

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 77

NADINE GORDIMER

This interview with Nadine Gordimer was conducted in two parts—in the fall of 1979, when she was in America on a publicity tour for her most recent novel, *Burger's Daughter*, and in the spring of 1980, when she was here to see her son graduate from college.

Our first meeting was in a room set aside for us by her publisher, the Viking Press—one of those conference rooms made cozy by lots of books and claustrophobic by its lack of windows. The hotel room where our second meeting took place was slightly more conducive to amiable conversation. But Gordimer does not waste words in conversation any more than she does in her prose. On both occasions she was ready to begin our interview the moment I walked in the door and ready to end it the moment the hour she had suggested for our meeting was up. Her clarity and mental focus allow her to express a great deal in a short amount of time.

A petite, birdlike, soft-spoken woman, Gordimer manages to combine a fluidity and gentleness with the seemingly restrained and highly structured workings of her mind. It was as if the forty-odd years that she had devoted to writing had trained her to distill passion—and as a South African writer she is necessarily aware of

being surrounded by passion on all sides—into form, whether of the written or spoken word. At the same time, she conveyed a sense of profound caring about the subject matter of her writing; those subjects natural to any writer concerned with the human condition, but set, in her case, in the heightened context of South African life. Her manner seemed to say, Yes, these are important subjects we're discussing. Now let's get through talking about them so I can get back to the business of writing about them.

—*Jannika Hurwitt, 1983*

INTERVIEWER

Do you have seasons in South Africa, or is it hot all year round?

NADINE GORDIMER

Oh no, we have seasons. Near the equator, there's very little difference in the seasons. But right down where we are, at the end of the continent, and also high up where I live in Johannesburg—six thousand feet up—you have very different seasons. We have a sharp, cold winter. No snow—it's rather like your late fall or early spring—sunny, fresh, cold at night. We have a very definite rainy season. But you don't see rain for about half the year. You forget that rain exists. So it's a wonderful feeling when you wake up one day and you smell the rain in the air. Many of the old houses, like ours, have galvanized iron or tin roofs. It's very noisy when there's a heavy rain—it just gallops down on the roof. The house that I was brought up in had a tin roof, so it's one of my earliest memories, lying in bed and listening to the rain . . . and hail, which, of course, on a tin roof is deafening.

INTERVIEWER

When was your first trip out of South Africa?

GORDIMER

My first trip out was to what was then called Rhodesia—Zimbabwe. That might seem very much the same thing as South Africa to you, but it isn't. Zimbabwe is Central Africa, subtropical, shading into tropical. But my first real trip out was much later. I had already published two books—I was thirty years old. I went to Egypt, on my way to England, and America. Perhaps it was a good transition. In London I felt at home, but in an unreal way—I realized when I got there that my picture of London came entirely from books. Particularly Dickens and Virginia Woolf. The writers who, I'd thought, had impressed me with the features of English life, like Orwell, did not have this evocation when I was actually in the place; they were not writers with a strong sense of place. Woolf and Dickens obviously were. So that when I walked around in Chelsea I felt that this was definitively Mrs. Dalloway's country. I remember I stayed in a hotel near Victoria Station. And at night, these dark, sooty buildings, the dampness when one leaned against a wall—absolutely decayed buildings . . .

INTERVIEWER

Were you as unprepared for this first trip off the African continent, and as awed by it, as Rebecca in your novel, *A Guest of Honour*?

GORDIMER

No, my mother, who hadn't been back to England for about twenty years, prepared me. She provided me with woolly underwear and whatnot, which I threw away after I arrived. But Rebecca's trip to Switzerland . . . I think descriptions of impressions from the air are something that writers nowadays have to be careful of. Like train journeys in mid-nineteenth-century literature . . . they made such a change in people's lives. They produced a . . . leap in consciousness, especially so far as time was concerned. I can imagine what it must have been, the thought of taking a train that was to go rushing through the countryside. There were so many

descriptions of trains in the literature of the day. But I think writers must be careful now not to overdo the use of travel as a metaphor for tremendous internal changes. “The journey” now is by air, and think of how many writers use this—in my own books it appears in *The Conservationist* and in *Guest of Honour*. And indeed, in *Burger’s Daughter*, Rosa Burger takes her first trip out of South Africa; I had to resist the temptation to talk about the journey—I describe only the landing, because that particular piece of the landscape could be useful later on.

INTERVIEWER

Was this trip to England a sort of “back to the roots” expedition?

GORDIMER

No. But it brought an understanding of what I was, and helped me to shed the last vestiges of colonialism. I didn’t know I was a colonial, but then I had to realize that I was. Even though my mother was only six when she came to South Africa from England, she still would talk about people “going home.” But after my first trip out, I realized that “home” was certainly and exclusively Africa. It could never be anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER

What brought your parents to South Africa?

GORDIMER

The same thing brought them both. They were part of the whole colonial expansion. My maternal grandfather came out in the 1890s with a couple of brothers. South Africa was regarded as a land of opportunity for Europeans. And indeed, he went prospecting for diamonds in Kimberley. I don’t think he found very much—maybe some small stones. After that, his entire life was the stock exchange. He was what we call a “tickey snatcher.” A tickey was a tiny coin like a dime—alas, we don’t have it anymore. It was equal to three English pence. *Tickey* is a lovely word, don’t you

think? Well, my grandfather was a tickey snatcher on the stock exchange, which meant that he sat there all day, and that he bought and sold stocks—making a quick buck.

My father's story is really not such a happy one. He was born in Lithuania, and he went through the whole Jewish pogrom syndrome, you know. He had hardly any schooling. There wasn't any high school for Jewish kids in his village. His father was a shipping clerk and there were twelve children. I'm sure they must have been very poor. Their mother was a seamstress. As soon as my father was twelve or thirteen the idea was that he would just go—*somewhere*, either to America or wherever—it was the time of the great expansion, you know, the early 1900s. So his was the classic Ellis Island story—thirteen years old, not speaking a word of English, traveling in the hold of a ship, but all the way to Africa instead of America—it must have been extraordinary. He was a very unadventurous man; he didn't have a strong personality—he was timid. He still is a mystery to me. I wonder if he didn't burn himself out in this tremendous initial adventure, whether it wasn't really too much for him, and once having found a niche for himself somewhere, he just didn't have the guts to become much of a personality. There was something *arrested* about my father.

INTERVIEWER

What did he do once he got to Africa?

GORDIMER

Like many poor Jews—one either became a shoemaker, a tailor, or a watchmaker. He had learned watchmaking. All he had was a little bag with his watchmaking tools. He went to the Transvaal, to the goldfields. He took his little suitcase and went around the mines and asked the miners if anybody wanted a watch fixed. And he would take the watches away to a little room he had somewhere; he would just sit there and mend watches. Then he bought a bicycle and he'd go back round the mines. But by the time I came on the scene he had a little jeweler's shop and he was no longer a

watchmaker—he employed one. Indeed, he imported his brother-in-law from Russia to do it. By now my father was the tycoon of the family. He brought *nine* sisters out of Lithuania—the poor man—saving up to bring one after the other. I found out later that he hated them all—we didn’t ever have family gatherings. I don’t know why he hated them so much.

INTERVIEWER

Where exactly was this jeweler’s shop?

GORDIMER

In a little town called Springs, which was thirty miles from Johannesburg. I grew up in a small, gold-mining town of about twenty thousand people.

