

## INPRINT

**Something Out There**  
By Nadine Gordimer  
Viking Press, 203 pp., \$15.95

By Dan Bellm

The prime minister of South Africa is giving a speech over the radio. "This government will not stand by and see the peace of mind of its peoples destroyed. It will not see the security of your homes, of your children asleep in their beds, threatened by those who lurk, outside law and order, ready to strike in the dark...." Is this a political speech, or a scary bedtime story?

"Something Out There," the title story of Nadine Gordimer's newest collection of short stories, uses caricature, irony and a keen understanding of character to examine the fears just beneath the well-groomed surface of white South African privilege.

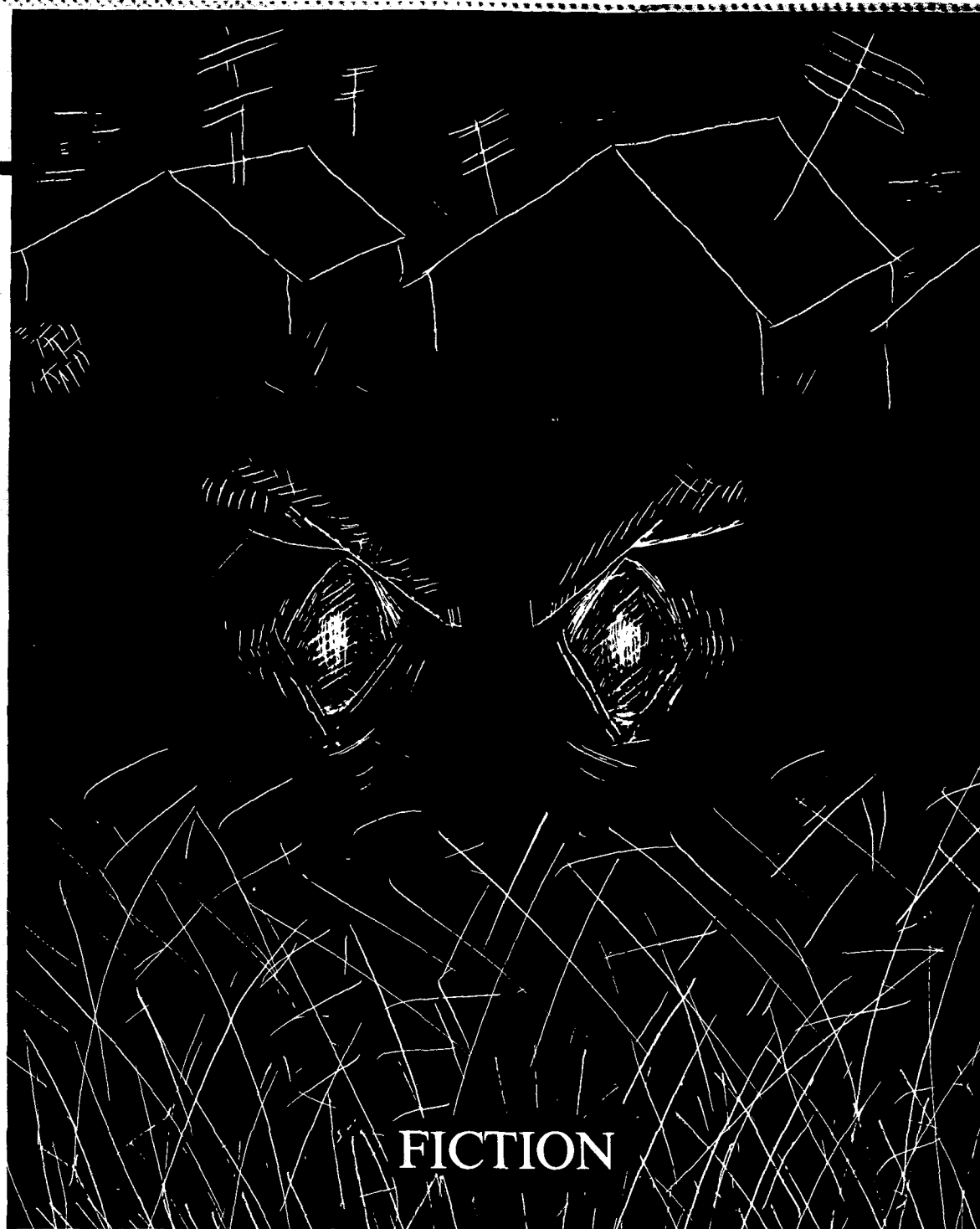
Fear is probably the core illusion upon which race hatred grows. What are whites afraid of? As the story opens, the tabloid newspapers are having a field day: a wild animal is on the loose in the plush suburbs of Johannesburg, mauling innocent little pets and stealing sides of meat. It all makes for a "nice change from the usual sort of news" (insults from the UN, rioting students). No one has gotten a close look—"a dark face with far-back eyes" is all one witness can remember—and since no one knows for sure what kind of animal it is, it becomes the primeval mythical Beast.

