

# Writing: An Act of Responsibility

*Phyllis Barber*

*“You can sing sweet and get the song sung, but to get to the third dimension, you have to sing tough, hurt the tune, then something else happens, the song gets large.”—Cathal<sup>1</sup>*

You’re a writer who loves these big, tough songs that pierce your heart and make you feel alive all over again. You believe in literature with a soul—the book that makes you think, that makes you feel as though you’ve been somewhere and experienced something, that you’re a different person for having read it. Writing just to entertain isn’t your goal. Writing to impress others with your cleverness or hoped-for-brilliance doesn’t matter as much as it once did. Your desire is something like Chekhov’s who spoke about writers describing situations so truthfully that readers could no longer avoid them. Or in your own words, to wrangle with the tough places in yourself and your subject. That’s what matters to you.

But you’re a Mormon, a Latter-day Saint, and you wonder about your responsibility for building the kingdom of God. You also have some deeply ingrained tendencies to be didactic, prescriptive, even moralistic at times. Having listened to sacrament meeting sermons every Sunday for a lifetime has affected your artistic sensibility and the way you think about things. You’re not in the market for a lesson on the “shoulds” of responsibility or yet another dictum placed on your shoulders, but you think it’s worthwhile to revisit the idea of responsibility—what it is, what it means, whether you have a strong sense of it and don’t even know it, how its nudgings affect you and your stance as a writer.

Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer's essay, "The Essential Gesture," begins:

When I began to write at the age of nine or ten, I did so in what I have come to believe is the only real innocence—an act without responsibility. For one has only to watch very small children playing together to see how the urge to influence, exact submission, defend dominance, gives away the presence of natal human "sin" whose punishment is the burden of responsibility. I was alone. . . . My poem . . . was directed at no one, was read by no one.

Responsibility is what awaits outside the Eden of creativity. I should never have dreamt that this most solitary and deeply marvelous of secrets—the urge to *make* with words—would become a vocation for which the world and that life-time ledger, conscionable self-awareness, would claim the right to call me and all my kind to account. The creative act is not pure.<sup>2</sup>

If you were born into the human condition which includes suffering (indeed, "opposition in all things"), then what is your responsibility for humanity's suffering, misunderstandings, and injustices? Do you have that "life-time ledger, conscionable self-awareness" calling you to account? And are you really convinced that the "creative act is not pure" or, in other words, not a blissful act of art born out of willows by the side of a stream where the air is clear and no one ever walks?

Remember the *Lord of the Flies* moments in your own childhood when someone ruled the playground with brute force and the times you heard someone taunting a peer who was handicapped, disfigured, or abnormal in some way? Remember when you were asked for a handout on the sidewalks of a big city by someone who was a mystery to you? (Is this a real down-and-outer or just an alcoholic buying his next drink?) You weren't sure whether you were in the middle of great need or involved in a scam. You weren't sure what it meant to be a Good Samaritan.

The term "sin," especially the term "natal human sin," has an ominous ring to you. Too many TV evangelists and neo-Puritan fundamentalists, maybe? But if the word "sin" is considered in the context of suffering (in addition to its original Greek, meaning "missing the mark"), you find this approach more useful. Not only have you been the brunt of playground mentality, but maybe you've reluctantly witnessed the bully in yourself, especially when you've been snagged on the hook of self-righteousness. You've seen your sense of right and wrong in action, your sense of justice and how you've sometimes used it as a blunt instrument or

wielded it without much awareness of the other side of the story. You suspect there might be a gap between your bad-day and good-day self.

If it is assumed that you, the writer, are born with natal human sin, that you will “miss the mark” at some point in your life, that you, too, are one of those human beings full of contradiction, then is it important that you are acknowledging, addressing, or bringing greater awareness to this condition. If so, you’re more inclined to paint your characters with brush strokes of paradox, characters whose shoes don’t always match.

