, indeed, criticized for this cold eye that I cast upon particularly white South Africans, though I have done so with the black characters as well. But my answer is I am one of you -- one of you, you know. And I -- if I'm castigating anybody, I'm castigating myself. Not from the point of view of self-improvement. I mean, I don't write to improve my morality. But it's part of the knowing process, of getting to know why we are as we are, what our behavior really means in all sorts of relationships. Not only political ones. If you take a story of mine like "Siblings," where you have a child -- a cousin in the family who is a little dropout, a drug addict, and the various attitudes of the family to their child. I have often in my stories -- you may have noticed -- dealt with relationships between children and their parents. Then we come something good I think of as one of my central themes, and that is power -- the way human beings use power toward one another."

MARCHANT: "You do something that I find really extraordinary, you manage to avoid being shrill or overtly didactic, and it seems to me that it's because you're writing about people as people who happen to be in circumstances. And I find you have a wide range of character, and some part of you loves them all."

GORDIMER: "Yes, I think that's true. Even, you know, the man I love to hate, Mehring in "Conservationist." He's just exactly the kind of person that I really despise in South Africa. But once I began to write about him and got under his skin, I began to understand him better. I don't believe that to understand is to forgive all. I think that's an -- certainly in a country with conflict like my own, it's a very dangerous statement, a dangerous attitude. But for a writer, it's absolutely essential to understand all. And once you understand all, you cannot be entirely unsympathetic to any character, unless you're a propagandist, and you want to draw cardboard figures."

MARCHANT: "Because the monster is not another person absolutely divorced from oneself. It's oneself in those circumstances if one doesn't watch out."

GORDIMER: "Absolutely, I agree. The monster's always there inside, in all of us."

RUBIN: "You have -- to follow through on this point, you have written -- said numerous times that you're not a propagandist, don't want to be. You're not a reporter, and don't wish to be a journalist. You're -- and one time you said you're a natural writer. Would you say something about this distinction? And is the language of politics truly distinct from the language of art?"

GORDIMER: "Oh, I think so. And I think one has to watch out for these words and phrases coming in. One's got to cleanse poetry and fiction of them, because they're -- you know they're like old pieces of soap, they're worn right down. There's really nothing there anymore. I said somewhere -- I prefaced an essay that I wrote by saying that nothing that I write here in this essay will be as true as my fiction. And I believe that with all my heart and mind. I always feel when I'm writing something nonfiction, I do it

really usually for political reasons because I feel there's something to say that perhaps I've got a little wrinkle on that you don't get in the newspaper. And then I always feel that the writing is self-conscious, that it isn't really -- that it's somehow being tailored by some other force in me. I'm never really happy about it, and I really mean that it is not as true as what I imagined."

RUBIN: "You have had this just this year in this country several essays -- speaking of essays -- in --"

GORDIMER: "Two."

RUBIN: "Well, you had the New York Times, and the New York Review of Books, and you had, I think, another essay in a literary review out of New York during this year. Are you troubled -- does the necessity to be moved to this kind of writing detract from your time and effort that you could give to your own imaginative writing?"

GORDIMER: "Well, I do it as little as possible, but as a white South African writer, when my country's in crisis and I know that more attention can be drawn to this by one piece in something like the New York Times magazine -- the only time I've ever written anything for them -- then I feel how can I refuse? Who am I, then, to sit and say, "No, no. I'm writing my novel. I can't do it"? So in certain special cases, it's the one thing I can do. And I think everybody must do what they happen to be able to do best. It's no good me going and sitting perhaps on some committee, though I do that sometimes, too. But it's better for me, then, to write something. But I won't mix that with my fiction."

KITCHEN: "We've spent a lot of time sort of trying to blur the distinctions between the art and the politics. I suppose I would have to ask the question of sex and whether or not you feel strongly that you are a female writer or a writer who happens to be female? And maybe speak a little bit about this. I know it's an issue that's been raised recently --"

GORDIMER: "Yes, well --"

KITCHEN: "-- and it's one of interest to me."

GORDIMER: "-- it's an issue on which I always give an unpopular answer, but I have to be honest. I'm not at all conscious of being a female writer. I think that there's a special kind of "male" writing and there's a special kind of "female" writing. And then there's another kind of writing which allows the writer to be what the writer really is, and that is this strange creature who can get into the skin of all sexes, all ages, all -- I think that that's something that a writer really needs to give him or herself the freedom of."

