

July's People
by Nadine Gordimer

“The decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them... given Wednesdays and alternative Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him and his town woman sleep with him in his room—he turned out to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, savior, July.”

July's People by Nadine Gordimer—a South-African-born writer—is a novel set against the outbreak of a South African civil war between black rebels and the white ruling class. Maureen and her husband, Bam, have fled the white suburbs of Johannesburg with their children and their servant, July. With nowhere else to go (the rebels are looting shops, burning houses, and shooting down airplanes), July guides them to his village, where they take up a strange new life.

The book is set against imagined violence and revolution and, in this way, achieves a wise conceit of reversal: whites forced to shelter with blacks, the served become dependent upon the servant. The new world is somewhat upside down, but the lingering ways in which it is still very much right side up are perhaps the most interesting. July, for example, continues to call Bam “master” even though they were never fond of this term back in Johannesburg, and July remains “July” even though he is in his own village (we don’t, in fact, learn his real name, Mwawate, until over two-thirds of the way through the novel). Officially, he is no longer their servant, yet he continues to care for them, giving them his mother’s hut, bringing them firewood after a rainstorm, and the like. Gradually, however, he drifts into independence.

Throughout, there is much made of the set of keys to the bakkie—the impractical pleasure vehicle that proves suddenly practical during wartime—which ferried them out of the city, and also of Bam’s bird gun, which—spoiler alert!—turns up missing in the late stages of the novel. There is also a measure of sexual tension—smartly, it’s never realized—between Maureen and July, and the novel employs some feminist imagery. In one important scene, Maureen walks out into a nighttime rainstorm, in the buff, and watches in the distance as July returns in the bakkie. And, as murky as it is, the ending has dim echoes of other feminist narratives: Maureen, upon hearing a helicopter landing and hovering and flying nearby, forsakes her husband and her children and runs after it—boldly, wildly, visibly. “She runs” is, in fact, the final line. Yet it’s debatable how much *July's People* should be read as a feminist text.

As much as the novel is anti-apartheid, it seems, above all, anthropological. That’s strange to say, given the fictitious civil unrest. Yet, Maureen and Bam occupy a very strange and real middle ground between the two worlds: they are white, but they are liberal. Though he owns a bird gun for hunting, Bam does not own a revolver that would function, as the local chief puts it, “to protect their radios and TV sets and coveted suits of clothing.” They are not Europeans, having been born in South Africa, and though they could have made efforts to attain dual citizenship, we know that they did not. They are not trying to leave South Africa, for there isn’t really anywhere else to go.

The novel is very much about power and politics and race and sex. That’s all in there, in just 160 pages, which is as close as I’ll get to a “Reading Rainbow” style endorsement. As for a small moment our class might care about: at one point the chief that makes clear that Gordimer has read Fanon—as she certainly would have—when he expresses his surprise that the white government is not killing the rebels, since “white men got those guns, those tanks, aeroplanes.” It seemed a small but clear echo. Also, there is a small moment of dark near-comedy late in the novel when Maureen seeks July out privately—as she has taken to doing—and finds him in the hut with the bakkie. It’s the payoff from the earlier scene during the rainstorm. After a long conversation, Gordimer writes:

The incredible tenderness of the evening surrounded them as if mistaking them for lovers. She lurched over and posed herself, a grotesque, against the vehicle’s hood, her shrunken jeans poked at the knees, her sweat-coarsened forehead touched by the moonlight, neglected hair standing out wispy and rough. The death’s harpy image she made of herself meant nothing to him, who had never been to a motor show complete with provocative girls. She laughed and slapped the mudguard vulgarly, as he had done to frighten a beast out of the way. The sharp sound flew back to them from the settlement.

In many ways, this functions as the novel’s climax.

Gordimer, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991, had several books banned during apartheid. She passed away last July.

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