

Gordimer (2)

“I’m not a liberal, my dear,” she said sharply. “I’m a leftist.”

Rachel L. Swarns, “A Vibrant Battler of Apartheid Keeps Her Vibrancy,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2002, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

[At the Delmas Treason Trial, 1986, Gordimer testified as witness, and the prosecutor asked] was Nelson Mandela my leader, and then he said is Umkhonto we Sizwe your Umkhonto we Sizwe? And I said yes.

Karen Lazar, “‘A Feeling of Realistic Optimism’: An Interview with Nadine Gordimer,” *Salmagundi* 113 (Winter 1997): 151, 154. Umkhonto we Sizwe refers to the armed wing of the ANC, considered terrorists during the apartheid regime.

1889	Kipling, “The Man Who Would Be King”
1907	Kipling’s Nobel
1910	Union of South Africa established (home rule)
1923	Nadine Gordimer b. Springs (near Johannesburg)
1929	Faulkner, <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>
1948	National Party in power; apartheid institutionalized
1949	<i>Face to Face: Short Stories</i> (Johannesburg: Silver Leaf)
1950	Faulkner’s Nobel
1953	“Six Feet of the Country,” <i>New Yorker</i> , May 23, 1953
1960	Sharpeville massacre; Gordimer’s friend Bettie du Toit arrested
1962	Nelson Mandela imprisoned (Gordimer is close to his defense lawyers)
1974	<i>The Conservationist</i> (London: Cape): Booker Prize
1976	Soweto uprising, June 16: several hundred students killed
1977	Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko murdered in detention UN enacts arms embargo
1979	<i>Burger’s Daughter</i> (New York: Viking); (briefly) banned in SA
1980	Zimbabwe achieves independence following civil war
1981	<i>July’s People</i> (New York: Viking)
1985	Rutgers divests from South Africa after student protests
1990	Mandela released from prison; negotiations to end apartheid begin
1991	Gordimer’s Nobel
1994	Mandela elected president in first universal suffrage elections
1999	“Loot,” <i>New Yorker</i> , March 22, 1999
2001	<i>The Pickup</i> (London: Bloomsbury): 2002 Commonwealth Prize
2014	d.

For Gordimer’s affiliation with Mandela’s defense team, see Per Wästberg, “Nadine Gordimer and the South African experience,” [nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org), April 26, 2001.

GORDIMER'S BANQUET SPEECH

When the six-year-old daughter of a friend of mine overheard her father telling someone that I had been awarded the Nobel Prize, she asked whether I had ever received it before. He replied that the Prize was something you could get only once. Whereupon the small girl thought a moment: 'Oh' she said, 'so it's like chicken-pox.'

Well, Flaubert said that 'honours dishonour' the writer, and Jean-Paul Sartre declined this particular honour, but whether as malediction or malady one cannot say. I certainly find being the recipient at this celebratory dinner more pleasurable and rewarding than chicken-pox, having now in my life experienced both.

But the small girl was not entirely wrong. Writing is indeed, some kind of affliction in its demands as the most solitary and introspective of occupations. We writers do not have the encouragement and mateyness I imagine, and even observe, among people whose work is a group activity. We are not orchestrated; poets sing unaccompanied, and prose writers have no cue on which to come in, each with an individual instrument of expression to make the harmony or dissonance complete. We must live fully in order to secrete the substance of our work, but we have to work alone. From this paradoxical inner solitude our writing is what Roland Barthes called 'the essential gesture' towards the people among whom we live, and to the world; it is the hand held out with the best we have to give.

When I began to write as a very young person in a rigidly racist and inhibited colonial society, I felt, as many others did, that I existed marginally on the edge of the world of ideas, of imagination and beauty. These, taking shape in poetry and fiction, drama, painting and sculpture, were exclusive to that distant realm known as 'overseas'. It was the dream of my contemporaries, white and black, to venture there as the only way to enter the world of artists. It took the realization that the colour bar – I use that old, concrete image of racism – was like the gate of the law in Kafka's parable, which was closed to the supplicant throughout his life because he didn't understand that only he could open it. It took this to make us realize that what we had to do to find the world was to enter our own world fully, first. We had to enter through the tragedy of our own particular place.

If the Nobel awards have a special meaning, it is that they carry this concept further. In their global eclecticism they recognize that no single society, no country or continent can presume to create a truly human culture for the world. To be among laureates, past and present, is at least to belong to some sort of one world.

"Banquet Speech," December 10, 1991, nobelprize.org.