MARCHANT: "If he or she is good enough. Chaucer had that gift. You have a very strong sense of nature. You know, you have this sense of someone with bare feet in the soil, of flowers, and landscape, and animal life. You've always had that?"

GORDIMER: "Yes, I have. And I don't know why, because South Africa is a very, very beautiful country, quite wonderful. But I happen to live in one of the few ugly parts of it. I was born in this ugly little mining town, very flat, above the tree belt. And well, a little town that had been thrown together because the mines came up. No -- nothing of -- no architectural beauty, and really nothing. But I always had this strong feeling, first of all, for minute things in nature, worms, and bugs, and the petals of flowers. Whatever there was there, however tiny, I always responded to very strongly. And then, of course, when I grew up and was free to move around my country, this opened up tremendously my sensuous response to nature. And I think in my early stories it's indeed the motivation of some of the stories."

Unfortunately, as you get older, I think that goes, because you don't see a -- that flower for the first time. You don't see that drop of dew on the telephone pole for the first time. You've seen it umpteen times, and you can't -- you don't -- doesn't have the same impact on you."

RUBIN: "How has your sense of your audience changed over the years of your career and with your growing eminence?"

GORDIMER: "Not at all. I never think about it, truly. Never."

RUBIN: "Do you do a lot of revising?"

GORDIMER: "Not much. No, not much. What I will usually do if I'm writing a long novel, I go straight through. And I may go back a chapter, but I don't go from the beginning again. And then when I've finished, then there will be the grand task of going right through it."

RUBIN: "Do you read your work aloud at any point in the composition process?"

GORDIMER: "Not usually, no. And I never show it to anybody. I've got a feeling that it will all disappear if I show it to somebody."

MARCHANT: "To anybody? You don't show it -- you don't read it to your family?"

GORDIMER: "No, never. I'm always amazed reading the correspondence, especially of 19th century writers, reading recently that the correspondence between Flaubert and Turgenev, how they trapped their families and friends and said, "Now listen." And they'd read for four hours. But of course, they really had something to read to the family."

MARCHANT: "Who -- do you listen to criticism? Family, friends, the critics?"

GORDIMER: "Family, friends? My family is very blunt, and I can get the truth from them, especially from my two children. But -- who are grown up, of course. And from my husband. Friends I think never tell you the truth, because if they love you, and they -- they do not want to tell you that they think that this book -- your latest book they don't like as much as the one before. So really I think they smile, and kiss you on both cheeks, and doubtless, I do the same -- would do the same thing. Critics, in my -- there are one or two in the world that I know of, and if they write a critique of a book of mine, I'm very interested to read it, and it means something to me. And I would be wounded if they had very strong criticisms of it, because I would feel they knew what I was trying to do and that I had failed to do it. On the other hand, very often the general run of things is you get praise for the wrong things; that somebody has read your book in a particular way and has really failed to see the point of what you were doing. Then you begin to think there's something wrong with you. But this really doesn't bother me too much, because I'm inclined to put the fault, then, on the reviewer rather."

MARCHANT: "What happens if your blunt husband and children don't like something?"

GORDIMER: "It's too bad, because the book's published by then. They haven't seen it before."

MARCHANT: "Oh, I see. They have no chance --"

GORDIMER: "No."

MARCHANT: "-- to get you to make alterations?"

GORDIMER: "No. I've only once in my life -- in one period in my life, during the time I was writing "Guest of Honor," there was one person with whom I discussed the book as it was -- while it was being written, and whose opinion of how it was going was important to me. And somehow -- it's somewhere in the shaping of the book psychologically. But that's the only time in my life. Just one book out of all these."

RUBIN: "You have also of late written for television in South Africa. Is this for you rather like essay writing, a necessity rather than a --"

GORDIMER: "No, no, not at all. I'm very interested in film, and I go to see films. And every now and then somebody comes along and wants to make a film of one of my stories. But what happens then is they want to bring in a Hollywood writer, and we're going to have "Lions on the Freeway." Indeed, we're going to have them running around the streets of Johannesburg. And it's been impossible. It's never got beyond the first negotiation, because I couldn't agree just to give my work over to anybody. The seven television films that you're speaking about from seven of my stories, this was an idea of somebody who just loved the stories, had no money, managed to raise a little through German Television and Channel Four in England. But in return for my giving the rights of my stories for really nothing, a tiny token, I had wonderful control. I chose the directors myself, and I wrote four of the scripts. And I enjoyed doing that, and I think I learned something."

