

# Some Novels from South Africa

by Grahame Addecott



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### Scope of Topic

In this *Bookmark*, three South African novels are analysed and discussed. Most of the critical criteria applied could be used with any novel to enhance the reader's appreciation, understanding and enjoyment. Plot, character, setting and purpose are looked at and, as these novels all deal with aspects of South Africa's racial problems, the question of whether the novels are in danger of becoming political treatises is also explored.

### BOOKS TO READ

Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* (Penguin, 1962)

Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country* (Penguin, 1958, 1982)

J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (Penguin, 1991)

### NOTES

For the past two hundred years the history of South Africa has largely been one of violence and conflict and it is in this context that the three novels chosen for discussion have been written. All three novelists are white South Africans, Paton born in Natal, Coetzee (a name of Afrikaans origin) in the Cape Province and Gordimer, born in the Transvaal into a Jewish family.

South Africa is in many ways a "world of strangers" - a country of people divided by race, tribalism, language, cultures and political aspirations and affiliations. Hostile or indifferent to one another or mutually suspicious, often ignorant of those of a different group, these people are almost invariably welcoming and courteous to visitors. "Ah but your land is beautiful", the visitor may exclaim, not only because of the hospitable welcome received but because of the natural features, the flora and fauna. However, the squalor of shanty towns, urban and rural poverty, race conflicts, riots and prejudices might well stifle such a remark.

### A World of Strangers

Nobel prize winner Nadine Gordimer is as noted for her short stories as for her novels. They offer a sensitive picture of people, places, attitudes. South Africa is her usual setting. In *A World of Strangers*, the narrator and interested observer of the South Africans he meets is a young English publisher, Toby Hood, sent out to take over the Johannesburg office of his family's publishing house.

This novel, which was first published in 1958, describes after a short preliminary section the experiences and reactions of Toby as he encounters various South Africans, visits their homes, works amongst them and gets to know these people, who are often strangers to him in more senses than one. They are, moreover, in various ways strangers to one another.

The theme of an Englishman getting to know people in the various communities of South Africa necessitates there being quite a number of characters. Toby meets most, not so much at work but at parties and through meeting Anna Louw, who approaches him on behalf of his African office "boy", Amon. Anna works for a Legal Aid Society.

Some characters are inevitably merely sketched in, like the inarticulate black singer, Betty Ntolo, or the very articulate hunter, John Hamilton, but two women, Anna and Cecil Rowe, and two black men, Steven Sithole and Sam, receive more detailed attention as Toby becomes involved with them.

With Toby Hood we get to know something of the lives and attitudes of many people. Inevitably, as would be the case in real life, Toby forms judgements, sometimes on rather slight acquaintance, and not all the portraits are detailed. His somewhat priggish and, at times, facile judgements of people on the ship are followed by rather more considered ones on most of the South Africans he meets.

The wealthy Alexanders are perhaps rather stereotyped. Hamish Alexander, the mining magnate, and his wife, who had once been at school with Toby's mother, are extremely rich, but this is not so of many of their acquaintance. It is through them that Toby meets Cecil Rowe who plays, with Steven Sithole and Sam, a large part in Toby's friendship with them. Anna, who does know them, is a liberal Afrikaaner, certainly not a stereotype. She and Cecil, however, are strangers and though Anna was born in Jagersfontein, where the Alexanders have a large farm, they are but names to Anna and she is unknown to them.

Anna and Cecil are in almost every way different and so too are Sam and Steven, though these two are good friends. These four are particularly important, not merely because they in some ways represent different race groups and attitudes but in what their friendship and attitudes mean to Toby. They introduce him (and the reader) to many facets of South African life. The death of one and the planned marriage of another are emotionally important events.

One minor character, Miss McCann, is of some importance not because she means much to Toby, her employer, but because her attitude is one not untypical of many a white South African. She resigns because she cannot bear to work for a white man who is friendly with black people. She may be seen as a foil to both Cecil and Anna.

