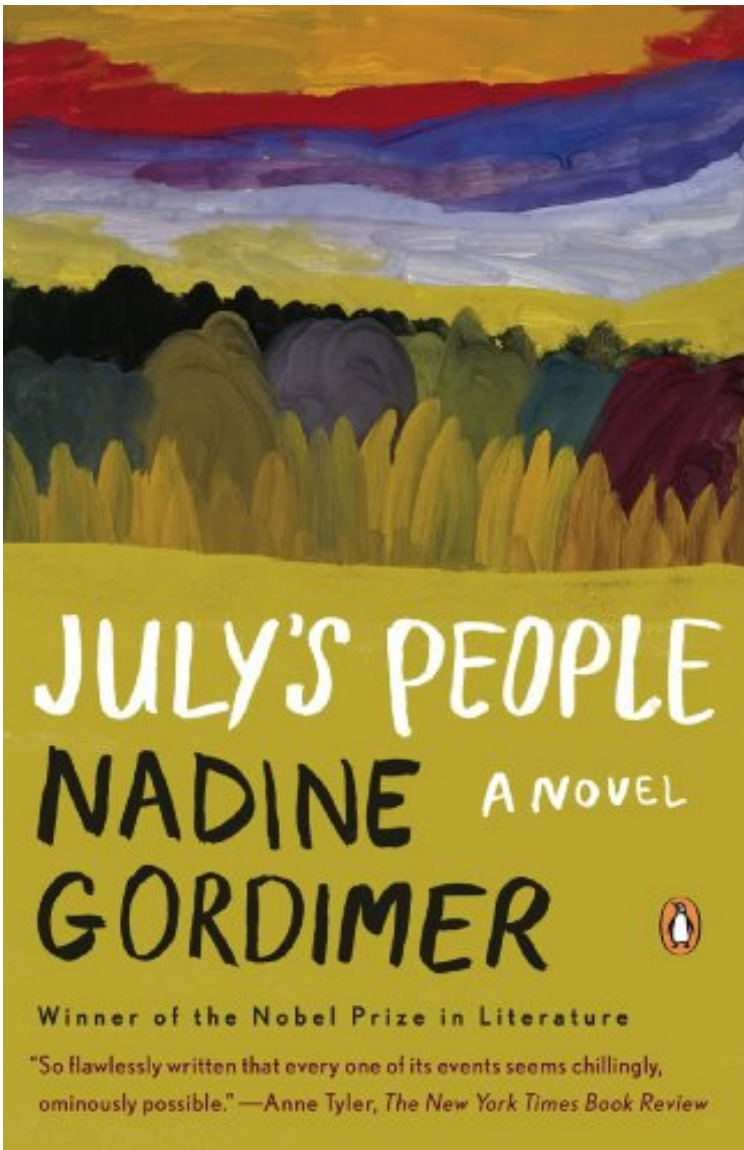


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July's People



Par Nadine Gordimer
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA startling, imaginative novel from the winner of the Nobel Prize in LiteratureFor years, it had been what is called a deteriorating situation. Now all over South Africa the cities are battlegrounds. The members of the Smales familyliberal whitesare rescued from the terror by their servant, July, who leads them to refuge in his village. What happens to the Smaleses and to Julythe shifts in character and relationships gives us an unforgettable look into the terrifying, tacit understandings and misunderstandings between blacks and whites.So flawlessly written that every one of its events seems chillingly, ominously possible.Anne Tyler,The New York Times Book ExtraitYou like to have some cup of tea?July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind.The

