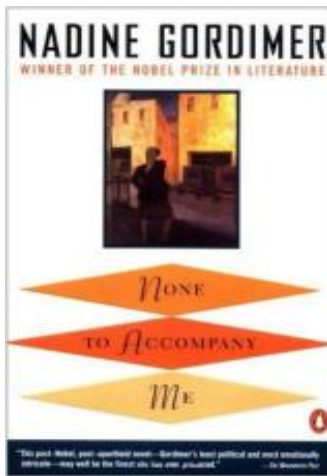


None to Accompany Me

by Nadine Gordimer



About the Book

None to Accompany Me, Nadine Gordimer's eleventh novel, takes place in a tumultuous South Africa in the final throws of apartheid, in the year when the old life comes to an end. The upheaval is reflected in the life of Vera Stark, a white civil rights lawyer who gradually sheds the trappings of her married life in pursuit of a small space in existence...to be traversed by herself: herself a final form of company discovered. Tracing Vera's transition along with her country's, **None to Accompany Me** is a lyrical exploration of radical social change as a possibility of changing oneself.

Both pragmatist and sensualist, wife and mother, lover and political activist, Vera is one of Gordimer's most complex and intriguing creations. The novel's secondary characters more than hold their own, though: Vera's handsome husband Bennet, a would-be sculptor now reduced by the desire to provide for her to selling so-called prestige luggage; their children Ivan, a London banker, and Annie, a gay South African doctor; Didymus and his wife Sibongile (Sally), black revolutionaries returned from exile abroad to find their public roles reversed: Didymus sidelined and Sibongile on a hit-list of high-profile politicians; their lovely daughter Mpho, half-Zulu, half-Xhosa, and all-London teenager; Vera's co-worker Oupa, former prisoner on Robber Island, bursting with hopes and plans for South Africa; and Zeph Rapulana, one of the new black men with the skills and personal power to help bring those hopes and dreams to fruition.

This new South Africa is not romanticized: there are deaths by violence, desperate housing shortages, hints of corruption, political rivalries. Asked by *Newsweek* what readers should learn from **None to Accompany Me**, Gordimer replied, "I hope they will take away a sense of the true realities of South Africa, of the wonderful achievements of freedom in [a] few short months, and also understand that there are enormous tasks for people to tackle, and that we need help."

Discussion Guide

1. In a 1994 interview Gordimer said, "We are all many people, and each of our acquaintances or friends or lovers or

children knows a different person. In the end you are left with this refraction of yourself, and it's for you to find out what you really are." What does Vera learn about who she is over the course of the story? How does she change in the eyes of her family members?

2. None to Accompany Me is divided into three sections: Baggage, Transit, and Arrivals. Why do you think the author chose these titles? How are they particularly appropriate to the experience of returning from exile?

3. Zeph Rapulana is an ambiguous figure, politically astute, financially savvy, soft-spoken yet ambitious. As she gets to know him, Vera acknowledges the beginning of some new capability in her, something in the chemistry of human contact that she was only now ready for. What does Zeph represent for her? What she seeks in her new living arrangement is a consequence in which there were loyalties but no dependencies. Is that realistic?

4. After sleeping with Otto for the first time, Vera lay beside Ben that night with a sense of pride and freedom rather than betrayal. Her infidelities, though few, are tremendously significant. What purpose do they serve for her? Nothing if not a realist, Vera's only indulgence is of her sensual nature. Is that a contradiction? Has it affected her daughter's sexuality?

5. Vera muses, "It was as if, in the commonplace nature of their continuing contact through the Foundation, [she and Zeph Rapulana] belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman. Is Vera, "the great lover of men," as Gordimer calls her in this interview, reaching a new middle ground between the sexes? If so, what are the implications?

6. Describing the Maqoma's years of complicity in exile, Gordimer writes, "The abstentions from adultery that trust means to most couples are petty in comparison; this was the grand compact beyond the capacity of those who live only for themselves." What effect can political comradeship have on a marriage? How is the relationship between Sibongile and Didymus affected by the reversal of their public roles when they return to South Africa? How does their marriage compare to the changing relationship between Vera and Ben?

7. Referring to the fact that Vera's work has always been more important than Ben's, Annie asks her mother, "Is there ever a fair division of labour, as you call it, between couples?" What do you think? How does it bear out in Ivan's and Annie's liaisons?

8. Sixteen-year-old Mpho combines the style of *Vogue* with the assertion of Africa. Yet she speaks neither Xhosa nor Zulu, but a perky London English. How does her experience of her homeland compare with that of Ivan, who has migrated in the opposite direction?

9. "Once [Bennet] had been the answer to everything; that was falling in love: the end of questions," reflects Vera early on. But Ben's experience of life through his wife becomes intolerable to her. "I cannot live with someone who can't live without me," she says to their daughter. "When someone gives you so much power over himself, he makes you a tyrant." Ben goes away knowing that he does not know how to carry on his life alone. Do you feel sorry for him? Is Vera justified? Vera slips away from her family because Bennet needs her, and her children don't. Is that inconsistent?

10. Vera gradually detaches from sex, from family, from all but the demands of her public life. When Annie asks, "What have you wanted?" her mother answers, "To find out about my life. The truth. In the end. That's all." Do you agree with Gordimer that everyone's life is a journey to the self, consciously or otherwise? Is anyone else in the book making the

same journey?

Author Bio

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in a small South African town. Her first book, a collection of stories, was published when she was in her early 20s.

Ms. Gordimer was a vice president of PEN International and an executive member of the Congress of South African Writers. She was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in Great Britain and an honorary member of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She was also a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France). She held 14 honorary degrees from universities including Harvard, Yale, Smith College, the New School for Social Research, City College of New York, the University of Leuven in Belgium, Oxford University, and Cambridge University.

Ms. Gordimer won numerous literary awards, including the Booker Prize for *THE CONSERVATIONIST*, both internationally and in South Africa.

Critical Praise

"This post-Nobel, post-apartheid novel - Gordimer's least political and most emotionally intricate - may well be the finest she has ever produced."

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Publication Date: October 1, 1995

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)

ISBN-10: 0140250395

ISBN-13: 9780140250398