So Toby meets various people through the Alexanders, at parties, at informal gatherings and occasionally through work. Many are alien to him in some way, many alien to one another. Even when some of the Alexanders' guests seem much like people in England, Toby finds he is partly deceived. Speaking of English relatives, he says that they "would have understood a city of many different ways of life, all intermingled, but would they have understood the awful separateness?"

The separateness of people's lives brought about by the prejudices of the various racial groups and by the country's laws is the major theme of this novel. A few South Africans like Anna, one of the best drawn characters in the novel, have left their own little world and are inhabiting a frontier between black society and white society. Toby is only a visitor to this frontier land, while most of the people he meets scarcely know of its existence.

The homes of these people, a few luxurious, others quite ordinary, sometimes a township house or room, are well described, as are the various Christmas celebrations Toby attends. Johannesburg, its suburbs and its African townships are quite vividly presented. Some townships may have disappeared since the novel was published, but no doubt the newer ones are in essence not that different, and the reader gets a good idea of their teeming, pulsating life, of shebeens and poverty, of humour and goodwill. Towards the end of the novel the African "bush", too, is described, but in the final analysis it is the people who matter. They differ in attitudes, character, race, interests, and we get to see their "awful separateness". The novel is not a political treatise focusing on the apartheid laws and system and simply condemning them. Rather, we see people living in this situation through the eyes of an outsider, Toby. Nadine Gordimer herself is not an outsider to this world and situation. Using Toby as a narrator gives a certain objectivity to her description of the people and events of this "world of strangers".

### **Cry the Beloved Country**

Alan Paton is as passionately involved in the world he describes in *Cry the Beloved Country* as he was in real life South Africa. Unlike Gordimer's, this novel is not narrated by one of its characters and it is moreover, a black South African clergyman who is the central character. Johannesburg and its townships are the setting for much of the novel but it opens in Zululand. Here in the village of Ndotsheni the Reverend Stephen Kumalo ministers to his flock, many of whose menfolk have left the land to work in Johannesburg. "They go to

Johannesburg and there they are lost and no one hears of them at all". Stephen Kumalo goes to Johannesburg summoned by a brother priest who has just discovered Stephen's sister, Gertrude, and her child. Stephen had lost contact with her, given her up for lost.

This is a novel with a strong and well-woven plot. In Parts One and Two, Stephen is in the city and not only goes to Gertrude, a Gertrude corrupted by city life, but meets his brother, John, now a politician, a political activist, and searches for his son, Absalom. He has not been in touch with his family for months and is as loved by Kumalo as his biblical namesake by his father. How city life has affected these Kumalos and Stephen's reactions to them and to the great city and its townships are crucial in the novel. Stephen is in many ways "an innocent abroad". He is a good, simple man, essentially kind and trying to be a good Christian, not so good that he cannot at times say hurtful or critical things, as he does to his brother and on one telling occasion, to the girl who is going to bear his son's child.

Stephen Kumalo is a very human figure whose private world suffers, as does the real world in which he lives. His village and valley in Zululand are poor, the land exhausted. The land could be rich and fertile, as the novel's beautiful opening indicates, but is overgrazed, over-used. Kumalo is bemused by the great city, distressed by its values, its crimes. Those who are politically and socially aware may well feel, as does his brother, John, that Stephen Kumalo, the *umfundisi*, is too ready to accept his lot, to be a passive sufferer but he has dignity and wins our sympathy when he and his family become involved in the murder of young Arthur Jarvis. The victim is a liberal philanthropist and son of a wealthy farmer whose Carrisbrooke lands lie close to Kumalo's village, Ndotsheni.

There is a rich variety of characters, black and white, in the novel, with Stephen Kumalo very much the central figure. There are also many vivid descriptive passages; that of the valley at the start of the novel may be contrasted with that of Johannesburg and the reef towns, as first seen by Kumalo, and with later descriptions of the townships.

The language, too, is captivating not only when Paton is describing scenes or emotions, but when he captures the courteous idiom of African exchanges or when he writes:

"Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom that is gone. Aye, and cry aloud for the man who is dead, for the women and children bereaved. Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end."