knock on the door. Seven o'clock. In governors residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses company bungalows, master bedrooms en suite the tea-tray in black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap. The knock on the door, an aperture in thick mud walls, and the sack that hung over it looped back for air, sometime during the short night. Bam, Im stifling; her voice raising him from the dead, he staggering up from his exhausted sleep. No knock; but July, their servant, their host, bringing two pink glass cups of tea and a small tin of condensed milk, jaggedly-opened, specially for them, with a spoon in it. No milk for me. Or me, thanks. The black man looked over to the three sleeping children bedded-down on seats taken from the vehicle. He smiled confirmation: They all right. Yes, all right. As he dipped out under the doorway: Thank you, July, thank you very much. She had slept in round mud huts roofed in thatch like this before. In the Kruger Park, a child of the shift boss and his family on leave, an enamel basin and ewer among their supplies of orange squash and biscuits on the table coming clear as this morning light came. Rondavels adapted by Bams ancestors on his Boer side from the huts of the blacks. They were a rusticism true to the continent; before air-conditioning, everyone praised the natural insulation of thatch against heat. Rondavels had concrete floors, thickly shined with red polish, veined with trails of coarse ants; in Botswana with Bam and his guns and hunters supply of red wine. This one was the prototype from which all the others had come and to which all returned: below her, beneath the iron bed on whose rusty springs they had spread the vehicles tarpaulin, a stamped mud and dung floor, above her, cobwebs stringy with dirt dangling from the rough wattle steeple that supported the frayed grey thatch. Stalks of light poked through. A rim of shady light where the mud walls did not meet the eaves; nests glued there, of a brighter-coloured mudwasps, or bats. A thick lip of light round the doorway; a bald fowl entered with chicks cheeping, the faintest sound in the world. Its gentleness, ordinariness produced sudden, total disbelief. Maureen and Bam Smales. Bamford Smales, Smales, Caprano Partners, Architects. Maureen Hetherington from Western Areas Gold Mines. Under 10s Silver Cup for Classical and Mime at the Johannesburg Eisteddfod. She closed her eyes again and the lurching motion of the vehicle swung in her head as the swell of the sea makes the land heave underfoot when the passenger steps ashore after a voyage. She fell asleep as, first sensorily dislocated by the assault of the vehicles motion, then broken in and contained by its a-rhythm, she had slept from time to time in the three days and nights hidden on the floor of the vehicle. People in delirium rise and sink, rise and sink, in and out of lucidity. The swaying, shuddering, thudding, flinging stops, and the furniture of life falls into place. The vehicle was the fever. Chattering metal and raving dance of loose bolts in the smell of the childrens car-sick. She rose from it for gradually longer and longer intervals. At first what fell into place was what was vanished, the past. In the dimness and traced brightness of a tribal hut the equilibrium she regained was that of the room in the shift bosses house on mine property she had had to herself once her elder sister went to boarding-school. Picking them up one by one, she went over the objects of her collection on the bookshelf, the miniature brass coffee-pot and tray, the four bone elephants, one with a broken trunk, the khaki pottery bulldog with the Union Jack painted on his back. A lavender-bag trimmed with velvet forget-me-nots hung from the upright hinge of the adjustable mirror of the dressing-table, cut out against the window whose light was meshed by minute squares of the wire flyscreen, clogged with mine dust and dead gnats. The dented silver stopper of a cut-glass scent bottle was cemented to the glass neck by layers and years of dried Silvo polish. Her school shoes, cleaned by Our Jim (the shift bosses name was Jim, too, and so her mother talked of her husband as My Jim and the house servant as Our Jim), were outside the door. A rabbit with a brown patch like a birthmark over one eye and ear was waiting in his garden hutch to be fed. As if the vehicle had made a journey so far beyond the norm of a present it divided its passengers from that the master bedroom en suite had been lost, jolted out of chronology as the room where her returning consciousness properly belonged: the room that she had left four days ago. The shapes of pigs passed the doorway and there were calls in one of the languages she had never understood. Once, she knew she always knew her husband was awake although still breathing stertorously as a drunk. She heard herself speak. Where is it? She was seeing, feeling herself contained by the vehicle. He said hide it in the bush. Another time she heard something between a rustling and a gnawing. What? Whats that? He didnt answer. He had driven most of the time, for three days and three nights. If no longer asleep, stunned by the need of sleep. She slowly began to inhabit the hut around her, empty except for the iron bed, the children asleep on the vehicle seats the other objects of the place belonged to another category: nothing but a stiff rolled-up cowhide, a hoe on a nail, a small pile of rags and part of a broken Primus stove, left against the wall. The hen and chickens were moving there; but the slight sound she heard did not come from them. There would be mice and rats. Flies wandered the air and found the eyes and mouths of her children, probably still smelling of vomit, dirty, sleeping, safe. The vehicle