INTERVIEWER

What were the schools like there?

GORDIMER

Well, I’ve had little formal education, really. I had a very curious childhood. There were two of us—I have an elder sister—and I was the baby, the spoiled one, the darling. I was awful—brash, a show-off, a dreadful child. But maybe that had something to do with having a lot of energy that didn’t find any outlet. I wanted to be a dancer—this was my passion, from the age of about four to ten. I absolutely adored dancing. And I can still remember the pleasure, the release, of using the body in this way. There was no question but that I was to be a dancer, and I suppose maybe I would have been. But at the age of ten, I suddenly went into a dead faint one day, having been a very skinny but very healthy child. Nobody took much notice. But then it happened again. So I was taken to the family doctor, and it was discovered that I had an incredibly rapid heartbeat. Nobody had noticed this; it was, I suppose, part of my excitability and liveliness. It was discovered that I had an enlarged thyroid gland,

which causes a fast heartbeat and makes one hyperactive. Well, I've since discovered that this isn't a serious malady at all. It happens to hundreds of people—usually at puberty. But my mother got very alarmed. This rapid pulse should have been ignored. But my mother was quite sure that it meant that I had a “bad heart.” So she went immediately to the convent where I attended school and told the nuns, “This child mustn't have any physical training, she mustn't play tennis, she mustn't even swim.” At ten, you know, you don't argue with your mother—she tells you you're sick, you believe her. When I would be about to climb stairs, she would say, “Now, take it slowly, *remember your heart.*” And then of course the tragedy was that I was told I mustn't dance anymore. So the dancing stopped like that, which was a terrible deprivation for me.

It's really only in the last decade of my life that I've been able to face all this. When I realized what my mother had done to me, I went through, at the age of twenty, such resentment—this happens to many of us, but I *really* had reason. When I was thirty, I began to understand why she did it, and thus to pity her. By the time she died in '76 we were reconciled. But it was an extraordinary story.

In brief, my mother was unhappily married. It was a dreadful marriage. I suspect she was sometimes in love with other men; but my mother would never have dreamt of having an affair. Because her marriage was unhappy, she concentrated on her children. The chief person she was attracted to was our family doctor. There's no question. I'm sure it was *quite* unconscious, but the fact that she had this “delicate” daughter, about whom she could be constantly calling the doctor—in those days doctors made house calls, and there would be tea and cookies and long chats—made her keep my “illness” going in this way. Probably I was being wrongly treated anyway, so that what medication should have cleared up, it didn't, and symptoms persisted. Of course, I began to feel terribly important. By that time I was reading all sorts of books that led me to believe my affliction made me very interesting. I was growing up

with this legend that I was very delicate, that I had something wrong with my heart.

When I was eleven—I don't know how my mother did this—she took me out of school completely. For a year I had no education at all. But I read tremendously. And I retreated into myself, I became very introspective. She changed my whole character. Then she arranged for me to go to a tutor for three hours a day. She took me there at ten in the morning and picked me up at one. It was such incredible loneliness—it's a terrible thing to do to a child. There I was, all on my own, doing my work; a glass of milk was brought to me by this woman—she was very nice, but I had no contact with other children. I spent my whole life, from eleven to sixteen, with older people, with people of my mother's generation. She carted me around to tea parties—I simply lived her life. When she and my father went out at night to dinner she took me along . . . I got to the stage where I could really hardly talk to other children. I was a little old woman.

INTERVIEWER

What about your sister's relationship to you during this time?

GORDIMER

My sister is four years older than I am. She went away to university; she wasn't really a companion to me. I stopped going to the tutor when I was fifteen or sixteen. So that was the extent of my formal education.

When I was twenty-one or twenty-two, already a published writer, I wanted to go to university to get a little more formal education. But since I hadn't matriculated, I could only do occasional courses at the University of the Witwatersrand—that's Afrikaans for "ridge of white waters." There was something called "general studies"—this was just after the war, and there were lots of veterans who had interrupted their education, and so it was very nice for me—there were people my own age mixed up with the others. A few years ago I gave a graduation address at that same university.

INTERVIEWER

Are you one of these writers to whom they're always trying to give honorary degrees?

GORDIMER

I don't accept them in South Africa. I've taken one—in Belgium in 1981, from the University of Leuven. It turned out to be quite extraordinary, because the man who got an honorary degree with me, Monsignor Oscar Romero, was assassinated two weeks later in El Salvador. In Belgium he had given the most marvelous address. He was such a striking man. He received a standing ovation for about eight minutes from the students. And two weeks later he was lying on the floor of a church, dead.

INTERVIEWER

How long did you go to university?

GORDIMER

One year. This was the first time in my life I'd mixed with blacks, and was more or less the beginning of my political consciousness. Perhaps the good thing about being carted around with my parents was that they would sit playing gin rummy or something while I wandered around the host's house seeing what I could find to read. I discovered everybody from Henry Miller to Upton Sinclair. It was Sinclair's *The Jungle* that really started me thinking about politics: I thought, Good God, these people who are exploited in a meatpacking factory—they're just like blacks here. And the whole idea that people came to America, not knowing the language, having to struggle in sweatshops . . . I didn't relate this to my own father, because my father was bourgeois by then . . . but I related it to the blacks. Again, what a paradox that South Africa was the blacks' *own country*, but they were recruited just as if they had been migrant workers for the mines. So I saw the analogy. And that was the beginning of my thinking about my position vis-à-vis blacks. But though I didn't know anything—I was twelve or thir-

teen, and leading the odd kind of life I did, living in books—I began to think about these things before, perhaps, I was ready for them. When I got to university, it was through mixing with other people who were writing or painting that I got to know black people as equals. In a general and inclusive, nonracial way, I met people who lived in the world of ideas, in the world that interested me passionately.

In the town where I lived, there was no mental food of this kind at all. I'm often amazed to think how they live, those people, and what an oppressed life it must be, because human beings *must* live in the world of ideas. This dimension in the human psyche is very important. It was there, but they didn't know how to express it. Conversation consisted of trivialities. For women, household matters, problems with children. The men would talk about golf or business or horse racing or whatever their practical interests were. Nobody ever talked about, or even around, the big things: life and death. The whole existential aspect of life was never discussed. I, of course, approached it through books. Thought about it on my own. It was as secret as it would have been to discuss my parents' sex life. It was something so private, because I felt that there was nobody with whom I could talk about these things, just *nobody*. But then, of course, when I was moving around at university, my life changed. From Europe—it was just after the war—came existentialism, and at home in South Africa there was great interest in movements of the left, and black-national movements. At that time, the Communist Party and various other leftist movements were not banned. So there were all sorts of Marxist discussion groups. This was an area of thought and conviction I simply never had heard mentioned before. I'd only read about it. And there, of course, were people who were mixing with blacks. So it was through people who were writing, painting, or acting that I started mixing with blacks.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after that year at university? Did you begin any political activity?

GORDIMER

No, you see I was writing then—a lot. I was concentrating tremendously on writing. I wasn't really interested in politics. My approach to living as a white supremacist, perforce, among blacks, was, I see now, the humanist approach, the individualistic approach. I felt that all I needed, in my own behavior, was to ignore and defy the color bar. In other words, my own attitude toward blacks seemed to be sufficient action. I didn't see that it was pretty meaningless until much later.

INTERVIEWER

Were you living on your own then?