To the second point of “conscionable self-awareness:” is there something in you—the observer, the writer, the conscience (with its notion of moral goodness or blameworthiness of conduct and intentions and its accompanying feeling of obligation to do right or be good) that wants to address these contradictions, not only in your characters but in yourself? Aware of the discrepancies between your own actions and the self you regard as true-blue nice, does your conscience affect your sense of responsibility? If so, how does it affect your writing?

Your first response to this question could be to examine boldly your assumptions, turn them inside out, upside down. For instance, you might be a valkyrie mother with iron breastplates when your young children come home sobbing because the bully had his way. But after you huff and puff with indignation and soothe the hurt that has become your own, do you teach them to be bullies in return and to fight fire with fire? Do you take a position of passiveness, afraid to show an aggressive face? Do you consider how your response might appear to other people? Do you find solace on higher moral ground on which you enjoy standing, thinking yourself better than the bully, while still and at the same time bullying others with your sense of justice? Or in another instance, you may have developed a fierce gut reaction to being pushed around or to watching someone else get pushed around. As a result, you’ve developed a crusader’s sense of fairness. Does this make you free of that natal human sin of which Gordimer speaks? Crusaders are capable of behaving badly on their side of the fence. They have their own demons to wrestle. You may be an advocate for the underdog because you grew up feeling *you* were the underdog. So are you merely taking care of yourself and your kind in an extended way and calling it compassion or goodness? Are you feeling your own self worth because of someone else’s weakness? The ground is uncertain in the land of self-awareness.

You suspect if you want to write something that matters, you need

to examine the biases in your characters which can only be understood after reflecting on the biases in your own character. You, after all, are human. But how willing are you to look at all of what that means? You think you need to view the entire spectrum of possible behavior, not just the “good-hearted” or “vile villain” slices of the pie. You ask how your characters can be less than three dimensional if they are to matter as commentary. Your willingness to blast into the third dimension seems essential if you want to sing those big songs or write those jagged, unpredictable stories with a *real* heart of gold.

One of Gordimer’s novels, *July’s People*, shows many layers of conscientious awareness. Maureen and Bamford Smales are affluent, progressive liberals from Johannesburg. Raised with house servants, they nonetheless pride themselves on their broadmindedness regarding racial issues in South Africa. After all, Maureen and her husband have always been considerate to the blacks, have been as gracious as they could be and provided their servant July with “two sets of uniforms, khaki pants for rough housework, white drill for waiting at table, given Wednesdays and alternate Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him and his town woman to sleep with him in his room.”<sup>3</sup>

After a series of riots, arson, occupation of headquarters of international corporations, bombs in public buildings, gunned shopping malls, blazing unsold homes, and a chronic state of uprising in the country, the Smales are forced to flee from Johannesburg with their two children to find refuge in the bush with their long-time native house servant, July.

But gradually, as Bamford, Maureen, and the children become more and more dependent on the people in the bush for their survival, a series of events forces Maureen into a different state of awareness. She begins to notice much of the shallowness of her former life in Johannesburg (the shallow repartee she had carried on with Bamford and the avoid-things-while-looking-good syndrome) and how inadequate it is in these new surroundings.

She realizes that this kind of repartee belonged to a certain “deviousness” that seemed “natural to suburban life.” When, in another instance, out in the bush, Maureen has to drown some kittens in a bucket and accepts it as a matter of course—a pointblank case of survival of the fittest—she realizes she and Bamford had been obsessed with the reduction of suffering but that they had given no thought about how to accept suffering. Bamford pities her that she should have to perform such an act, that

she should have to suffer in that way. "Poor girl." He can't accept the fact that this was the best choice in the situation and that the natural cycle of life and death can be witnessed more clearly in primitive surroundings.

Finally, Maureen's shifting state of awareness gradually evolves into a state of terror when she notices, not only the shift of power to July, whose territory they now inhabit because they have no place else to go, but also that July has the keys to their car and drives it when he wants to without asking permission. Power is no longer in her hands—the woman with the precious white skin that has given her an elevated place in her particular life. Her husband is ineffectual in this raw-close-to-nature setting; he can't pull the magic tricks he was used to pulling in civilization with his easy talk and trendy humor; his progressive ideas and habits seem merely laughable in the rawness of the bush country. The Smales are captives of those who were once their captive, no matter how graciously they perceived the way they "kept" July in his servitude.

