page 592 where I could no longer resist the urge to jump ahead to track a particular character. This was an American woman flyer, a member of the WASPS, whose story is a magnificent bit of women's history I knew nothing about.

In her "After Words" Piercy describes the ten years of research that went into the book. The novel chronicles a huge array of recorded wartime activities, working these imaginatively into the lives of her characters. This allows her to claim the license of fiction in her historical reconstructions; it also permits her to create at least four characters with unrealistically comprehensive perceptions of global events and motivations — an awareness available only to the student of world history, forty years after the events. This anachronistic authority creates some odd effects as she manoeuvres her people into all the most interesting spots of the war and has localized intelligence units comprehending the shape and purpose of chaotic events a continent away. But it also has the advantage of allowing her to depict such things as the cryptanalysis of fleet movements, the creation of American public policy and war profiteering, the industry of propaganda-making, and most horribly and graphically, the systematic destruction of European Jews.

This last element is the heart of the book and the creation of Jacqueline Lévy-Monet, Sorbonne student turned Jewish freedom fighter, is the book's triumph. Jacqueline's wartime development seems intended as a parallel to, and a commentary on, the development of Jewish consciousness during the same years. The brutal treatment of French Jews, her work in the French Resistance Army, and her incarceration in both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, force her to abandon her dreams of universal humanism in favour of armed combat and Zionist ideology. My summary here suggests that Piercy's novelistic motor is fuelled by ideas and I think this is not inaccurate. But her genius lies in her ability to wrest from these programatic ideas flesh-and-blood characters propelled by passionate energy for useful work, for intelligent discussion, for enlivening sexual relations, for positive communal living and even for (exquisitely described) food.

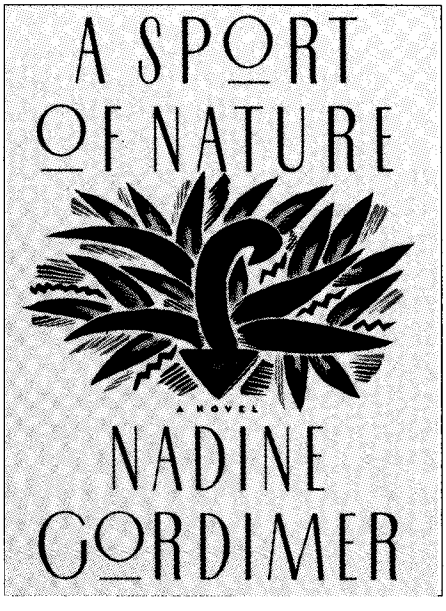
Whenever Piercy publishes a novel, reviewers set about belittling her accomplishment, usually on stylistic grounds. As Joanna Russ angrily noted in a recent letter in the *Women's Review of Books*, Piercy never receives unqualified praise; even the people who insist that she is one of her country's finest writers complain that she has never produced a satisfactory work. Like Russ I am impatient of the critical condescension. *Gone to Soldiers* is a remarkable achievement both formally and thematically. As in all her novels, she is here examining the nature of community and the mechanisms by which it coheres. Her formal structure insists that we note the interconnections among widely dispersed people, even those who never meet. But in this war novel she devises a new metaphor for community that she borrows from combat practice. This is the convoy of ships passing through alien waters, subject to relentless if random violence, the destiny of the oddly assorted and unevenly equipped ships depending entirely on their ability to move together. This image she expands in a description of the characters' emotional and familial lives, particularly those of the Jewish community which is at one point described as a "convoy, a mass, a herd of relationships." As Piercy eloquently demonstrates, in moments of extreme, usually arbitrary, danger one relinquishes naive notions of individuality for the greater human good of community. In Piercy's world, one is most alive in company, finding ways together, as Jacqueline would have it, to "be of use."

## A SPORT OF NATURE

Nadine Gordimer. New York: Viking, 1987.

### *Elspeth Heyworth and Marjorie Moulton*

A sport of nature is a plant or animal which "exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type." Hillela is the sport of nature in Gordimer's latest and longest novel, and the whole drama revolves around her. She is a beautiful girl but naively unaware of the reactions of those around her to her powerful presence: she is a Jewish White South African (with perhaps some Portuguese blood?) whose "spontaneous mutation" causes her to break the taboos of her tribe. She is expelled from her Rhodesian boarding school. She expels herself from the loving family of her aunt in Johannesburg for she cannot stay to embarrass and endanger them. After various other experiments she is abandoned by the friend she trusted and she becomes a "beach girl" in Tamarisk Beach. This is where the exiles from apartheid live and build together their threadbare, caring community.



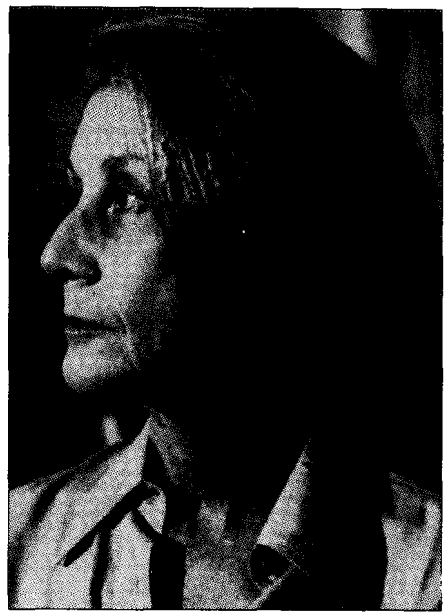

But as we are watching Hillela grow and mature, we are also seeing the many-sided life of Johannesburg: the rich who dare not know too much; those sympathetic to the black community who live in anxiety and fear; the warm family relationship of white boss and black servants; the prisons. We follow her into exile, to the countries that share South Africa's frontiers. Then to England and America, to Germany and Communist countries of Europe, and back again into Africa. As always, Gordimer brings delight into the narrative with her generous crowd of characters, interesting in themselves and vital to the development of Hillela's personality and to the history of Southern Africa being made before our very eyes.