GORDIMER

No, I wasn't. In that way I was extremely backward. But you have to look at the kind of dependency that had been induced in me at the crucial age of ten. When other kids were going off to the equivalent of what's known as "summer camp"—"Nadine can't go camping, she's got a *bad heart!* If people go on a hike, she can't go. She's got to stay with mama." A child like that becomes very corrupt, a kind of jester, an entertainer for grown-ups. Especially at the age of fifteen and sixteen. Adults find you charming. You flirt with other people's husbands instead of with boys your own age. It's a very corrupting thing. I was rather a good mimic. Perhaps it was the beginning of having an ear for dialogue? So I would take off people. Grown-ups would sit around at drink parties, getting a little tight, and there was Nadine prancing around, rather cruelly imitating people whom they knew. It didn't occur to them that the moment their backs were turned I was doing it to them as well.

At any rate, I was still living at home when I went to university, and I used to commute by train into Johannesburg. Then

my sister got married and lived in Johannesburg, so that when I didn't want to go home I would go to her, which was very nice for me, to have a base there. But I still didn't have the guts, I don't know why, to move out of home, the mining town of Springs. And you see, I wasn't earning enough by my writing, heaven knows, to live on. I was doing something that no kid does nowadays—I was living off my father. On the other hand, my needs were so modest. It never occurred to me that one would want a car—now every kid has a jalopy—this was just not the kind of thing that I would have dreamt of. All I wanted was to buy books. I earned enough with my writing here and there to do this, and of course I also used the library tremendously, which, again, people don't seem to do so much anymore. When I talk to young writers, and I say, "Have you read this or that?"—"Well, no, but books are so expensive . . ."—I say, "Well, for God's sake! The central library is a wonderful library. For heaven's sake, use it! You're never going to be able to write if you don't read!"

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps the isolation of your childhood helped you to become a writer—because of all the time it left you for reading—lonely though it must have been.

GORDIMER

Yes . . . perhaps I would have become a writer anyway. I was doing a bit of writing before I got "ill." I wanted to be a journalist as well as a dancer. You know what made me want to become a journalist? Reading Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* when I was about eleven. Enough to make anybody want to be a journalist! I absolutely adored it. I was already reading a lot, obviously, but of course I was reading without any discrimination. I would go to the library and wander around, and one book led to another. But I think that's the best way. An Oxford student who is doing a thesis on my writing came to visit me in Johannesburg the other day. I did something I've not done before. I told him, "Right, here are

boxes of my papers, just do what you like.” I liked him so much—he was so very intelligent and lively. I would meet him at lunch. He would emerge, and so would I, from our separate labors. Suddenly he brought out a kid’s exercise book—a list, that I’d kept for about six months when I was twelve, of books that I’d read, and I’d written little book reviews. There was a review of *Gone with the Wind*. Do you know what was underneath it? My “review” of Pepys’s *Diary*. And I was still reading kids’ books at the time, devouring those, and I didn’t see that there was any difference between these and *Gone with the Wind* or Pepys’s *Diary*.

INTERVIEWER

Were you publishing stories in *The New Yorker* before you published your first book?

GORDIMER

No. I published a book of stories in South Africa, in 1949. I must have started publishing stories in *The New Yorker* when I was twenty-six. I had one story in *The New Yorker*, and several in journals like *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Yale Review*—the traditional places where young writers in the fifties submitted their work. Then my first book was published abroad—a book of short stories.

INTERVIEWER

You sent your manuscripts around to these magazines?

GORDIMER

No, no, by that time I had an agent. It came about that I had an agent in New York. I never sent anything on impulse to those magazines, because I wasn’t familiar at all with American publications. The publications I was familiar with were the English ones. Of course, publishers in those days usually watched magazines. And my first publisher, Simon and Schuster, became interested in me through reading that first story of mine in *The New Yorker*.

Katharine White became my editor and friend at *The New Yorker*. She told me, years after, that all those other stories that were in my first book had already been submitted to *The New Yorker* via my agent. But they had been read by the slush-pile people. She had never seen them, and she regretted very much that she hadn't. But of course these things happen. And I don't quite know how that *one* story surfaced.

INTERVIEWER

Who was your agent?

GORDIMER

My agent was an extraordinary man called Sidney Saterstein. He was an extremely rich man who loved writers. He had no children, and I think writers were his children. He had very few writers really, because he wasn't principally an agent. I came to him through somebody who knew him and knew my work and said, "It's ridiculous—you should have an agent abroad." He was such an incredible man—a sort of John O'Hara character, or even coarser, really. He spent half his time flying to Las Vegas to gamble, or to Florida to play golf. He was a kind of caricature of a rich American. He always had a cigar in his mouth. He was big, and wore the most ghastly clothes—checked trousers and things like that. He was an absolute darling. Of course he gave me a completely false idea of what an agent was. When I met him I was exactly thirty—though he had taken me on in my mid-twenties—and he was in his mid-sixties. He established a sort of fatherly relationship with me, very fond. Strangely enough, he really liked my writing, which surprised me. One wouldn't have thought that my writing—especially my stories—would have interested *him*. But they did. He was incredible. He knew the circumstances of my life. I was newly divorced, I had a small child—a baby, indeed, eighteen months old—and I had no money. And he really fought for me. If somebody bought something of mine—and after all, I was totally unknown—he insisted that I was a hot property. He got suf-

ficient money for me to live on. When Simon and Schuster bought my first book of stories, they wanted to know if I was writing a novel, and indeed I was. And again he pushed them to give me what would now be considered a *teeny* advance, the amount someone would get to write a line today, but then publishers were not so generous, nor writers so demanding. But at least they gave me a modest sum that I could live on. And once the book was well along, and they saw part of it, Satenstein said to them, “You’ve just *got* to give her more, she’s got nothing.” So they gave me another advance—all due to him. He used to send me enormous bottles of French perfume. The times I came here—twice—while he was alive, he threw parties for me at the “21” Club, with caviar and sturgeon . . . he had a big heart, and style.

Unfortunately, he died—of a heart attack—just when I began to get known and make a success. He deserved better, because it would have been terribly exciting for him. At least he was able to be thrilled with the response to my first novel. Though not a best-seller—I’ve never been that—it was a big critical success here . . . a completely unknown writer with a front-page review in *The New York Times*.

INTERVIEWER

What role do you feel politics and the constant conflict it evokes in South Africa have played in your development as a writer?

GORDIMER

Well, it has turned out to have played a very important role. I would have been a writer anyway; I was writing before politics impinged itself upon my consciousness. In my writing, politics comes through in a didactic fashion very rarely. The kind of conversations and polemical arguments you get in *Burger’s Daughter*, and in some of my other books—these really play a very minor part. For various reasons to do with the story, they had to be there. But the real influence of politics on my writing is the influence of

politics on people. Their lives, and I believe their very personalities, are changed by the extreme political circumstances one lives under in South Africa. I am dealing with people; here are people who are shaped and changed by politics. In that way my material is profoundly influenced by politics.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see that as an advantage for a writer?

GORDIMER

Not really. Life is so apparently amorphous. But as soon as you burrow down this way or that . . . you know Goethe's maxim? "Thrust your hand deep into life, and whatever you bring up in it, that is you, that is your subject." I think that's what writers do.

INTERVIEWER

If you had grown up in a country that was not politically oppressed, might you have become a more abstract writer?

