



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



THE ALPHABET OF HOPE



W R I T E R S F O R L I T E R A C Y

NADINE GORDIMER



Nadine Gordimer was born and lives in South Africa. She is the author of fourteen novels, numerous short story collections and works of non-fiction. Three of her books were banned in South Africa during the Apartheid regime. She has received numerous awards, culminating in the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1991. She is a Goodwill Ambassador of UNDP. She recently edited an anthology of stories featuring twenty-one international authors, all profits in aid of HIV/AIDS victims, now published in fifteen languages worldwide.

The image and the word

In the beginning was the Word. The Word that was Creation. Its transformation into the written word came to us when it was first scratched as a hieroglyph or ideogram on a stone or traced on papyrus, and when it travelled from parchment to print in Gutenberg. That was the next genesis: of literacy. It was and is the miraculous ability that humans alone possess within the miracle of creation. (We have devised the means to take to the air.)

Our new millennium, stated as dedicated to defining and upholding human rights, surely should list literacy as an inalienable one?

Yet UNESCO reports that nearly 800 million adults in our era cannot read or write and more than a 100 million children do not go to school, deprived of their rightful heritage, literacy. In South Africa, where I write these words, illiteracy is almost 50% in certain rural areas.

What are the reasons, world-wide or nearer wherever one's home may be? Poverty and lack of educational facilities are the obvious ones in poor and developing countries. The disastrous economic effect is seen from the humble levels – at an automobile assembly plant in South Africa, research found that many workers on the line could follow only spoken orders, unable to read any written notification. At the level of higher education for the professions, universities are faced with the problem of students ostensibly qualified for entry who do not have the vocabulary or skilled use of the written word necessarily assumed for university courses. The shortage of suitably competent candidates for positions essential in development of governance, social services, industry and commerce, is thus evident. President Mbeki recently said that in order to serve the needs of South Africa's fast-growing economy – the leading one on the African continent in terms of resources and infrastructure – he believes we shall have to import qualified individuals from other countries to fill the vacancies while assisting to raise the capabilities of South Africans to fulfill such positions, particularly in industry. An upgraded version of the adage, each-one-teach-one.

But we come back to the absolute. It shouldn't need to be stated, but has to be, it seems. Literacy is the basis of all learning. Even if one goes on to the differently profound numero-ideogrammatic knowledges of science.

And on the way back to the source that is the written word we arrive at a presently prevalent intermediate condition of literacy: semi-literacy. This is no doubt exacerbated in multilingual countries where as a result of long colonisation a foreign language became and

remains a lingua franca, the second language, not the mother tongue, the natal Word of the inhabitant. One would accept that you are unlikely to be able to read and write the lingua franca as confidently, precisely, as, once master of the alphabet, you surely could read and write your own. But a distinguished writer and academic, Professor Es'kia Mphahlele, tells me that black South Africans emerge from their schooling semi-literate in the reading and writing of their own mother tongues just as white South Africans and those of other ethno-linguistic backgrounds are semi-literate in theirs. To be able to read the legend on a billboard and the bubble-enclosed dialogue of Spacemen in a comic book, while unable to understand the vocabulary of a poem or follow in prose literature the meaningful variations of syntax, the use of words in ways that open up new depths of self-comprehension – that is not literacy. It is not what every individual should have by human right.

The developing countries, although with more reasons for producing only the half-way to literacy, are not alone in this cultural state. Colleges in the USA report the same result of their educational system, reflection of current cultural values of their society. In Britain there is the same dismay at young men and women, born and educated in the country of the birth of the English language, who cannot read or write using the great resources of their mother tongue.

So while poverty and lack of educational opportunity are responsible for the great void in our world that is illiteracy, this tragic situation is not the prime cause, let alone the justification for the widespread phenomenon of semi-literacy.

The fact is that we are conjoined, all countries long developed or struggling to develop across the abyss between rich nations and poor, under threat of the Image against the Written Word. From the first third of the 20th Century the image has been challenging the power of the written word as the stimulation of the imagination, the opening of human receptivity. The bedtime story of middleclass childhood has been replaced by the hour in front of the TV screen; in shack settlements all over the poor countries of the globe the TV aerial signifies the battery-run screen where no book is to be found. School and community libraries don't exist in villages and towns where video cassettes are for hire. Yes, TV images are accompanied by the spoken word, sometimes by text, but it is the picture that decides how secondary the Word's role shall be.

The American writer William Gass defines best the Written Word, in its home, the book: 'We shall not understand what a book is, and why a book has the value many persons have... if we forget how important to it is its body, the building that has been built to hold

its lines of language safely together... Words on a screen have virtual qualities, to be sure... but they have no materiality, they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they'll be gone. Off the screen they do not exist as words. They do not wait to be reseen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit.'

Yes, the Image of text, of the Word, disappears off the screen; to recall it, along with the other visuals, you have to have an apparatus, a cell, a battery, access to an electric power connection. The book needs none of these. Simply held in the hand it can be read, turned to again and again, on a bus, in the subway, in the bath, on a mountain top, in a queue.

This is no fuddy-duddy turning away from progress. The vast advances in communications technology are an information revolution that has great possibilities for social development if well used, which means made economically available to the millions in the world whose lives will otherwise be bulldozed by the financial oligarchy of globalisation.

But *information* does not, it cannot, ever replace, outmode *illumination* – searching knowledge of the human intellect and spirit that, all readers know, comes in communication with the Word in its infinitely portable, available home between hard or paperback covers.

First it became the book of the movie.

Now it is the book of the website.

Don't let it happen.

Nadine Gordimer