was a bakkie, a small truck with a three-litre engine, fourteen-inch wheels with heavy-duty ten-ply tyres, and a sturdy standard chassis on which the buyer fits a fibreglass canopy with windows, air-vents and foam-padded benches running along either side, behind the cab. It makes a cheap car-cum-caravan for white families, generally Afrikaners, and their half-brother coloureds who can't afford both. For more affluent white South Africans, it is a second, sporting vehicle for purposes to which a town car is not suited. It was yellow. Bam Smales treated himself to it on his fortieth birthday, to use as a shooting-brake. He went trap-shooting to keep his eye in, out of season, and when winter came spent his weekends in the bush, within a radius of two hundred kilometres of his offices and home in the city, shooting guinea-fowl, red-legged partridge, wild duck and spur-wing geese. Before the children were born, he had taken his wife on hunting trips farther afield to Botswana, and once, before the Portuguese regime was overthrown, to Moambique. He would no sooner shoot a buck than a man; and he did not keep any revolver under his pillow to defend his wife, his children or his property in their suburban house. The vehicle was bought for pleasure, as some women are said to be made for pleasure. His wife pulled the face of tasting something that set her teeth on edge, when he brought it home. But he defended the dyed-blond jauntiness; yellow was cheerful, it repelled heat. They stood round it indulgently, wife and family, the children excited, as it seemed nothing else could excite them, by a new possession. Nothing made them so happy as buying things; they had no interest in feeding rabbits. She had smiled at him the way she did when he spurred ahead of her and did what he wanted; a glimpse of the self that does not survive coupling. Anything will spot you a mile off, in the bush. In various and different circumstances certain objects and individuals are going to turn out to be vital. The wager of survival cannot, by its nature, reveal which, in advance of events. How was one to know? Civil Emergency Planning Services will not provide. (In 76, after the Soweto Riots, pharmaceutical firms brought out a government-approved line in First Aid boxes.) The circumstances are incalculable in the manner in which they come about, even if apocalyptically or politically foreseen, and the identity of the vital individuals and objects is hidden by their humble or frivolous role in an habitual set of circumstances. It began prosaically weirdly. The strikes of 1980 had dragged on, one inspired or brought about by solidarity with another until the walkout and the shut-down were lived with as contiguous and continuous phenomena rather than industrial chaos. While the government continued to compose concessions to the black trade unions exquisitely worded to conceal exactly concomitant restrictions, the black workers concerned went hungry, angry, and workless anyway, and the shop-floor was often all that was left of burned-out factories. For a long time, no one had really known what was happening outside the area to which his own eyes were witness. Riots, arson, occupation of the headquarters of international corporations, bombs in public buildings, the censorship of newspapers, radio and television left rumour and word-of-mouth as the only sources of information about this chronic state of uprising all over the country. At home, after weeks of rioting out of sight in Soweto, a march on Johannesburg of (variously estimated) fifteen thousand blacks had been stopped at the edge of the business centre at the cost of a (variously estimated) number of lives, black and white. The bank accountant for whom Bam had designed a house tipped off that if the situation in the city showed no signs of being contained (his phrase) the banks would have to declare a moratorium. So Bam, in a state of detached disbelief at his action, taking along a moulded plastic-foam box that had once held a Japanese hi-fi system, withdrew five thousand rands in notes and Maureen gave the requisite twenty-four hours notice for withdrawal from her savings account and cleared it, one thousand seven hundred and fifty-six rands in notes which, secured by rubber bands, she carried home without incident in a woven grass shopping bag with Bam's suit from the dry cleaner folded ostentatiously on top. And then the banks did not close. The blacks were held back (they were temporarily short of ammunition and they had long since given up the heroism of meeting bullets with sticks and stones) by the citizen force strengthened by white Rhodesian immigrants, some former Selous Scouts, accustomed to this sort of fighting, and the arrival of a plane-load of white mercenaries flown in from Bangui, Zaire, Uganda wherever it was they had been propping up the current Amin, Bokassa and Mobutu. The children stayed home from school but played wildly at street-fighting in the peaceful garden. The liquor store suddenly delivered wine and beer ordered weeks before, two black men in overalls embroidered with the legend of a brand of cane spirit carrying the cases into the kitchen and exchanging time-of-day jokingly with the servants. For the twentieth, the hundredth time, since the pass-burnings of the Fifties, since Sharpeville, since Soweto 76, since Elsie's River 1980, it seemed that all was quietening down again. First the Smales had given the time left as ten years, then another five years, then as perhaps projected, shifted away into their children's time. They yearned for there to be no time left at all, while there still was. They sickened at the appalling thought that they might find