RUBIN: "You know, you're frequently described very positively as being in the mainstream of English fiction. But the cinematic issue you were just raising suggests ways in which you are a bit experimental in some of your recent work. Would you say something about that? Do you see yourself as being in the mainstream of anything artistically?"

GORDIMER: "Well, I think that anybody who tries to write well in the English language and feels inevitably however much the language may change, because you're living in this country, all that, and your sensibility is different. You belong -- if -- you belong to the mainstream of the English language. I would say the same about French writers or German ones. It is the language that is your mainstream, as long as you're using that language, and if you use it well, I think you do belong to the mainstream."

RUBIN: "Would you say something about what might be called the stream of consciousness or interior monologue in the kinds of thing you read earlier, and --"

GORDIMER: "Well, I think we will -- all of us who write today were very much influenced by Joyce, obviously, and by Proust. Like Proust, in my life, was a great influence. Without Proust, Joyce, and Thomas Mann, where would we be? It's impossible to say what has come in -- what we have absorbed from the tradition."

RUBIN: "This is the mainstream."

GORDIMER: "And the 19th century writers, of course, and further back."

MARCHANT: "What do you find to be significant about writing in terms of social change? If, obviously, your strength lies in writing fiction and not in journalism, and not in making political speeches, but do you have any faith that your fiction makes change?"

GORDIMER: "I don't think that fiction can make change. I don't think that writers are taken that seriously. I know they're not in my own country. And indeed, most of us are regarded as enemies. Black writers are certainly all regarded as enemies, and most white writers as well, because we all oppose the

state. You won't find one writer who will covertly or overtly defend Apartheid. It's one of the interesting -- it's an interesting phenomenon. I think that we, by our books -- and I've got this from other people's books -- it makes South Africans, black and white, see themselves as they cannot from inside themselves. They get a kind of mirror image with which to compare their own feelings and their motives. So I think that it raises their consciousness in this way to the social conditions in which they live. In the case of blacks, it has raised people's self-respect and pride in bad times. I think in the outside world, fiction writers, long before and in between the times when South Africa is headline news because of terrible things happening, it's the fiction writers who have given the sense of the daily life, the picture of the daily life, the complexity, to the outside world through their novels. So in that way I think we have influenced the outside world to become aware of what is happening in South Africa."

RUBIN: "To end on a -- perhaps a somber note that this discussion suggests at this point, and one I think just suggested by your recent work, and by a questions Judy asked earlier, are -- to what extent are people free? I mean, it seems that your characters are continually running into these limitations. To -- are you -- to what extent do you find in your writing of fiction that you discover people are free?"

GORDIMER: "Well, it depends what you call freedom. I mean, the many, many whites -- many middle-class whites, upper middle-class whites would regard themselves as completely free."

RUBIN: "Well, you know --"

GORDIMER: "But they're not."

RUBIN: "I mean the question -- I don't mean, of course, the political question. I mean the question of -- the larger question of fatality."

GORDIMER: "Oh, yes."

RUBIN: "To what extent can human beings really direct their lives?"

GORDIMER: "Free -- whether there is question of free will. I mean, whether -- how they will direct their lives. Well, I think that they don't, really. And certainly not within the kind of determined social order of the kind in which I live. And there are always tremendous hazards. I've just learned this morning before I came here that a friend of mine, a black writer in Cape Town, a poet, was arrested and detained yesterday. I don't know why, and probably will not know why."

MARCHANT: "And he could be detained for weeks or months?"

GORDIMER: "Yes."

MARCHANT: "Without recourse, without any lawyer?"

GORDIMER: "I don't know -- I don't know which -- you can be detained under different sections of the law. And under the one particular section, you cannot see a lawyer or anybody. And under the other -- the other section is less stringent, and you could consult with your lawyer. But he has been in detention before for some weeks, and come out without ever being charged. So this is really a situation out of Kafka, isn't it?"

RUBIN: “Well, on this note, I must bring this conversation to a close. I would add that you are certainly a writer whose great gifts have flourished under a situation of various kinds of constraint, even including at time censorship. And this has been a great pleasure to have you speak with us today. Thank you.”

MARCHANT: “Thank you.”

RUBIN: “Peter and Judy, thank you both.”

GORDIMER: “Thank you.”

KITCHEN: “Thank you.”

[Music]

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