The novel's ending offers some hope because of the positive attitudes of the agricultural demonstrator and of Mr Jarvis, or his grandson and of Kumalo himself, but the philanthropy and paternalism of Jarvis could hardly be seen as any real solution to South Africa's problems.

### **Age of Iron**

Coetzee's novel appeared nearly fifty years after Paton's and is a sparser, tauter and angrier work. In several of his novels the protagonist is an "outsider", a woman going mad, a disfigured coloured gardener and in *Age of Iron* a woman dying of cancer. Elizabeth Curran, once a university lecturer, is the narrator. She is writing a long letter or account to her daughter who has gone to live in America.

There is no self pity, no sentimentality but great feeling as she writes, sometimes of the pain of her disease, and more and more of her reactions to the homeless Vercueil who becomes involved in her life, and above all of her reaction to the terrible events that engulf the life of her servant, Florence, Florence's son, Bheki, and his friend John.

The fate of these people, whose inner thoughts, feelings and attitudes Mrs Curran never fully knows, becomes increasingly important to her and makes her all the more critical of the government and of the police. Yet when faced with some of the worst events and deaths in the townships, Mrs Curran can scarcely cope. "A crime was born long ago", she says. "I was born into it ... It is part of me, I am part of it." The despairing, dying woman quite objectively describes her state and how outsiders, such as a policewoman, must see her. She must seem wild, strange, even ridiculous. However, the reader will not really see her so or

feel, as she lies in the street or when she cannot fully control herself, that she has lost dignity.

What a marvellous foil to her is the uneducated, unwashed, alcoholic, rather detached Vercueil, with his smelly dog and his laconic comments.

The novel's setting is Cape Town and there are occasional references to specific streets, to Woodstock Hospital, to the townships, but the novel's strength is not in descriptions of places. Why indeed would the narrator describe places known to her daughter? Her attitude to death -- her own approaching death and those of the black people she sees killed -- and her attitude to the injustices of the society in which she lives are most tellingly conveyed.

"Grief past weeping. I am a hollow, I am a shell", she writes at one time, and a little later, "I cannot find it in my heart to love, to want to love, to want to want to love. I am dying because in my heart I do not want to live."

We may well accept that Mrs Curran does not want to live, not so much because of her cancer but because of what she sees around her. But surely she does love, is not a shell. As she faces what happens to John and to Bheki, and therefore to Florence, as she and Vercueil become closer, she loves, she feels, she reacts.

This novel is a strong indictment of the policies and actions of the Nationalist (Afrikaaner) authorities' enforcement of the apartheid system. One would not label it a "political treatise", however, for it is not narrowly partisan and offers no glib and easy solutions. The dying narrator is concerned with the wider world beyond her, with politics, is almost forced to be so concerned, but this is her personal testament. Mrs Curran emerges as truly human with a dignity and an integrity and honesty we can admire.

Every sentence, almost every word of Coetzee's novel is effective, telling and engages the reader fully. Here is an account of South Africa that is honest, involved and moving.

Coetzee's novel and the two others discussed differ in style, language, purpose. The authors are all adept in helping us to see and live with various South Africans, sharing with them their experiences. No honest novel about twentieth-century South Africa could fail to deal in some way with racism and this, in their differing ways, these three works do so well. We are made painfully conscious of the deadening consequences of the racial attitudes which gave birth to apartheid. The bleakest vision is Coetzee's but that he and other South African writers can see and convey so well the cost in human suffering arising from racism offers some real hope for their country.

## FURTHER READING

Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (Heinemann, 1972)

Andre Brink, *A Chain of Voices* (1982) ; *A Dry White Season* (1981, both Flamingo)

Penguin Books publish:

J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael X* (1985)

Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (1983); *July's People* (1982); *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (Short stories, 1962 & reprinted)

Alan Paton, *Too Late the Phalarope* (1983); *Ah But your Land is Beautiful* (1983); *Debbie Go Home* (Short stories, 1961,1971)

Boris Ford, *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (1983)

*The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (Blain & others, Batsford) has an entry on Gordimer

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