Gordimer continually goes deeper and deeper into the layers of Maureen Smales's "conscionable self-awareness." The impetus for seeing her shallowness is the fact that she is losing power, that the twisting, turning knife of power is now close to her throat and that she is at the mercy of the captor.

Gordimer spares no one. She doesn't stop with the progressive white liberals and their easy phrases, simple assumptions, and unchallenged thinking. She shows the corrupting effect of power on whoever holds that power—black or white. She probes behind the smiles and the glad handshake and the strings of euphemisms of all her characters. What lurks there? Of what are humans capable?

In her essay, "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer says that "Octavio Paz, speaking from Mexico . . . sees a fundamental function as social critic for a writer who is 'only a writer.' It is a responsibility that goes back to the source: the corpus of language from which the writer arises. 'Social criticism begins with grammar and the re-establishing of meanings.'"<sup>4</sup> Then, it follows that we must ask: What are the real meanings of words such as charity, love, democracy—words that are tossed about freely? What are the things we say and the things we don't do? What do we mean when we talk about our "fellow man" or our "neighbor?"

The third point in this consideration of responsibility is that, if you write to be read, you are answerable. "The creative act is not pure." According to Gordimer, a writer has laid upon her the responsibility for vari-

ous interpretations of the text; she is held before she begins by the claims of different concepts of morality: artistic, linguistic, ideological, national, political, religious. Second, the writer needs to learn that her creative act is not pure even while being formed in her brain. Responsibility surrounded her at birth: genetics, environment, social mores of whatever class she inhabited, and the economic terms given her.

What did your parents tell you was important? What pearls of wisdom were tossed to you when you were young? For the woman to be obedient to or coequal with the man? For the man to be the breadwinner at all costs? Did your parents tell you that the rich are a group of self-absorbed people who have no thought for those who have to sweat when they labor? Did they say that no one really understands an intellectual and that there is no audience for the truly superior mind? Did they insist that the unexamined life is not worth living or that life should not be examined under any circumstances?

What congenital burdens have been placed inside or upon you? What responsibilities do you have of which you are unaware? Maybe your idea of responsibility is unconscious or unknown to you. Maybe your sense of responsibility is a gut reaction to the things you've been taught and don't even realize you are bound to live by.

Gordimer was born in the political hotbed of South Africa to Jewish emigrants from London. She experienced a typical European middle-class colonial childhood, the solitude of which was relieved by extensive and eclectic reading at the local library. Gordimer appears to have settled into her political awareness slowly. In an interview with Carol Sternhell in *Ms.*, she said, "I think when you're born white in South Africa, you're peeling like an onion. You're sloughing off all the conditioning that you've had since you were a child."<sup>5</sup> For you, this raises the question often asked of North American writers: "Does writing have more social significance in wartorn countries where political drama is at the heart of much of its literature, such as in South Africa, the former Soviet Union, Iran, Vietnam, Taiwan, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, to name a few? Would you be a more essential writer if what was happening around you and what you wrote about was a matter of life and death? Dueling with national drama is an important reason to write, but what about the more subtle dramas which most of us face?

In democratic countries, there is (hopefully) little chance of being silenced by the government and sent into exile, but what about the idea

that you are an LDS writer who's supposed to be building the kingdom of God with your work? What kind of responsibility do you have as you face the blank page? There might be a narrowing of possibility before the creative process begins because of given perimeters, even though you hope you have a free and wide world to choose from—the world which God inhabits and where *everything* is sacred and worthy of the literary eye resting upon it.