GORDIMER

Maybe. Take a writer whom I admire tremendously, the greatest American short-story writer ever, Eudora Welty. In a strange way, if she had lived where I've lived, she might have turned these incredible gifts of hers more outward—she might have written more, she might have tackled wider subjects. I hesitate to say this, because what she's done she's done wonderfully. But the fact is that she hasn't written very much; I don't think she ever developed fully her gifts as a novelist. She was not forced by circumstance to come to grips with something different. And I don't believe it's just a matter of temperament, because my early writing had qualities similar to hers. I got to hate that word about my work—"sensitive." I was constantly being compared to Katherine Mansfield. I am *not* by nature a political creature, and even now there is so much I don't like in politics, and in political people—though I admire tremendously people who are politically active—there's so

much lying to oneself, self-deception, there has to be—you don't make a good political fighter unless you can pretend the warts aren't there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have the same complaint about Virginia Woolf's novels as you do with Eudora Welty's?

GORDIMER

No, because Virginia Woolf extended herself the other way. I mean she really concentrated totally on that transparent envelope that she'd find for herself. There are two ways to knit experience, which is what writing is about. Writing is making sense of life. You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area. Virginia Woolf did this incomparably. And the complexity of her human relationships, the economy with which she managed to portray them—staggering. But you can't write a novel like *Burger's Daughter* with the sensibility of a Virginia Woolf. You have to find some other way. You're always trying to find some other way. I'm interested in both ways of writing. I started off by being interested in that transparent envelope.

INTERVIEWER

Was Woolf a big influence when you began writing?

GORDIMER

Midway, I think—after I'd been writing for about five years. She can be a very dangerous influence on a young writer. It's easy to fall into the cadence. But the content isn't there. The same could be said for a completely different kind of writer like Dos Passos, or Hemingway. You've got to be very careful, or you do if you are a writer like me, starting out with an acute sensibility and a poor narrative gift. My narrative gift was weak in my early novels—they tend to fall into beautiful set pieces. It was only with *The Late Bourgeois World*, which was published in 1966, that I

began to develop narrative muscle. From then on, my struggle has been not to lose the acute sensitivity—I mean the acuteness of catching nuance in behavior (not in description, because as you get more mature that falls into place) and to marry it successfully to a narrative gift. Because the kind of subjects that are around me, that draw me, that I see motivating me, require a strong narrative ability.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your political situation—the political situation in South Africa—gave you a particular incentive as a writer?

GORDIMER

No. For instance, in *Burger's Daughter*, you could say on the face of it that it's a book about white communists in South Africa. But to me, it's something else. It's a book about commitment. Commitment is not merely a political thing. It's part of the whole ontological problem in life. It's part of my feeling that what a writer does is to try to make sense of life. I think that's what writing is, I think that's what painting is. It's seeking that thread of order and logic in the disorder, and the incredible waste and marvelous profligate character of life. What all artists are trying to do is to make sense of life. So you see, I would have found my themes had I been an American or an English writer. They are there if one knows where to look . . . if one is pushed from within.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel that fiction from relatively nonoppressed countries compares with that produced in countries where the political situation necessitates a certain amount of political consciousness?

GORDIMER

To me, it's all a matter of the quality of the writing. To me, that is everything. I can appreciate a tremendously subjective and

apolitical piece of writing. If you're a writer, you can make the death of a canary stand for the whole mystery of death. That's the challenge. But, of course, in a sense you are "lucky" if you have great themes. One could say that about the Russians in the nineteenth century. Would they have been the wonderful writers they are if they hadn't had that challenge? They also had the restrictions that we chafe against in South Africa—censorship, and so on. And yet it seems on the face of it to have had only a good effect on writing. Then I think it depends. It can have a deleterious effect. In South Africa, among young blacks who are writing—it's difficult for them to admit it, but they know this—they have to submit to an absolute orthodoxy within black consciousness. The poem or the story or the novel must follow a certain line—it's a kind of party line even though what is in question is not a political party, but it *is*, in the true sense of the word, a party line. For example, nobleness of character in blacks must be shown. It's pretty much frowned upon if there's a white character who is human. It's easy enough to understand this and it's important as a form of consciousness-raising for young blacks to *feel* their own identity, to recite poems that simply exalt blackness and decry everything else, and often to exalt it in crude terms, in crude images, clichés. That's fine as a weapon of propaganda in the struggle, which is what such writing is, primarily. But the *real* writers are victims of this, because as soon as they stray from one or two clearly defined story lines, they're regarded as—

INTERVIEWER

—traitors. Are there many blacks writing and publishing in South Africa?

GORDIMER

There are a lot, and there's a fairly good relationship between black and white writers. Literature is one of the few areas left where black and white feel some identity of purpose; we all struggle under censorship, and most white writers feel a strong

sense of responsibility to promote, defend, and help black writers where possible.

INTERVIEWER

Burger's Daughter was banned three weeks after it was published, wasn't it?

GORDIMER

Yes, and it remained banned for several months. Then it was unbanned. I was pleased, as you can imagine. Not only for myself, but because it established something of a precedent for other writers, since there are in that book blatant contraventions of certain acts. In that book I published a document that was a real document, distributed by the students in the 1976 riots in Soweto, and banned by the government. It's in the book with all the misspellings and grammatical mistakes . . . everything exactly as it was; and indeed that's important because, as Rosa points out, these kids rioted because they felt their education wasn't good enough. And when you read the text of that pathetic little pamphlet you can see what the young blacks meant, because that's as well as they could write at the age of sixteen or seventeen, when they were ready to matriculate. So here is one example where, indeed, I flagrantly crossed the line to illegality. Now that the book has been unbanned, it's going to be a difficult thing for the censors to ban other books on evidence of such transgressions.

INTERVIEWER

Why was the book unbanned?

GORDIMER

If I hadn't been a writer who's known abroad and if this hadn't been a book that happened to receive serious attention at a high level abroad—it obviously made the censors feel rather foolish—the book would not have been released. So there we are.

INTERVIEWER

Is it common for a book to be unbanned?

GORDIMER

Well, not so quickly. Of my two previous books, one, *A World of Strangers*, was banned for twelve years, and the other, entitled *The Late Bourgeois World*, for ten; after that length of time most books are pretty well dead.

INTERVIEWER

How does a book get banned?

GORDIMER

First of all, if the book is imported, the authorities embargo it. In other words, it's just like any other cargo arriving at the docks. It is embargoed at customs and the customs officer sends the book off to the Censorship Board. He's got a list of suspects. For instance, a South African writer like myself would be on it, you see, because they know the kind of subjects I've chosen, and, in any case, I've had three books banned previously. So would somebody like James Baldwin; several of his books were banned. Then there's another way that books get embargoed with the possible outcome of a ban. After normal distribution, somebody, some Mother Grundy, old busybody, reads a book that's already in the bookshops, objects to it, and sends it off to the Censorship Board with a complaint. On the recommendation of just one person, a committee will read the book to see if it's "objectionable." But while it's being read by the censors, it's under embargo, which means that although there are copies in the bookshops the bookseller can't sell them; he's got to put them away, take them off the shelves. Sometimes the book is then released. It happened to my novel *A Guest of Honour*; it happened to *The Conservationist*. *The Conservationist*, I think, was held by the censors for ten weeks, which is iniquitous because the first ten weeks in a book's life are crucial from the point of view of sales. Then it was

released by the director of the board. The members of the censor's committee—there are a number of those, usually with three people constituting a committee—read the book, each writes an independent report, and if these concur that the book should be banned or released, right, it's done. If they don't concur, then a fourth person has to be brought in. If they concur that the book is undesirable, then it is banned. The author isn't told. The decision is published in the government gazette, which is published once a week. And that's the end of the book.