A cast of terrified and rather simple-minded bigots, with names like Naas Klopper and Bokkie Scholtz, finds their "lovely homes" invaded by mystery: "It just shows you," says Bokkie, "whatever you do, you can't call yourself safe."

Caricature is rare in Gordimer's work, but the potshot humor is an effective foil for a deeper plot that slowly unfolds. Something else is "out there." White suburbia is distracted by a marauding monster, four people (two of them white, two black) are stockpiling ammunition and supplies for a raid on a power plant. Charles and Joy, the white "couple"—no longer lovers, but committed to carrying out a plan they long ago agreed upon—have rented an abandoned farmhouse for the purpose. The black men Eddie and Vusi join them, play-acting for the neighbors the role of hired garden-boys when necessary. No living arrangement could be more "unnatural" under the apartheid regime, and their shared political commitment doesn't make it any easier. In this comic "spook" story Gordimer reserves her respect for these four, as they fumble their way from play-acting and stilted hospitality to real intimacy.

One evening they hear the prime minister describing terrorists over the radio. "They were accustomed to smile as people will when they must realize that those being referred to as monsters are the human beings drinking a glass of water, cutting a hang-nail, writing a letter, in the same room; are themselves." The value of this story lies in Gordimer's continuing ability to give white South Africa's nightmares a human face.

Some critics have charged Gor-



FICTION

## Nadine Gordimer: A thorn in apartheid's side

dimer with playing upon white guilt. But she puts white characters into crises too urgent for guilt; they either move beyond it or they don't survive. Nor is she simply "playing" upon white fears; rather, she holds the fear of spooks up to ridicule in order to identify the real fear underneath: how much whites may have to change.

Gordimer remarked in an interview this September, "There are some whites in South Africa who one way or another are looking for ways to prepare themselves, to live differently under a black majority government in a non-racial state. They believe in a non-racial state and they think that the way toward it is through black liberation. I'm one of them."

Her best-known novels have presented white characters at various stages of such preparation. In *Burger's Daughter* (1980), Rosa Burger, whose radical father has died in prison, slowly emerges from under the weight of his noble reputation to embrace his values for herself. In *July's People* (1981), set during a state of siege in the not-too-distant future, the tables are turned on a liberal white family overnight, who now find themselves completely dependent for survival on their decently treated but long-ignored black servant.

Gordimer's frequent emphasis on white response to apartheid—although she does not shy away from creating black characters—by no means implies that the answers lie in white hands. In "Something Out There," Eddie

scoffs at the old liberal theory that "if whites could have been cured of being scared of blacks, that would have solved everything." Charles agrees—a panic-stricken speech like the prime minister's only demonstrates "the power of fear, not the collapse of power." Righteousness will not shame evil out of existence; they have chosen direct action.

Since *July's People*, Gordimer's work has taken on an increasingly revolutionary tone, but it isn't necessarily hopeful. She understands that violence may be necessary to break out of the current impasse, and yet she hopes (despairingly) that change can somehow come by peaceful means.

The ending of "Something Out There" doesn't judge the effec-

*Her stories talk about the core illusion of race hatred—fear. Something is lurking out there in white suburbia....*



tiveness of bombing a power plant; that's not the point. As the tabloids take up the investigation, to get to the bottom of this latest horror, they are left holding scattered bits of information about four essentially unknowable characters. The four "terrorists" can't fully grasp the meaning of their own action either. In the brilliant closing sequence, Gordimer steps outside her story to view this bombing incident as an indefinite point in the long cycle of African history—one that began, and by implication will end, with black people.