Can you, as a writer who cares about Mormonism, come to discover your own essential gesture as a writer, and might it differ from another Latter-day Saint's essential gesture? Quoted by Gordimer, Roland Barthes says that a writer's "enterprise"—his work—is his "essential gesture as a social being."<sup>6</sup> How do you put out your hand to society at large? Do you reach out to the LDS society alone or does your essential gesture include a desire to build a bridge between cultures and explore the universals? Chaim Potok, author of *The Chosen*, once said in answer to your question from the audience about how to write the Great Mormon Novel: "Find the universals, those things common to all humans."<sup>7</sup>

Gordimer writes of political issues that spring from her South African culture, but her politics resonate with the universal. Her writing is not purely political, that is to say, written to drive a point home or promote an ideology. It is meant to examine, to probe, to unearth the disparities in her culture and in its politics. Purely political writing is often purely bad writing. But if a broader definition of politics is used, such as "the total complex of relations between people in society," then political writing can be a good thing. The difference between bad political writing and good political writing seems to be promotion versus exploration. The obvious question—though the term "religious writing" covers a broad spectrum of quality, depth, and subject matter—is: Is religious writing a form of political writing and worth considering from a political vantage point?

Italo Calvino writes in *The Uses of Literature* about two wrong ways of thinking of a possible political use for literature: (1) to claim that literature should voice a truth already possessed by politics, that is, to believe that the sum of political values is the primary thing to which literature must simply adapt itself, in other words, to claim that Maoist theory is the only valid cause about which Chinese writers can write; and (2) to see literature as an assortment of eternal human sentiments. This perspective assigns writing the task of confirming what is already known. Basically, literature is responsible for preserving the classical and immobile idea of liter-

ature as the repository of a given truth. Consider the African writer in South Africa, for instance, who is expected to represent the tribal cause in the guise of the noble revolutionary. What about the writer who chooses to look beyond that expected stance of nobility and ask questions?

Calvino then presents two right ways of thinking of a possible political use for literature: (1) Literature is necessary above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. It is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of ordinary language, an eye that can see beyond the color spectrum perceived in ordinary light; (2) Literature has the ability to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, and to create a model of values that is simultaneously aesthetic and ethical.<sup>8</sup>

After considering Calvino, you think maybe it's your responsibility to distrust politics, literature, and maybe even the way that your LDS heritage/theology is put together in your brain.

Further, if being a writer with an LDS background means that your writing should promote the building of the kingdom of God, does it also mean an unequivocal reverence for all things considered Mormon? How do you deal with difficult subjects such as homosexuality, pornography, infidelity, or sexual abuse without being seen as a traitor to the G-rated and harmonious life seen by this culture as synonymous with the kingdom of God? Does familiarity with or questioning of a suspicious subject automatically mean that a writer has fallen from the pure trajectory of white light?

You agree that you've accepted responsibilities given to you by your heritage, from your birthright, from your being in this world and rising out of your particular society. But even if you've been born into an LDS family, is there such a thing as an average LDS family? Your parents may have been devoted to Mormonism. Or your parents may have been divided over Mormonism. An example of this complexity is illustrated by a man you knew who always wanted to be a writer. He moved every year of his childhood and youth. He was forever the new kid in town. His first friend was always the librarian. He was a scrappy, sensitive, shy, intelligent kid. He always stood up for the underdog fiercely and sometimes to his detriment. He never finished college, and he always talked about how he would have done so much better if he had. The LDS Church gave his family some sense of continuity, even though his father vacillated between be-



ing a religious, stable family man and one who couldn't keep a job because of his love affair with alcohol. To write about Mormonism for this man, then, would be colored by the economic circumstances, the presence of a deeply conflicted father, the unreliable environment in which he found himself as a young boy. What would be the list of responsibilities he carried because of these circumstances? How would he, as a writer, find his essential gesture—the gift he had to give back to society?

How have you, as a writer, been colored by your circumstances? You may have grown up privileged in a homogenous neighborhood where everyone expected conformity from you and you were happy to supply it, at least on the surface. You may have grown up with no money and little hope for it and a burning desire to be seen for the splendor you wished-upon-a-star hoped you had—some kind of Queen Esther or Joan of Arc role model. You may have accepted every tenet from LDS doctrine peacefully and graciously with the hope of a rosy future. You may have challenged your parents' certainty about the "right way to live according to LDS standards." You may have seen your parents as putting you on a train on an infinite track with no windows or doors and, as a result, developed a fierce attachment to the right to question any and every thing.