INTERVIEWER

What happens then? Is it like what happened with *Ulysses*? Do people scrounge around frantically trying to get hold of it and hide it when policemen walk by?

GORDIMER

People do, people do. Books are usually banned only for sale and distribution but not for *possession*, so that if you've already bought the book you may keep it; but you may not lend it to me or the person across the road, and you may not sell it.

INTERVIEWER

You can't lend it?

GORDIMER

No. This, of course, is perfectly ridiculous. Everybody lends banned books all the time. But people are very nervous, for instance, about buying them abroad or having them sent. They're rather too timid about that. They don't like to have to smuggle them in.

INTERVIEWER

So there isn't much smuggling going on?

GORDIMER

Some people don't, some do. But with some of us, it's a point of honor always to do this.

INTERVIEWER

To smuggle?

GORDIMER

Yes, of course. It's a legitimate form of protest. But unfortunately, when a book is banned, very few copies get around.

INTERVIEWER

Getting back to the idea that oppressed societies produce better writers . . .

GORDIMER

Well, I don't know. I think in the case of Latin American countries, they seem to have experienced so many forms of oppression, and for so long, that it's become a normal state. But notice that they all write about the same thing . . . the themes are as obsessive as the African ones. *The* theme among the remarkable Latin American writers is the corrupt dictator. Nevertheless, despite the sameness of theme, I regard this as the most exciting fiction being written today in the world.

INTERVIEWER

Which Latin American novelists?

GORDIMER

García Márquez, of course. Hardly necessary even to name Borges. Borges is the only living successor to Franz Kafka. Alejo Carpentier was absolutely wonderful. *The Kingdom of the Earth* is an exquisite little novel—it's brilliant. Then there's Carlos Fuentes, a magnificent writer. Mario Vargas Llosa. And Manuel Puig. These just roll off my tongue quickly; there are others. But

always there's this obsessive theme—the corrupt dictator. They all write about it; they're obsessed by it.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose that an oppressed culture such as South Africa's creates the possibility for heroes to exist, and that this is why some of your novels, such as *A Guest of Honour* and *Burger's Daughter*, have heroes as their motivating force.

GORDIMER

Well, you know, it amazes me . . . I come to America, I go to England, I go to France . . . nobody's at risk. They're afraid of getting cancer, losing a lover, losing their jobs, being insecure. It's either something that you have no control over, like death—the atom bomb—or it's something with which you'd be able to cope anyway, and that is not the end of the world; you'll get another job or you'll go on state relief or something of this nature. It's only in my own country that I find people who voluntarily choose to put everything at risk—in their personal life. I mean to most of us, the whole business of falling in love is so totally absorbing, nothing else matters. It's happened to me. There have been times in my life when I have put the person I was in love with far ahead of my work. I would lose interest, I wouldn't even care if the book was coming out. I'd forget when it was being published and I wouldn't worry about the reception it got because I was in such a state of anguish over some man. And yet the people I know who are committed to a *political* cause never allow themselves to be deflected by this sort of personal consideration or ambition.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think romantic love manifests itself in families such as Rosa's, where people's passions lie in politics?

GORDIMER

This is what interested me so much, and this is what I partly

tried to explore in the relationship between that girl and her family, who loved her, exploited her, but at the same time felt that they were doing this not for each other or to each other, but because the *cause* demanded it.

INTERVIEWER

We get only very brief glimpses of the love affair between Burger and his wife. In fact, the reader hardly gets any picture either of their relationship or of Rosa's mother at all.

GORDIMER

That was one of the points that's fascinated me about such people: You could know them very well, and yet even in their intimate relations with one another they remained intensely secretive; it's part of the discipline that you have to have. I have a very, very close friend—no character in the book is modeled on her, I might add—but much that I know or have discovered intuitively about such people started with my fascination with her. She has been my closest friend for many years—she's a political exile now—and we've talked nights and days. She's one of the few people for whom I suppose I'd put myself physically at risk if there were to be cause. There are so many things I don't know about her that normally would come out in confidences between people who are as close as we are, and it's because of her political commitment that I can't ask her and she won't tell me. I think that this could extend even to family relationships. It's part of the discipline that the more you know, the more dangerous you are to the people around you. If you and I are working together in an underground movement, the less I know about you the better.

INTERVIEWER

We've talked about the South American writers you admire. What about other writers?

GORDIMER

Lots of novelists say they don't read other novelists, contemporary ones. If this is true, it's a great pity. Imagine, if you had lived in the nineteenth century and not read the writers that we now turn back to so lovingly, or even if you had lived in the twentieth century and hadn't read Lawrence or Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and so on. At different times in my life I've—liked is not the word—I've been psychologically *dependent* upon different writers. Some have remained influential in my life and some haven't, and some I suppose I've forgotten and do them an injustice by not mentioning. When I first began to write, I wrote short stories, and of course I still do; I've written a great many. It's a form that I love to write and to read. I was very influenced by American, Southern short-story writers. Eudora Welty was a great influence on me. Years later, when I met Eudora—visited her in Jackson—there were such parallels between the way she was living, even then, and my life: A black man was mowing the lawn! There was a kind of understanding. Of course, this really had nothing to do with the fact that I thought she was a superb short-story writer. Katherine Anne Porter was an influence on me. Faulkner. Yes. But, again, you see, one lies, because I'm sure that when we were doing the five-finger exercises of short-story writing, Hemingway must have influenced *everybody* who began to write in the late forties, as I did. Proust has been an influence on me, all my life—an influence so deep it frightens me . . . not only in my writing, but in my attitudes to life. Then later came Camus, who was quite a strong influence, and Thomas Mann, whom I've come to admire more and more. E. M. Forster, when I was a young girl; when I was in my twenties—he was very important to me. And I still think *Passage to India* is an absolutely wonderful book that cannot be killed by being taught in the universities.

INTERVIEWER

In what way did Hemingway influence you?

GORDIMER

Oh, through his short stories. The reduction, you know, and also the use of dialogue. Now I think a great failure in Hemingway's short stories is the omnipresence of Hemingway's voice. People do not speak for themselves, in their own thought patterns; they speak as Hemingway does. The "he said," "she said" of Hemingway's work. I've cut these attributions out of my novels long ago. Some people complain that this makes my novels difficult to read. But I don't care. I simply cannot stand "he said" "she said" anymore. And if I can't make readers *know* who's speaking from the tone of voice, the turns of phrase, well, then I've failed. And there's nothing anyone can do about it.

INTERVIEWER

It certainly enforces concentration when one is reading your novels.

GORDIMER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

The dashes are very effective.

GORDIMER

Oh, that's very old. It started with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

INTERVIEWER

What technique did you use that was the same?

GORDIMER

A kind of interior monologue that jumps about from different points of view. In *The Conservationist*, sometimes it's Mehring speaking from inside himself, observing, and sometimes it's a totally dispassionate view from outside.

INTERVIEWER

It's a much more standard narrative technique than that of *Burger's Daughter*.

