

# **Nobel Lecture by Abdulrazak Gurnah**

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2021



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## Writing

Writing has always been a pleasure. Even as a boy at school I looked forward to the class set aside for writing a story, or whatever our teachers thought would interest us, more than to any other class on the timetable. Then everyone would fall silent, leaning over their desks to retrieve something worth reporting from memory and imagination. In these youthful efforts, there was no desire to say something in particular, to recall a memorable experience, to express a strongly-held opinion or to air a grievance. Nor did these efforts require any other reader than the teacher who prompted them as an exercise in improving our discursive skills. I wrote because I was instructed to write, and because I found such pleasure in the exercise.

Years later, when I was myself a school teacher, I was to have this experience in reverse, when I would sit in a silent classroom while the pupils bent over their work. It reminded me of a poem by D.H. Lawrence which I will now quote a few lines from:

Lines from 'The Best of School'

As I sit on the shores of the class, alone,  
Watch the boys in their summer blouses  
As they write, their round heads busily bowed:  
And one after another rouses  
His face to look at me,  
To ponder very quietly,  
As seeing, he does not see.

And then he turns again, with a little, glad  
Thrill of his work he turns again from me,  
Having found what he wanted, having got what was to be had.

The writing class I was speaking of and which this poem recalls, was not writing as it would come to seem later. It was not driven, directed, worked over, re-organised endlessly. In these youthful efforts I wrote in a straight line, so to speak, without much hesitation or correction, with such innocence. I also read with a kind of abandon, similarly without any direction, and I did not know at the time how closely connected these activities were. Sometimes, when it was not necessary to wake up

early for school, I read so late into the night that my father, who was something of an insomniac himself, was forced to come to my room and order me to switch off the light. You could not say to him, even if you dared, that he was still awake and why should you not be, because that was not how you spoke to your father. In any case, he did his insomnia in the dark, with the light switched off so as not to disturb my mother, so the instruction to switch off the light would still have stood.

The writing and reading that came later was orderly compared to the haphazard experience of youth, but it never ceased to be a pleasure and was hardly ever a struggle. Gradually, though, it became a different kind of pleasure. I did not realise this fully until I went to live in England. It was there, in my home-sickness and amidst the anguish of a stranger's life, that I began to reflect on so much that I had not considered before. It was out of that period, that prolonged period of poverty and alienation, that I began to do a different kind of writing. It became clearer to me that there was something I needed to say, that there was a task to be done, regrets and grievances to be drawn out and considered.

In the first instance, I reflected on what I had left behind in the reckless flight from my home. A profound chaos descended on our lives in the mid-1960s, whose rights and wrongs were obscured by the brutalities that accompanied the changes brought about by the revolution in 1964: detentions, executions, expulsions, and endless small and large indignities and oppressions. In the midst of these events and with the mind of an adolescent, it was impossible to think clearly about the historical and future implications of what was happening.

It was only in the early years that I lived in England that I was able to reflect on such issues, to dwell on the ugliness of what we were capable of inflicting on each other, to revisit the lies and delusions with which we had comforted ourselves. Our histories were partial, silent about many cruelties. Our politics was racialised, and led directly to the persecutions that followed the revolution, when fathers were slaughtered in front of their children and daughters were assaulted in front of their mothers. Living in England, far away from these events yet deeply troubled by them in my mind, it may have been that I was less able to resist the power of such memories than if I had been among people who were still living their consequences. But I was also troubled by other memories that were unrelated to these events: cruelties parents inflicted on their children, the way people were denied full expression because of social or gender dogma, the inequalities that tolerated poverty

and dependence. These are matters present in all human life and are not exceptional to us, but they are not always on your mind until circumstances require you to be aware of them. I suspect this is one of the burdens of people who have fled from a trauma and find themselves living safely, away from those left behind. Eventually I began to write about some of these reflections, not in an orderly or organised way, not yet, just for the relief of clarifying a little some of the confusions and uncertainties in my mind.