But here you pause. You need to interrupt yourself to ask how much of what you write is a reaction to the situation that has surrounded you. Is your writing life about action or reaction? You may be a lamb in a flock relieved to have a shepherd or a stubborn bull in a pen, snorting and pawing the ground, running, when you run, in circles. You've made choices of your own; you've also accepted many norms. You think your responsibility may be to move away from definition and be willing to see those things that might shock you were someone else to pass you the news.

Rosa Burger, the main character in Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, is the daughter of Lionel Burger, the great white revolutionary for anti-apartheid in South Africa. She therefore inherits the cause at her birth. Rather than weddings or bar mitzvahs, her social life consists of events connected to the revolution. "What'd you celebrate in your house?" asks Conrad, the character who challenges Rosa's commitment to the cause. "The occasions were when somebody got off, not guilty, in a political trial. Those were your nuptials and fiestas."<sup>8</sup> The responsibility laid upon Rosa Burger at birth was not pure for her. She wasn't supposed to ask questions, yet she is left to agonize over her place in the machinery set in motion.

Maybe your responsibility is to see that the whole of who you think

you are may not be the whole of who you actually are. How do you find that conscionable self-awareness that sees clearly all facets of the crystal you call yourself? And then, how do you find your essential gesture, those things you have to give that no one else has to give, that view of the world, that glimpse, that angle?

Your essential gesture may include a sense of compassion for all ways of being. It may be a questioning of the establishment or an attachment to the idea of democracy that all humans are created equal and are growing to something finer than exists on this earth. You're aware, however, that this sensibility has been forged by your religion, your culture, your economic roots, your parents who had parents before them who may have been shaky citizens, proud pioneers or denizens of the deep. And sometimes you suspect you don't have anything called a self. You have that niggling feeling at the back of your mind that "I" is a grain of sand, a letter of the alphabet, a pronoun, an entity meant to surrender to the will of God and to follow the Essential Essence so much wiser than that of the puny self. That thought stays with you and is part of that wild bird seed mix that comes out in your writing.

All of this must be to ask yourself what responsibility you've taken on as a writer. What have you knowingly and unknowingly accepted? What is authentic to you, and for what do you care deeply? You want to use your gift of imagination. You hope it's possible to lift your experience from its limited boundaries and transform it into a unique bloom of perception.

And so you're writing what you're bidden to write, however you're bidden to do it. You are fascinated with the responsibility of being ruthlessly honest with yourself about why you are saying what you want to say and how you say it. Calvino's statement that literature and politics (and, you add, even religion) must above all know itself and distrust itself is of value to you: So you have an axe you want to grind; okay, grind the axe; but do you understand the whole of why you're grinding the axe? Are you writing mainly soothing phrases for the ears of your comrades-in-arms? Or do you want to go beyond and behind the obvious?

I suspect you want that raw encounter with God and pristine creativity. You want to ask the hard questions and look in all the corners. Then, when that's all said and done, you want to let loose your imagination to play in the fields and meadows and even in the middle of the mean

streets. This is what you think might be your responsibility for now, at this moment in time and maybe forever.

### Notes

1. I heard this quotation during a lecture entitled "Duende," delivered by William Smith at the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program Winter Residency, January 1998. I assume Cathal is the well-known Cathal and the Boys of the Lough, who perform all over the world in concert, but I heard only this name with the quotation. The Cathal I have in mind plays the penny whistle and fiddle and sings Irish folk songs with his band.

2. Nadine Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture," *The Essential Gesture*, edited and introduced by Stephen Clingman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 285.

3. Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 9.

4. Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 295.

5. Carol Sternhell, "Nadine Gordimer: Choosing to be a White African," *Ms. Magazine* 16, no. 3 (September 1987): 28.

6. Roland Barthes, quoted in Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 286.

7. Informal question and answer session in conjunction with Chaim Potok's appearance at Kingsbury Hall, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, September 29, 1982; the question was mine.

8. Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 97.

9. Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 52.