GORDIMER

Well, no, it isn't, you know. In *The Conservationist* you've got interior monologue and you have a real narrator. It's not always Mehring speaking. But the line between when he is and when he isn't is very vague, my theory being that the central personality is there, whether it's being observed from outside or whether from inside—it's the same entity.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned that the way in which you came up with the structure of *Burger's Daughter*, in which Rosa is always speaking to somebody, was from the idea that when one is writing one always has a listener in mind.

GORDIMER

Oh, no, not in your writing, in your *life*. I believe that in your life, in your thoughts when you are alone, you are always addressing yourself to somebody.

INTERVIEWER

And you are not doing this when you write?

GORDIMER

No, because you're no longer yourself when you're writing; you're projecting into other people. But I think in your life, and sometimes even in the conduct of your life, you're imagining that some particular person is seeing your actions. And you're turning away, sometimes, from others.

INTERVIEWER

How has Faulkner influenced you? Do you see any similarities

in the structure of *Burger's Daughter* and, say, *As I Lay Dying*?

GORDIMER

No, none at all, and I don't think there could be any influence there. I think the big time when people influence you is when you're very young and you start to write; after that you slough off what you don't need and you painfully hammer out your own style.

INTERVIEWER

There's a similarity between the way your method of narration in *Burger's Daughter* and some of Faulkner's books address themselves to the relative nature of "truth."

GORDIMER

Yes. Well, of course it is a method that points out the relativity of truth. The point I'm trying to make is about the relationship between style and point of view; in a sense, style is the point of view, or the point of view is the style.

INTERVIEWER

Right, and that's why you choose to structure your narratives in the way that you do.

GORDIMER

And then it was Proust who said that style is the moment of identification between the writer and his situation. Ideally that is what it should be—one allows the situation to dictate the style.

INTERVIEWER

So that you are expressing a point of view, with the style that you choose, about the way life is in South Africa.

GORDIMER

Yes. I'm expressing a point of view of the way life is for that

particular person and the people around her (in the case of *Burger's Daughter*), and, by extension, a view of life itself.

INTERVIEWER

In Conor Cruise O'Brien's review of *Burger's Daughter*, which appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, he says that your novel is constructed with a "properly deceptive art." He talks about how the construction makes the book seem as if it were a book in which nothing happens, and then several cataclysmic things do, in fact, happen. I was wondering if you have any response.

GORDIMER

For me again, so little of the construction is objectively conceived. It's organic and instinctive and subconscious. I can't tell you how I arrive at it. Though, with each book, I go through a long time when I know what I want to do and I'm held back and puzzled and appalled because I don't know before I begin to write how I'm going to do it, and I always fear that I can't do it. You see, in *Guest of Honour*, I wrote a political book, a book that needed certain objective entities relating to and acting upon the character's life in particular. And I wrote that book as a conventional narrative so that at the point where there was indeed a big party congress there was no difficulty then in presenting it almost like a play. Then I wrote *The Conservationist*, where I chose to ignore that one had to explain anything at all. I decided that if the reader didn't make the leap in his mind, if the allusions were puzzling to him—too bad. But the narrative would have to carry the book in the sense of what is going on in the characters' minds and going on in their bodies; the way they believed things that they did *really were*. Either the reader would make the leap or not, and if the reader was puzzled now and then—too bad. In other words, the novel was full of private references between the characters. Of course, you take a tremendous risk with such a narrative style, and when you do succeed, I think it's the ideal. When you don't, of course, you irritate

the reader or you leave him puzzled. Personally, as a reader, I don't mind being puzzled. Perhaps the writer doesn't know the consequences implied in his/her books, because there's a choice of explanations; and, as a reader, I enjoy that. To me, it's an important part of the exciting business of reading a book, of being stirred, and of having a mind of your own. And so, as a writer, I take the liberty of doing this.

INTERVIEWER

You don't consciously create a complete structure before you begin writing a novel?

GORDIMER

No. For *Burger's Daughter*, perhaps four or five pages of very scrappy notes for the whole book. But, for me, those half sentences or little snatches of dialogue are tremendously important; they are the core of something. And I've only got to look at them, and know that that's the next stage in the book that I'm coming to.

INTERVIEWER

Is this the way you usually write your novels?

GORDIMER

Yes. With me it's really a very natural process once I get started. An organic process.

INTERVIEWER

How long do you prepare before you get started?

GORDIMER

It's so difficult for me to say because, looking back at *Burger's Daughter*, for example, I know that I've been fascinated by the kind of person Rosa is for many years. It's as if the secret of a life is there, and slowly I'm circling, coming closer and closer to it. Perhaps there are other themes that present themselves but finally spin

off instead of drawing me to them. I suppose one's ready for different things at different times in one's life. And also, in a country where so much is changing, the quality of life around one is changing; so that perhaps I wouldn't be attracted now to write the book that I wrote ten years ago, and vice versa.

INTERVIEWER

So you feel that the way your books are written is more an inevitable phenomenon than a conscious choice.

GORDIMER

I don't think any writer can say why he chooses this or that or how a theme impinges itself. It may have been around for a long time and then a stage comes in your life when your imagination is ready for it and you can deal with it.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about *The Conservationist*, in which death is almost an obsessive theme. There are certain sections where it is continually brought up in ritualized ways: the man hopping up from his grave in different people's minds throughout the book, and the ritual of killing the goat to get back at Solomon's injury . . .

GORDIMER

In *The Conservationist* there's a resurrection theme, and that is also a political theme. At the end of the book there's a disguised message. The slogan of the biggest banned liberation movement, a kind of battle cry widely adopted, is the African word *mayibuye*. This means, "Africa, come back." You can see the whole idea of resurrection is there. And if you look at the end of *The Conservationist* you'll see that this thought is reworded, but it is actually what is said when the unknown man is reburied: That although he is nameless and childless, he has all the children of other people around him; in other words, the future. He has people around him

who are not his blood brothers and sisters but who stand for them. And that he has now been put with proper ceremony into his own earth. He has taken possession of it. There's a suggestion of something that has been planted, that is going to grow again.

INTERVIEWER

This theme is repeated in one of your short stories: "Six Feet of the Country."

GORDIMER

Yes. But the repetition is in reverse: "Six Feet" was written years before *The Conservationist*. Oddly enough, that early story is based on a true incident.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a fascination with death?

GORDIMER

Not consciously, but then . . . how can any thinking person not have? Death is really the mystery of life, isn't it? If you ask, What happens when we die? Why do we die? you are asking, Why do we live? Unless one has a religion . . . Without a religious explanation, one has only the Mount Everest argument: I climb it because it's there. I live because there is the gift of life. It's not an answer, really, it's an evasion. Or, I think my purpose on this earth is to make life better. Progress is the business of making life more safe and more enjoyable . . . fuller, generally. But that justification, it stops short of death, doesn't it? The only transcendent principle is that you are then seeking to improve the human lot for future generations. But we still don't get past the fact that it's a turnabout business; it's your turn and then it's mine, and life is taken up by somebody else. Human beings are never reconciled to this. In my own life I am made puzzled and uneasy by my attitude and that of others to death. If somebody dies young it's so terrible, it's such a tragedy, and the sense of waste is so strong; you think of all the promise

that was there. And then if people live into old age, there's the horror of decay, especially—it's awful to say—but especially with exceptional people; when you see their minds going and their bodies falling to pieces, and they want to die and you want them to die, then that's equally terrible. So it's the mere fact of death that we can't accept? We say it's terrible if people die young, and we say it's terrible if they go on living too long.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a religious or mystical person?

