

Interview with Nadine Gordimer
By Kerry Chance
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"Terror poured from the sky" this past year in New York, and erupted from the streets twenty years ago in Johannesburg. That terror remains over these places; a writer can see it. In the media, however, "the event casts no shadow," as Nadine Gordimer put it to a small seminar of Bard students and faculty yesterday. In media's sensationalizing and so-called 'objective' imaging of the event, the shadow is imperceptible. Only the imaginative word, the writer's word, can make it visible again.

To a packed Olin auditorium, and with her long-time friend Chinua Achebe by her side, Gordimer argued for taking back the position of the witness from lights and cameras and reinstate it in its 'proper place:' the inwardness of the human observer. While critics have questioned her separation between word and image in this formulation, she argues that inwardness also falls into a duality with the exterior world - the political, the historical world, the world of social commitment. "I don't think other media can do it," she said, citing the media's attraction to the drama, rather than the meaning, of an event.

Gordimer has explored this duality, or what she has similarly called 'marginality,' through more than fifty years of writing, which have produced 13 novels and numerous volumes of short stories. From *The Conservationist* (her favorite among her work) to *The Burger's Daughter*, and *July's People*, Gordimer has a history of South Africa written into her own marginal position as writer-witness, one which points to event with the nuances of terror and resistance. After a radio interview, student seminar, and little sleep, Gordimer kindly sat down with the *Free Press* to discuss the position of the writer-witness, journalism and media, as well as her new book *The Pick-Up* (2001).

KC: The title of your talk, "Witness: The Inward Testimony," offers a definition of witnessing events of crisis and violence. Can you briefly describe your conception of witnessing, and how it relates to your experience as witness in South Africa?

NG: Well, I think that because of the incredible technological advances, the whole idea of witnessing has changed. Generations ago, though not so long ago, there were newspaper reports, and there was even television during the atomic bombing. But only way after the event did we see what happened to Hiroshima. When [the attacks] happened in New York, it was all instantly seen all over the world. Six thousand miles away in Johannesburg, anyone who had the TV on: there it was. Some people saw the actual second plane hit; certainly many Americans did.

It was an event whose immediacy - and incredibly powerful image - was witnessed all over the world, for the first time ever in history. In other words, it was the television coverage - the cameramen - who were the first witnesses. The people who were standing [on the street] were not near enough to say they were witnessing.

Then you get the descriptions in the newspapers of what was first seen on television and what people rushed to try and see. Then comes "political analyses," like Dateline, which speculates about the "why." That, of course, goes on for a long time after the event.

So we all had the impact of the terror hit immediately, and the consequences have slowly come out since then, yet we still haven't found any new consequences. And the consequences are indeed worldwide because it moves into the whole question of, "what is terrorism? Can we get rid of terrorism? Who are the terrorists? Is this state a terrorist state?"

My thesis is that there's another damage to the whole thing, which must come slowly from the writer. And that's what I called "inward" testimony. Take the Japanese writer Kenzabur Oe. He wrote about a very complex relationship between an airman and remote Japanese villagers. The plane crashes, but then a black American bails out of the sky. In this village, they had never seen a black man before - never mind an American - and he's like an animal to them. They chain him up, they're repulsed by him and they're afraid of him, and they don't know what to do with him: they don't know whether to kill him or not. So they decide that they're going to rear him like an animal and they leave the children, the young boys, to go and take him food and to empty his bucket and so on. The story is about what happens between these children and this man. To me, in that little story, the question of alienation, the question of "the other," and the question of race and culture are discussed.

You can read as many books as you like about Hiroshima, and there are other examples from the past that also shows how, eventually, when the event has become history - a matter of dates and the amount of people who were killed, and who was at war with who - when that is all made in history books, so to speak, and on the internet, and one can look it up, there is another dimension which comes from these wonderful writers.

KC: I also had a question relating to what we began discussing during the seminar. What do you think is the relationship between writing as a journalist and writing as a poet or fiction writer? Does it align with the word and image distinction that you were talking about earlier?

NG: I think it's something in between, because a journalist is also the guardian of the word. Two things, first of all, journalists must stick to facts... Everyone suggests that a journalist must tell it like it is. And, as a journalist, you also

always have a deadline. So I think it's in between the word of the imaginative writer and the image.

KC: In your work, you have explored complicated themes of marginality and oppression, largely within the country of South Africa. In your most recent book, *The Pick Up*, you explore new forms of marginality that seem to reflect South Africa and an increasingly globalized society. Do we need new terms to write about marginality and oppression?

NG: Well, whatever happens in our society and happening around us is happening to us as well. It calls forth an unfamiliar form of reaction and I think that's some of the things I'm exploring in that book, the strange unresolved conflict between these two people who are lovers. Whether they're in love or not, I don't know. [The male protagonist] feels love is a luxury that he can't afford, and [female protagonist] is a girl who is afraid of a bourgeois sentimentality. It's almost as if there's a question about love reluctantly intervening there. There difference in their conception of a worthwhile life - she is so shocked at the idea, she is even ashamed to take him to her bourgeois family, that she is against, even though she is living on a monthly amount of money handed up up up. But for him, this is what he wants, and he feels that she is naïve, she doesn't understand the world, and from his point of view he is absolutely right. But, from her point of view, which she thinks is a kind of moral one - it brings into question what morality is but it doesn't attend to the circumstances.

Things that I am exploring in that book, on that intimate level, as well as the whole idea, unimaginable, for those of us who have a passport and a citizenship, to think what it must be like. We are, in this room, are we not all immigrants? We all are. Your family came here, you may have come from the Mayflower for all I know. Everybody, you are not a real Indian, so it doesn't matter how far back your immigrant status goes. It's same with me.

But how interestingly our attitudes change. Now, at home, from the real indigenous people of Africa, there is great resentment for the people that come from Nigeria, from Zimbabwe, they even come from Korea, from North Korea. It's all done with bribes and who knows what, some of them are legal and some are not. And they're often street traders. Well, you've got hired recruits, and many of our own people are street traders. And they resent this very much, and they grumble to the government about it, and they parade in the streets.

KC: I know you have been active in forming a community of writers in South Africa. How do you describe the state of that community now, and where do you see your own literature going?

NG: I don't know. It's only as I write it. And, in any case, I'm getting extremely old - I don't know how many more books I'll write. Writers are...we don't have a school of writers, and I'm so pleased we don't. We get on well, we know each

other, and there's a lot of mixture between people of different ages and different generations, out of out great interest. I'm hoping for more journals where people can see their publications. And more money forthcoming, either from private sources or from the government, to publish more books and to properly distribute them because we've got big distribution problems.