they had lived out their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent. They joined political parties and contact groups in willingness to slough privilege it was supposed to be their white dog nature to guard with Mirages and tanks; they were not believed. They had thought of leaving, then, while they were young enough to cast off the blacks rejection as well as white privilege, to make a life in another country. They had stayed; and told each other and everyone else that this and nowhere else was home, while

knowing, as time left went by, the reason had become they couldnt get their money outBams growing savings and investments, Maureens little legacy of De Beers shares her maternal grandfather had left her, the house there was less and less opportunity of selling as city riots became a part of life. Once again, for the hundred-and-first time, thousands of blacks were imprisoned, broken glass was swept up, cut telephone lines were reconnected, radio and television assured that control was re-established. The husband and wife felt it was idiotic to have that money hidden in the house; they were about to put it back in the bank againWhen it all happened, there were the transformations of myth or religious parable. The bank accountant had been the legendary warning horn bill of African folk-tales, its flitting cries ignored at peril. The yellow bakkie that was bought for fun turned out to be the vehicle: that which bore them away from the gunned shopping malls and the blazing, unsold houses of a depressed market, from the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday-morning garb of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those trying to take off from Jan Smuts Airport. The cook-nanny, Nora, ran away. The decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in 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 sleep with him in his roomhe turned out to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, saviour, July.He brought a zinc bath big enough for the children to sit in, one by one, and on his head, paraffin tins of water heated on one of the cooking-fires.

She washed the children, then herself in their dirty water; for the first time in her life she found that she smelled bad between her legs, andsending the children out and dropping the sack over the doorwaydisgustedly scrubbed at the smooth lining of her vagina and the unseen knot of her anus in the scum and suds. Her husband took a chance and washed in the riverall these East-flowing rivers carried the risk of bilharzia infection.July came back and forth with porridge, boiled wild spinach, and even a pawpaw, hard and greenthe familys custom of finishing a meal with fruit ritualistically observed, somehow, by one so long habituated to them. No uniform here (he wore an illegibly faded T-shirt and dusty trousers, clothes he left to come back to on his two-yearly leave), but he went in and out the hut with the bearing he had had for fifteen years in their home; of service, not servile, understanding their needs and likings, allying himself discreetly with their standards and even the disciplining and indulgence of the children.Well cook for ourselves, July.

We must make our own fire. The guest protesting at giving trouble; he and she caught the echo of those visitors who came to stay in her house and tipped him when they left.He had brought wood for Bam, but was back again at dusk. He didnt trust them to look after themselves. You want I make small fire now? He was carrying a Golden Syrup tin full of milk. There was a little boy with him; earlier in the day he had chased curious black children away. This my third-born, nearly same time like Victor. Victor hes twenty-one January, isnt it? This one hes Christmas Day.The white children had seen the servants photograph of his children, in his wallet along with his pass-book, back there. They looked at the black child as at an impostor.Is from the goat, this milk we drink, I dont know if Gina shes going like it. Always Gina little bit fussy. Madam, you can boil it He screwed up one eye and his mouth drew down the sides of his moustache, advising caution, most delicately acknowledging some lack of hygiene, if he were to compare the goat, the syrup tin, with the sterilized bottles from which he would take milk out of the refrigerator, back there.The vehicle was moved from the bush, at night, to a group of abandoned huts within sight of but removed from those of Julys family. Bam did not use the headlights and was guided by July moving along in the dark ahead of him, as he had been for certain stretches of the journey. That way they had avoided both patrols and roving bands. Julys knowledge or instinct that in country dorps the black petrol attendants often live in sheds behind the garage-and-general-store complexon that they had kept going, on and on, although they had left with only enough fuel to take them less than halfway. He asked for notes from the plastic-foam box and, every time, came back with petrol, water, food. It was a miracle; it was all a miracle: and one ought to have known, from the sufferings of saints, that miracles are horror. How that load of human beings with the haphazard few possessions there was time to take along (the bag of oranges Maureen had run back to fetch from the kitchen, the radio Bam remembered so that they could hear what was happening behind them as they fled) could hope to arrive at the destination placed before themthat was an impossibility from minute to