### Spring the trap.

Gordimer is best known in this country for her novels (and "Something Out There" is long enough to be grouped with them) but over the past 30 years she has continually returned to the short story—where she began. *Something Out There* is her seventh collection of stories, and several of these new stories reconfirm her ability to condense character, place and meaning into a seemingly effortless quick sketch. All but one are set in South Africa. The best of them trick us into believing we've understood the characters and the situation (a "simple" case of political evil, right?), only to spring the trap.

Two of the stories concern unsuspected acts of betrayal: in "A City of the Dead, a City of the Living" a woman informs on the fugitive it seems she was falling in love with; in "Crimes of Conscience" a woman subtly undermines the agent sent to spy on her. "A Correspondence Course" is an excellent study-in-miniature of a mother and daughter faced with a dilemma much like Rosa Burger's: to accept inaction or to be "done for" by accepting the radical consequences of a small "liberal" act of kindness.

"At the Rendezvous of Victory" takes us back to the dilemmas of Gordimer's novel *A Guest of Honor* (1983): a black military hero who becomes an outdated embarrassment as the revolution he helped win is co-opted. "Blinder" is the beautiful and moving story of a housemaid, Rose, whose lover has died. Her employer assumes she will resort to another of her alcoholic binges, but Rose shames expectations with an act of strength.

Fiction alone, of course, will not bring the apartheid system to its knees. Nor are difficult books like *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer admits, likely to rouse the masses. The South African government, no doubt realizing this—and wary of international outcries in defense of a great writer—no longer bans her books. Yet Gordimer continues to live in South Africa and write what she pleases—a thorn in apartheid's side.

She has stayed out of prison by avoiding direct political action, but her work continues to unmask for the entire world the moral and human waste of her country's system. Nadine Gordimer remains one of the best sources for knowing not the grim statistics of South Africa, but how South Africans live.

Dan Bellm is a New York-based freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *The Guardian* and the *New York Native*.



By Pat Aufderheide

## PUBLISHING

# New project rescues and translates forbidden literature

Literature that is provoked by injustice and produced in challenge to censorship often doesn't have to be good to be interesting—but sometimes it's both. And that is the stuff that two human rights activists have recently undertaken to get translated and on to our bedside tables.

The new project is called Readers International, but it uses an old method: sale by subscription. This 19th-century marketing mode has also been borrowed and adapted by Book of the Month Club and by encyclopedia salesmen. But for the impoverished first-time publishers Sherman Carroll and Dorothy Connell, who show up at book conventions with their baby stroller in tow and hot manuscripts under their arms, it is a poor person's way to offer English-speakers a view beyond the many curtains between us and all the them. Like a magazine subscription, it's a gamble—but it could be more than worth it, for its introduction to worlds we might never have known existed.

A world, for instance, like the one offered in *Najran below Zero*. This may be the first novel from a critical perspective on social crisis in Saudi Arabia. Reading it will place North Yemen—which fell into Saudi territory in 1934 and was a loyalist stronghold during the '60s civil war—on your mental map. It will give you a sense of social context for political action. The story makes real the importance of religious belief (and religious police) and of harshly rigid sex roles in setting the terms for politics.

Although the novel is framed in a graceful, third-person story-telling style, it also uses subjective voice and stream-of-consciousness at different moments to create its visions of Saudi Arabian society from the bottom up. If the novel seems sophisticated for an area of the world our nightly news labels "backward," the irony is all on us. Author Yahya Yakhlef is head of the Palestinian Writers Union, and only one of the many Arab-world writers working in Western forms we've never heard of before. And that's not surprising—less than 1 percent of the books published in this country are books in translation.

Other writings in this series experiment with and stretch the fiction form so regularly pronounced moribund at home. For instance, there is *To Bury Our Fathers*, a novel by Nicaragua's leading novelist (and vice-presidential candidate for the Sandinistas this fall). The book, written during exile in the Somoza era, recounts life in the resistance from the viewpoint of different resistance members, each as full of foibles and illusions as of dreams. The novel shocks a long-distance observer of Central American politics for conjuring up the feel, smell and look of a society under siege. It is far from didactic literature—it plunges you into the exasperating and sometimes ludicrous terms of daily life in a land where society-wide poverty can be harder to overthrow than a dictator.