GORDIMER

I'm an atheist. I wouldn't even call myself an agnostic. I am an atheist. But I think I have a basically religious temperament, perhaps even a profoundly religious one. I went through a stage in my life when I was about thirty-two or thirty-three years old—when I was very fascinated by the writings of Simone Weil. In the end, her religious philosophy left me where I was. But I felt that there was something there that answered to a need that I felt, *my* "need for roots" that she wrote about so marvelously. I couldn't find the same solution.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about Conor Cruise O'Brien's idea about there being Christian overtones in *Burger's Daughter*?

GORDIMER

Well, I'm thinking of that. I'm sure that many of my friends, people who know me well, laughed because they know that, as I say, I'm an atheist. But he hit on something that is there in me, a certain inclination—more than that—a pull. Perhaps, brought up differently in a different milieu, in a different way, I might have been a religious person.

INTERVIEWER

Then there is the resurrection of the black man in *The Conversationist*.

GORDIMER

But of course the idea of resurrection comes from the Greeks, from the Egyptians. You can begin to believe in a collective unconscious without having religious beliefs.

INTERVIEWER

I've noticed that sensual elements play a key role in your writing: smells, textures, sexuality, bodily functions. You don't write about the so-called beautiful people, the leisured class of South Africa, and the beautiful environment in which they must live. In fact, I noticed that almost all of the white women in your *Selected Stories* are physically and mentally both highly unattractive and middle class. Does this reflect the way in which you view white colonialists in your country?

GORDIMER

I don't make such judgments about people. After all, I'm a white colonial woman myself, of colonial descent. Perhaps I know us too well through myself. But if somebody is partly frivolous or superficial, has moments of cruelty or self-doubt, I don't write them off, because I think that absolutely everybody has what are known as human failings. My black characters are not angels either. All this role-playing that is done in a society like ours—it's done in many societies, but it's more noticeable in ours—sometimes the role is forced upon you. You fall into it. It's a kind of song-and-dance routine, and you find yourself, and my characters find themselves, acting out these preconceived, ready-made roles. But, of course, there are a large number of white women of a certain kind in the kind of society that I come from who . . . well, the best one can say of them is that one can excuse them because of their ignorance of what they have allowed themselves to become.

I see the same kind of women here in the U.S. You go into one of the big stores here and you can see these extremely well-dressed, often rather dissatisfied-looking, even sad-looking middle-aged women, rich, sitting trying on a dozen pairs of shoes; and you can see they're sitting there for the morning. And it's a terribly agonizing decision, but maybe the heel should be a little higher or maybe . . . should I get two pairs? And a few blocks away it's appalling to see in what poverty and misery other people are living in this city, New York. Why is it that one doesn't criticize that American woman the same way one does her counterpart in South Africa? For me, the difference is that the rich American represents class difference and injustice, while in South Africa the injustice is based on both class *and* race prejudice.

INTERVIEWER

What about the "beautiful people" of South Africa?

GORDIMER

They're featured very prominently in an early book of mine called *A World of Strangers* but very rarely since then, until the character of Mehring in *The Conservationist*. They are not the most interesting people in South Africa, believe me . . . although they may regard themselves as such.

INTERVIEWER

Is it intentional that so often the physical details of characters are not brought home strongly in your work? One gets a very strong sense of the mind's workings in major characters, but often a very limited sense of what they actually look like.

GORDIMER

I think that physical descriptions of people should be minimal. There are exceptions—take Isaac Bashevis Singer. He very often starts off a story by giving you a full physical description. If you look very closely at the description, of course it's extremely good.

He stamps character on a twist of the nose or a tuft of red beard. My own preference is for physical description to come piecemeal at times when it furthers other elements in the text. For instance, you might describe a character's eyes when another character is looking straight into them so it would be natural . . . a feature of that particular moment in the narrative. There might be another scene later, where the character whose eyes you've described is under tension, and is showing it by tapping her foot or picking at a hangnail—so if there was something particular about her hands, that would be the time to talk about them. I'm telling you this as if it were something to be planned. It isn't. It comes at the appropriate moment.

INTERVIEWER

In the introduction to your *Selected Stories*, you say: "My femininity has never constituted any special kind of solitude, for me. In fact, my only genuine connection with the social life of the town (when I was growing up) was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least, I felt and followed sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of communion I could share. Rapunzel's hair is the right metaphor for this femininity: by means of it I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as—alone—in the mind." You go on to say you "question the existence of the specific solitude of woman-as-intellectual when that woman is a writer, because when it comes to their essential faculty as writers, all writers are androgynous beings." What about the process of becoming a writer, of becoming an androgynous being? Isn't that a struggle for women?

GORDIMER

I hesitate to generalize from my own experience. I would consider it an arrogance to state my own experience as true for all women. I really haven't suffered at all from being a woman. It's inconceivable, for example, that I could ever have become interested in a man who regarded women as nonbeings. It's never hap-

pened. There would be a kind of war between us. I just take it for granted, and it has always happened, that the men in my life have been people who treated me as an equal. There was never any question of fighting for this. I'm somebody who has lived a life as a woman. In other words, I've been twice married, I've brought up children, I've done all the things that women do. I haven't avoided or escaped this, supposing that I should have wished to, and I don't wish to and never wished to. But, as I say, I don't generalize, because I see all around me women who are gifted and intelligent who *do* have these struggles and who indeed *infuriate* me more easily. But I did manage to maintain it when my children were young, I suppose, by being rather ruthless. I think writers, artists, are very ruthless, and they have to be. It's unpleasant for other people, but I don't know how else we can manage. Because the world will never make a place for you. My own family came to understand and respect this. Really, when my children were quite small they knew that in my working hours they must leave me alone; if they came home from school and my door was closed, they left and they didn't turn on the radio full blast. I was criticized for this by other people. But my own children don't hold it against me. I still had time that I spent with them. What I have also sacrificed, and it hasn't been a sacrifice for me, is a social life; and as I've got older, I'm less and less interested in that. When I was young I did go through some years when I enjoyed party-going very much and stayed out all night. But in the end, the loss, next day, the fact that I had a hangover and that I couldn't work, quickly outweighed the pleasure; and, as time has gone by, I've kept more and more to myself. Because a writer doesn't only need the time when he's actually writing—he or she has got to have time to think and time just to let things work out. Nothing is worse for this than society. Nothing is worse for this than the abrasive, if enjoyable, effect of other people.

INTERVIEWER

What conditions do you find to be most conducive to writing?

GORDIMER

Well, nowhere very special, no great, splendid desk and cork-lined room. There have been times in my life, my God, when I was a young divorced woman with a small child living in a small apartment with thin walls when other people's radios would drive me absolutely mad. And that's still the thing that bothers me tremendously—*that* kind of noise. I don't mind people's voices. But Muzak or the constant clack-clack of a radio or television coming through the door . . . well, I live in a suburban house where I have a small room where I work. I have a door with direct access to the garden—a great luxury for me—so that I can get in and out without anybody bothering me or knowing where I am. Before I begin to work I pull out the phone and it stays out until I'm ready to plug it in again. If people really want you, they'll find you some other time. And it's as simple as that, really.

INTERVIEWER

How long do you usually work every day? Or do you work every day?