minute. We can go to my home. July said it, standing in the living-room where he had never sat down, as he would say We can buy little bit paraffin when there was a stain to be removed from the floor. That he should have been the one to decide what they should do, that their helplessness, in their own house, should have made it clear to him that he must do this the sheer unlikeliness was the logic of their position. There was nothing else to do but the impossible, now they had stayed too long. They put their children into the vehicle, covered them with a tarpaulin under which Maureen crawled, and drove. How the vehicle hadn't broken down, urged across the veld and mealie-fields, ground-nut fields, into dongas and through sluices whose stones were deep under the table of summer rains; how they had found their way, not daring to use the roads, taking three days and nights for a journey that could be done in a days hard driving under normal conditions but that was July, July knew the whole six hundred kilometres, had walked it, making a fire to keep the lions away at night where his path bordered and even passed through the Kruger Park, the first time he came to the city to look for work. The vehicle was driven right within the encirclement of a roofless hut.

Red as an anthill, thick clay walls had washed down to rejoin the earth here and there, and scrubby trees pushed through them like limbs of plumbing exposed in a half-demolished building. The vehicle flattened the tall weeds of the floor and a roof of foliage, thorn and parasitic creepers hid the yellow paint. From the doorway of the hut they had been given she could make out the vehicle. Or thought she could; knew it was there. There was still a plastic demijohn of tap-water taken from the last dorp, hidden in it. She went secretly, observed from afar by whispering black children, to fetch rations for her children to drink. Within the hot metal that boomed hollowly where her weight buckled it, the vehicle was a deserted house re-entered. Trapped flies lay droning into unconsciousness on their backs. It was as if she had walked into that other abandoned house. You won't see it from the air. They had watched two planes flying over, although at a great height. Bam was satisfied the vehicle would not draw a stray bomb shot by some aircraft from the black army's bases in Moambique that might reconnoitre the bush and find a suspicious sign of white paramilitary presence in an area where even a broken-down car was a rarity. July's home was not a village but a habitation of mud houses occupied only by members of his extended family. There was the risk that if, as he seemed to assume, he could reconcile them to the strange presence of whites in their midst and keep their mouths shut, he could not prevent other people, living scattered round about, who knew the look of every thorn-bush, from discovering there were thorn-bushes that overgrew a white man's car, and passing on that information to any black army patrol. If not acting upon it themselves? July broke into snickering embarrassment at her ignorance of a kind of authority not understood by her; and anyway, he had told them everybody about the vehicle. Told them what? She was confident of his wily good sense; he had worked for her for years. Often Bam couldn't follow his broken English, but he and she understood each other well. I tell them you give it to me. Bam blew laughter. Who'll believe that. They know, they know what it is happening, the trouble in town. The white people are chased away from their houses and we take. Everybody is like that, isn't it? *Revue de presse* So flawlessly written that every one of its events seems chillingly, ominously possible. Anne Tyler, *The New York Times Book Review* Gordimer knows this complex emotional and political territory all too well and writes about it superbly. *Newsweek* Gordimer's art has achieved and sustained a rare beauty. Her prose has a density and sparsity that one finds in the greatest writers. *The New Leader* Nadine Gordimer writes more knowingly about South Africa than anyone else. *The New York Times*