## Diverse human rights.

Although all the novels have as their common thread a concern with human rights, more striking is the richness of their diversity, both in style and content. The coolly factual *A Cadre School Life*, written by the aged intellectual Yang Jiang about her experi-



The Nicaraguan novel, *TO BURY OUR FATHERS*, recounts life in the resistance and conjures up the feeling of a society under siege.

ences in a labor camp during the Cultural Revolution, astounds as much for its understated tone as for its record of abuse, mismanagement and idealism gone amok. If there is irony or anger here, it is sternly kept in check; this is a woman who believes the facts will speak for themselves.

At the other end of the spectrum is the witty, elegantly crafted set of short stories by Czech author Ivan Klima. The stories each light up a window in a society where the corrupt rivals the quixotic in the daily affairs of Klima's urban neighbors.

The publishers began thinking about this project when Connell was an editor with the British publication *Index on Censorship* and Carroll was working with Amnesty International. They are no doubt heartened to find that their new venture has already made an impact in censored societies. Their publication of *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, a story of Soweto written by black South African poet Sipho Sepamla, has helped to re-issue the originally banned book inside South Africa.

Readers International faces a double challenge in providing this kind of fiction to English-speakers. Besides the task of rescuing forbidden literature from one country and marketing it in another where "political" art doesn't sell well, they also face the prohibitive costs of transla-

*One example is a novel about social crisis in Saudi Arabia by the head of the Palestinian writers union.*

tion. Even in the best of circumstances, it's expensive. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for all its reputation, required a subsidy to be translated into English. There are also technical difficulties, such as finding low-cost translators for languages ranging from Arabic to Czech, and making sure that translations can be transatlantic.

Ramirez' novel, for instance, is full of slang that, phrased in American English, might as well be Greek—or Spanish—to British readers. The publishers have landed some start-up money from the Dutch-based European Human Rights Foundation, but bemoan the lack of interest among government agencies for funding of translations. They point, in contrast, to efforts by German, Japanese and South Korean governments to fund translation efforts.

## A humanist vision.

Connell and Carroll think they may be introducing American readers to some of the most interesting writing in the world today, as well as offering the readers a humanist vision of political affairs. "The books we are interested in," says Connell, "are being written about something the writers feel urgently. These are writers who are not dogmatic or ideological, but who are writing about the simple facts of life. And it is that that gets them in trouble with the authorities."

"I don't see much introspective writing in this area," comments Carroll. "The more introspective style tends to come from intellectuals who have studied or who live abroad. Younger writers often favor narrative fiction because they feel they have a story to tell. In any case, we want to start this series with fiction—drama and poetry can come later—in order to acquaint readers with works that have strong characters, a good plot and an adept use of language."

One service Readers International is unlikely to provide is the traditional author tour. Indeed, some of Connell and Carroll's best stories of manuscript acqui-

sition must go untold because of the risk to the authors. And royalties may be difficult to deliver even if any money gets made. But they still get encouragement from their authors. Ivan Klima first learned that his work would be translated when he heard the news on Radio Free Europe, and he promptly sent them an enthus-

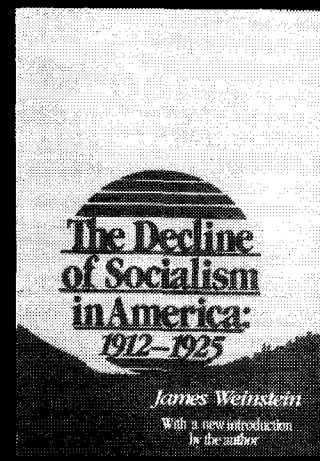
iastic message of support.

"What we hear from the authors is, 'Please tell our story, get it out—that's what gives us protection,'" says Carroll.

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"A brilliant study of the Socialist Party that will alter many of the prevailing assumptions about American radicalism.... Casts the entire history of the American left wing into a new light."

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