GORDIMER

When I'm working on a book I work every day. I work about four hours nonstop, and then I'll be very tired and nothing comes anymore, and then I will do other things. I can't understand writers who feel they shouldn't have to do any of the ordinary things of life, because I think that this is necessary; one has got to keep in touch with that. The solitude of writing is also quite frightening. It's quite close sometimes to madness, one just disappears for a day and loses touch. The ordinary action of taking a dress down to the dry cleaner's or spraying some plants infected with aphids is a very sane and good thing to do. It brings one back, so to speak. It also brings the world back. I have formed the habit, over the last two books I've written, of spending half an hour or so reading over what I'd written during the day just before I go to bed at night. Then, of course, you get tempted to fix it up, fuss with it, at night.

But I find that's good. But if I've been with friends or gone out somewhere, then I won't do that. The fact is that I lead a rather solitary life when I'm writing.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a time of day that's best?

GORDIMER

I work in the morning. That's best for me.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it usually take you to write a book?

GORDIMER

It depends. The shortest has been about eighteen months. *Burger's Daughter* took me four years.

INTERVIEWER

Four years of steady writing?

GORDIMER

I wrote one or two other things, small things. Sometimes when I'm writing I get a block, and so I stop and write a short story, and that seems to set me going. Sometimes when I'm writing a book I get ideas for stories, and they're just tucked away. But alas, as I get older, I get fewer ideas for short stories. I used to be teeming with them. And I'm sorry about that because I like short stories.

INTERVIEWER

What about writer's block? Is that a problem for you?

GORDIMER

No. And I say so, as you see, with hesitation and fear and trembling because you always feel that that demon is waiting behind the back of your brain.

INTERVIEWER

You have the short story to loosen you up?

GORDIMER

Yes, and occasionally I do some nonfiction piece, usually something involving travel. For me, this is a kind of relaxation. During the time I was writing *Burger's Daughter* I did two such pieces.

INTERVIEWER

You don't even have minor fits of procrastination, endless cups of tea or things like that?

GORDIMER

No, no. Though I do have, not blocks but . . . problems moving on from one stage to the next; particularly when I've got something done with and it's worked well. For instance, I finished that chapter with Brandt Vermeulen, you know, the nationalist in *Burger's Daughter*, which went unexpectedly well. I simply wrote it just like that and it all came right. I had been dreading it. I had been dreading getting the tone of voice and everything right. And then, knowing where I was going on from there, there was suddenly an inability to get out of that mood and into another, and so there were perhaps a few awful days, because when that happens, I don't stop and do something else. I sit in front of that paper for the normal time that I would be writing. And then, well, I break through.

INTERVIEWER

There's no specific routine that gets you from the bedroom or the living room into the writing room, bridging that terrifying gap between not writing and writing?

GORDIMER

No—that's the advantage if you're free to choose the time

you're going to write. That's the advantage of writing in the morning. Because then one gets up and in one's subconscious mind one knows: I am going to write. Whatever small thing you have to do, such as talking to other people at breakfast, it's only done with one part of you, so to speak; just done on the surface. The person with whom I live, my husband, understands this and has for a very long time. And he knows that to say to me at breakfast, "What shall we do about so-and-so?" or, "Would you read this letter?"—he knows that isn't the time to ask. I get irritable, and irritated; I don't want to be asked to do things then. And I don't want to phone an order to the grocer at that time. I just want to be left alone to eat my breakfast. Ideally, I like to walk around a bit outside, which you can do, of course, with a garden. But I often think that even that becomes a kind of procrastination because it's so easy then to see a weed that one has to stop and pull up and then one sees some ants and wonders, Where are they going? So the best thing to do is to go into the room and close the door and sit down.

INTERVIEWER

Do you go through much revision of your work?

GORDIMER

As time goes by, less and less. I used to. When I was young, I used to write three times as much as the work one finally reads. If I wrote a story, it would be three times the final length of that story. But that was in the very early times of my writing. Short stories are a wonderful discipline against overwriting. You get so used to cutting out what is extraneous.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever find critics useful?

GORDIMER

Yes, but you must remember they're always after the event, aren't they? Because then the work's already done. And the time

you find you agree with them is when they come to the same conclusions you do. In other words, if a critic objects to something that I know by my lights is right, that I did the best I could, and that it's well done, I'm not affected by the fact that somebody didn't like it. But if I have doubts about a character or something that I've done, and these doubts are confirmed by a critic, then I feel my doubts confirmed and I'm glad to respect that critic's objections.

INTERVIEWER

Frequently writers say they don't read reviews because even one bad review among ten shining ones can be devastating.

GORDIMER

Of course, it depends very much on the reviewer. There are people who are not reviewers, one or two, to whom I give my books to read, perhaps even in manuscript. I am sick with apprehension while they are reading them. And certainly there are certain reviewers I would be very wounded by if they were to say, "Well, this one's rotten."

INTERVIEWER

But this hasn't happened yet.

GORDIMER

Not yet. With *Burger's Daughter* I've had, out of perhaps fifty or sixty reviews, two bad ones.

INTERVIEWER

You say that writers are androgynous. Do you recognize any difference between masculine and feminine writing, such as, say, Woolf's versus Hemingway's writing?

GORDIMER

Hemingway is such an extreme example, and his writing is really an instance of machismo, isn't it? Henry James could have

been a woman. E. M. Forster could have been. George Eliot could have been a man. I used to be too insistent on this point that there's no sex in the brain; I'm less insistent now—perhaps I'm being influenced by the changing attitude of women toward themselves in general? I don't think there's anything that women writers don't know. But it may be that there are certain aspects of life that they can deal with a shade better, just as I wonder whether any woman writer, however great, could have written the marvelous war scenes in *War and Peace*. By and large, I don't think it matters a damn what sex a writer is, so long as the work is that of a real *writer*. I think there *is* such a thing as “ladies' writing,” for instance, feminine writing; there are “authoresses” and “poetesses.” And there are men, like Hemingway, whose excessive “manliness” is a concomitant part of their writing. But with so many of the male writers whom I admire, it doesn't matter too much. There doesn't seem to be anything *they* don't know, either. After all, look at Molly Bloom's soliloquy. To me, that's the ultimate proof of the ability of either sex to understand and convey the inner workings of the other. No woman was ever “written” better by a woman writer. How did Joyce know? God knows how, and it doesn't matter. When I was a young woman, a young girl, I wrote a story about a man who had lost his leg. He couldn't accept this, the reality of it, until he was sitting recuperating in the garden and saw a locust that had its leg off; he saw the locust struggling because it felt its leg was still there. I don't know how I wrote that story, somehow I just imagined myself into it. A psychiatrist once told me it was a perfect example of penis envy.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything, new or otherwise, that you hope to do with your writing in the future?

GORDIMER

I would always hope to find the one right way to tackle whatever subject I'm dealing with. To me, that's the real problem, and

the challenge of writing. There's no such feeling as a general achievement. You cannot say that because I have managed to say what I wanted to say in one book, that it is now inside me for the next, because the next one is going to have a different demand. And until I find out how to write it, I can't tackle it.

INTERVIEWER

In other words, you don't know the question until you have the answer?

GORDIMER

Yes. I would like to say something about how I feel in general about what a novel, or any story, ought to be. It's a quotation from Kafka. He said, "A book ought to be an ax to break up the frozen sea within us."

