



PRESS RELEASE

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My name is Nadine Gordimer and I am a South African. That's my identity."

On Sunday September 8 at 6.57pm on SABC3, 21 Icons South Africa is proud to celebrate the first artist in the series: novelist and short-story writer Nadine Gordimer. She is the fourth Nobel prize winner featuring in 21 Icons South Africa, having won the prestigious prize for literature in 1991. The other three are former South African presidents Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, who received the peace prize jointly in 1993, and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, who was the recipient of the 1984 peace prize.

Although Gordimer is admired as an activist for political and social justice during apartheid South Africa (she joined the then banned ANC and played an active role in opposing the regime), she is firm that she is a writer first and foremost and that her life's work has been her writing.

And despite years of local and international exposure on the literary circuit and as a lecturer, she does not feel comfortable being photographed. "I never enjoy having my portrait shot," she tells filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn on set at her home in Parktown, Johannesburg. "I'm always embarrassed. If you want to know about me, you either have to know me in a personal relationship and/or read my books. I don't think you'll see it in my face. It doesn't matter what I look like and I'm the same with writers that I admire: I don't care what they look like."

Still, she consented to being photographed sitting atop a pile of life-sized copies of some of her books, under a jacaranda tree in her garden. Dwarfed by her books, the portraits reflects her tremendous contribution to South African and world literature and how, through the political and moral themes she wrote about, she placed the country's injustices, nuances, outer and inner conflicts, and their effects on people from all

walks of life firmly in the world's consciousness. "There are different forms of using the word," she tells the team, "this wonderful thing that needs a capital letter: the Word. To me being a writer is a voyage of discovery. You are questioning and you're moving on to discover what the real meaning of life is."

"Nadine Gordimer is a tiny woman and the juxtaposition of her sitting on these enormous books really worked for me," says Steirn. "You've got Nadine Gordimer sitting on her own books, like something in "Alice in Wonderland" — it really is extraordinary to see."

The portrait will be published as a poster in the Sunday Times newspaper on September 8. The original photograph, signed by Gordimer, will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital, a specialist pediatric academic and tertiary referral hospital that is being built to provide services to all the children of Southern Africa irrespective of their social and economic status.

Steirn chose the titles on which Gordimer sits with care: they are her first novel, "The Lying Days" (1953), "A World of Strangers" (1958), "The Late Bourgeois World" (1966), "Burger's Daughter" (1979) — which she names as her favourite of all her novels —and "July's People" (1981). Apart from her debut, these books were all banned by the apartheid government, some for more than a decade. And to the shame of that government, it never officially congratulated her on her 1991 Nobel prize for literature — the first woman writer in 25 years to receive it — even as it came in the heady days of apartheid already being dismantled. "Perhaps I should take it as a compliment," she says in 21 Icons, clearly not too bothered by this lack of recognition.

What she does treasure is that she received a letter from Nelson Mandela while he was in prison, smuggled out to her after he read "Burger's Daughter", which in turn was smuggled into prison for him. He wanted to see her after he had read the book, having



already met her during his trial in 1962. Her request for permission to visit him was denied, though, but she was there when he walked out of Victor Verster Prison in Cape Town in 1990, and she was one of the first people he wanted to visit. A few years later she would be in his official entourage when he went to Sweden to accept the Nobel prize for peace.

She also has a deep admiration for his lawyer during the Rivonia trial, George Bizos, with whom she struck up a lasting friendship. She calls Bizos her “guru”, a great friend “and an inspiration in the sense that we care about justice in the same way”.

Gordimer’s one big regret is that she never learnt one of South Africa’s African languages and she faults herself for not doing it. “When I look back at the way I’ve conducted my life as a South African that is a big, big gap,” she tells Steirn.

She has a deep love for South Africa and never really considered leaving for exile during the apartheid years. As she says: “I think I’ve been tremendously lucky in my life and I have had an extraordinary life. I don’t know: Would I be a different kind of writer if I had lived somewhere else? I don’t call South Africa a miracle nation, but I belong to it with all its faults and it’s part of my life not just as a writer, but my life as a human being, as a responsible citizen of my own country in the world.”

She has this advice for aspirant writers: “Read and write. Don’t go to creative writing class. You can’t be taught to write. You can be taught to be a good journalist, but you cannot be taught to be a poet or a novelist. You read, read, read so that you become aware of the power and the range of the word — and then you want to do your own little experiment.”

Programme synopsis: Filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn pays homage to South Africa’s celebrated and Nobel prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer. He shoots an “Alice in Wonderland” portrait of her as she reveals the profound love of books and writing that has focused her entire life.

Photograph details: Photographer Adrian Steirn used soft, ambient lighting to capture Nadine Gordimer sitting in her garden on a pile of giant-sized books – the titles taken from the author’s own works. It speaks of her enormous contribution to South African and world literature, but also, quite playfully, reflects the wonder world that words, books and writing has always held for Gordimer. The portrait title is ‘*On her Word*’.

ENDS

On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

Jo-Leen Jan

Publicity

joleen@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 83 287 0165

+27 74 525 9014

Heidi Pretorius

Project Management

heidi@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 82 940 3464