In time, though, it became clear that something deeply unsettling was taking place. A new, simpler history was being constructed, transforming and even obliterating what had happened, re-structuring it to suit the verities of the moment. This new and simpler history was not only the inevitable work of the victors, who are always at liberty to construct a narrative of their choice, but it also suited commentators and scholars and even writers who had no real interest in us, or were viewing us through a frame that agreed with their view of the world, and who required a familiar narrative of racial emancipation and progress.

It became necessary then to refuse such a history, one that disregarded the material objects that testified to an earlier time, the buildings, the achievements and the tendernesses that had made life possible. Many years later, I walked through the streets of the town I grew up in and saw the degradation of things and places and people, who live on grizzled and toothless and in fear of losing the memory of the past. It became necessary to make an effort to preserve that memory, to write about what was there, to retrieve the moments and the stories people lived by and through which they understood themselves. It was necessary to write of the persecutions and cruelties which the self-congratulations of our rulers sought to wipe from our memory.

There was also another understanding of history necessary to address, one that became clearer to me when I lived closer to its source in England, clearer than it had been while I was going through my colonised education in Zanzibar. We were, those of our generation, children of colonialism in a way that our parents were not and nor were those who came after us, or at least not in the same way. By that I don't mean that we were alienated from the things our parents valued or that those who came after us were liberated from colonial influence. I mean that we grew up and were educated in that period of high imperial confidence, at least in our parts of the world, when domination disguised its real self in euphemisms and we agreed to the

subterfuge. I refer to the period before decolonisation campaigns across the region hit their stride and drew our attention to the depredations of colonial rule. Those who came after us had their post-colonial disappointments and their own self-delusions to comfort them, and perhaps did not see clearly, or in great enough depth, the way in which the colonial encounter had transformed our lives, that our corruptions and misrule were in some measure also part of that colonial legacy.

Some of these matters became clearer to me in England, not because I encountered people who clarified them to me in conversation or in the classroom, but because I gained a better understanding of how someone like me figured in some of their stories of themselves, both in their writing and in casual discourse, in the hilarity that greeted racist jokes on the TV and elsewhere, in the unforced hostility I met in everyday encounters in shops, in offices, on the bus. I could not do anything about that reception, but just as I learned to read with greater understanding, so a desire grew to write in refusal of the self-assured summaries of people who despised and belittled us.

But writing cannot be just about battling and polemics, however invigorating and comforting that can be. Writing is not about one thing, not about this issue or that, or this concern or another, and since its concern is human life in one way or another, sooner or later cruelty and love and weakness become its subject. I believe that writing also has to show what can be otherwise, what it is that the hard domineering eye cannot see, what makes people, apparently small in stature, feel assured in themselves regardless of the disdain of others. So I found it necessary to write about that as well, and to do so truthfully, so that both the ugliness and the virtue come through, and the human being appears out of the simplification and stereotype. When that works, a kind of beauty comes out of it.

And that way of looking makes room for frailty and weakness, for tenderness amid cruelty, and for a capacity for kindness in unlooked for sources. It is for these reasons that writing has been for me a worthwhile and absorbing part of my life. There are other parts, of course, but they are not our concern on this occasion. A little miraculously, that youthful pleasure in writing that I spoke of at the beginning is still there after all the decades.

Let me end by expressing my deepest gratitude to the Swedish Academy for bestowing this great honour on me and on my work. I am very grateful.





*The premises of the Swedish Academy are in the Exchange (Börshuset), in Stortorget in the Old Town in Stockholm. The building was erected between 1767 and 1778. The ground floor was intended for the Stockholm Stock Exchange and the upper floor for the burgesses of Stockholm. From the 1860s the Grand Hall served as the council chamber for the City aldermen.*

*It is in the Grand Hall that the Academy has always held its Annual Grand Ceremony, but finding premises for the daily work and the weekly meetings has at times caused problems. Not until 1914 was a solution found. A donation made it possible for the Academy to acquire the right to use the upper floor of the Exchange (including the Grand Hall) and its attic in perpetuity. It did not finally move in, however, until 1921, when Stockholm's new Town Hall had been completed.*