

NEELK BOOK OF THE MONTH

***Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black: And Other Stories* by Nadine Gordimer**

Review by Jan Wilm - January 2009

There are a few books on my shelf so heavily underlined and so thoroughly magic-marked, a friend of mine once quipped it would be easier to just underline every sentence beforehand and read the book in full once I'm done. Nadine Gordimer's latest story collection is one of those books. I found myself marking the first sentence of the title story, "Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black," and while I read I fast-fingeredly capped and uncapped my marker as with each new sentence the author dishes out a fresh revelation, an ingenious insight or a phrase of such beauty that I finally just followed my friend's advice, kept my yellow highlighter in hand and swept it along over Gordimer's prose as fluidly as my eyes traced her writing. Her art is so crisp and fascinating I didn't want to miss anything upon a second glance at an individual story. But once done reading the eleven stories in the collection, any aficionado of great writing will want to read them again right away. There is so much to marvel at here.

Consider the title story of a white South African going in search of possible black ancestors and his frustration at being lost in a world of unknowns, pondering a chest of photographs of his great-grandfather, a diamond miner in Kimberley who may have exploited black women and fostered children. The narrator says: "You're not responsible for your ancestry." And there is so much sadness buried in this sentence. Here is a former activist in the fight against apartheid, a man in middle age, two failed marriages and a lost custody battle behind him, who is hoping for nothing else than family, even if its history is one of exploitation and suffering.

There is the story "Mother Tongue" of a cheerful young German woman who goes to South Africa for love, joyously exclaiming that she is at home in the English language. In the end, the woman will sit at a dinner table with her husband and his friends, a clique knit together by common experiences, inside jokes - and language; and the woman will look at the others over half-empty wine glasses and Gordimer writes: "She understood she didn't know the language. The only mother tongue she had was in her mouth, at night."

There is a story of a widow's quest to track down an ex-lover of her husband, an ex-lover who is a man. Or the tale of a daughter who has lost her mother and sits in the second row of a theatre night after night in the same exact chair, because she has opened a cache of her mother's containing a letter stating that the actor on stage is her biological father. Gordimer opens the story with her customary precise insight: "Caches of old papers are graves, you shouldn't open them."

At 85, Nadine Gordimer has the experience to write multi-layered, complex short-stories charting depths on grand scales many novels do not; and she has the wisdom to constrain her epic scope to smaller, unpretentious tales and a graceful, slender prose. Remarkably, Gordimer also creates stories so fresh and humorous one stands in awe of her reach. In "Gregor", a writer and avid reader of Kafka muses about a beetle trapped under the screen of her word processor. The story "Tape Measure" is a playful anecdote about a very charming - and very eloquent - tapeworm and his sorry descent into intestinal hell. What sounds like an unpalatable joke achieves a powerful poignancy in the sentences after the tapeworm has been 'ejected': "...begin all over again. Come to life."

In the story "Dreaming of the Dead," an unnamed narrator conjures up somnambulant images of deceased friends, mixing memory and desire, when she meets Edward Said, Susan

Sontag, and Anthony Sampson in a Chinese restaurant in New York City. However, despite this offering of wit and intelligence the three nocturnal guests display and the fondness the narrator has for them, there is one person missing at the table, the one she misses most, the love of her life, who she figures has not been dead long enough to emerge in dream.

What ties the author's stories together are common themes like the yearning for an identity, any kind of identity, whether it be achieved through reclaiming a family history out of letters or faded photographs, finding out the truth about one's ancestry, or finding it in a language. The shared motif of each of these eleven stories is the hope of prolonging the fleeting present. What remains is the hope for a common ground and a connection to that which we've lost yet cannot escape.

Time and again art has ventured to come to terms with life passing and to preserve what may be there to salvage. In Gordimer's stories we have a poignant expression of the ephemeral past forever trapped somewhere in time and the past's ways of shooting up its vines through the soil we call our present life. In a story by Anton Chekhov a character is calmed that his troubles will pass. He considers this for a moment and answers: "Nothing passes." Gordimer's work echoes the same belief, but reverts it and sees this as a powerful laugh in the face of the clock's hands that part our ways.

In its own way, each story in the collection is a defiance of the tentacled Leviathans of our existence, death, the passage of time, and the loss of each moment; every story is a mutinous attempt at conserving the past and putting together history's pieces to shape a lasting vault of our life as it once was and always will be, somewhere.

Nadine Gordimer. *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black: And Other Stories*. Bloomsbury. 2007.