Hillela's marriage to the black revolutionary is the centre, the pivot of her life, the cause which her fine intelligence serves, bringing her fulfillment and joy and tragedy.

The drama is over but there is still half the book to read. It is easy to think of the novel as two volumes. The second loses

the bright beauty of the first. Yet we are still beguiled by the charm of the heroine and fascinated by the atmosphere of a new country coming to birth. The storyteller becomes the historical novelist; and then she takes to herself the mantle of prophecy in the unexpected end.

This is a most ambitious book, not content to simply describe the characters and political climate, but with a Shakespearean depth and breadth. One theme is that there are no individual solutions in the complexity of the South African situation and Hillela personifies a detachment resulting from this perspective. None of the other characters really knows her, nor are we allowed to as readers. At times it seems that Gordimer is giving her a very powerful role as a woman who can use her femininity and her unusual gifts to make major change in a blatantly discriminatory society. But the detachment and independence of this central character lose our involvement and ultimately become the



weakness of the book: we don't care as much as we want to or as Gordimer wants us to. Hillela is too much of an "abnormal variation" for us to identify with her on either feminist or political terms.

The style of writing also makes it a difficult book to read — sentences need to be re-read to make sense, it is frequently necessary to return and trace through passages to understand situations. Unlike her short stories or *Burgher's Daughter*, we are not caught up immediately with the flow. Nevertheless, all of Gordimer's writing has a strong sense of metaphor, of a deeper portentous meaning. A half-sentence, the giving of a name, the brilliant small happening are clues to what is to come, seeds to bear their fruit later — symbols. And in the end, the strongest symbol of all is the handclasp of love and trust: of man with woman; of black with white.

*This review became a joint and trans-Atlantic project of Elspeth Heyworth and her eighty-four year-old mother Marjorie Moulton.*

## FLIGHT AGAINST TIME

Emily Nasrallah (Issa J. Boullata, trans.). Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1987.

### *Rebecca Leaman*

Emily Nasrallah, one of the international guest authors present at the Calgary Olympics in February 1988, draws on devastating personal experience and a real understanding of human nature in *Flight Against Time*, the first of her thirteen books to appear in English translation. A native of the small village of Kfeir in South Lebanon, she was educated in Beirut, where she raised a family and established a reputation as one of her country's finest writers of fiction. Her home was completely destroyed by the war in 1982. According to *Ragweed*: "When asked why she stayed in such a strife-torn country, she replied that, as a writer, she felt compelled to document the ... effects of constant war, particularly on women and children."

*Flight Against Time* is eloquent testimony. It is not a novel of war; rather, it is the intensely moving story of family ties strained by the absence of peace physical, political, and deeply personal. Nasrallah's prose, in this sensitive translation, retains the flavour and rhythms of its origins. Despite the often emphatic symbolism ("he saw the dove abandon gentleness and turn into a hawk which ... killed residents rooted in the earth like the olive trees"), there is a certain delicacy, an honesty in the evocation of strong emotion which effectively defuses sentimentality.

The novel follows Radwan, an old man who is persuaded to leave his village in Lebanon to visit, with his wife, their children and unknown grandchildren in Canada. Little educated and less travelled, Radwan is at first slightly comic, childlike in his confusion in the city, the airport. Through his struggle to reach an understanding of North America and the new life-style of his children, the immigrant experience is described with humour and compassion. Radwan emerges as a homespun philosopher, human and intuitive, with whom the reader is eager to sympathize. "For the first time he began to see an aspect of the truth he feared and escaped from every time someone discussed the future.... An alien land will always remain alien."

Appropriate to their culture, Radwan is more vocal than his wife, Raya; his thoughts are more fully articulated. Yet Raya, in her near silence, is somehow as believable and as complex a character. She is drawn with finer lines. The reader senses that she has a core of strength which sustains her, a faith in her grown children and their happiness, their safety and prosperity. Her perception of tradition is of a home made the stable centre of an inevitably and terribly, incomprehensibly, changing world. No faceless mother figure, she is an individual torn between loyalty to Radwan and her unspoken longing for peace wherever it is found.

The long-ago courtship and marriage of the old couple, relived in memory, seems — as indeed it is — of a different life. The contrast is almost, but never quite, overstated; it runs constantly beneath the surface of the more immediate conflicts and through Radwan's thoughts: "There, in his warm village, he felt he could stretch out his hand and hold the vineyard, the garden and the wheat fields in his palm. He could grasp the vast distances between one footstep and the next. In Canada who knew where these plains stretched? Who took care of them?"

His essential need is for the homeland that exists in those memories. The acceptance of reality is reluctant, painful, slow. "Why, man," he berates himself, "are you trying to avoid the facts? You saw them before you left, at the airport, at the airline office — long lines of young men forced to flee, to escape. You also saw them standing at the road blocks, with weapons in their hands and fire in their