

**“Come Rap for the Planet”:
Matters of Life and Death in Nadine Gordimer’s
Get a Life (2005)**

KARINA MAGDALENA SZCZUREK

Independent writer
6 Banksia Road, Rosebank
7700 Cape Town, South Africa
szczurek@mweb.co.za

Abstract. *Get a Life* (2005) is Nadine Gordimer’s latest and probably last novel. As some of its reviewers have suggested, it is not a major addition to her oeuvre. However, its significance lies in its activist thrust as the first truly ‘green’ novel published in post-apartheid South Africa. Using a basic ecocritical approach, the following essay exposes the eco-conscious character of the book. Furthermore, it shows how the novel engages in some crucial contemporary debates in the South African public sphere and situates them in the global context of the 21st century. At the same time, by looking at some of Gordimer’s short stories written around the time of publication of *Get a Life* and primarily at the novel itself, this essay analyses how the author explores the topics of ageing and natural death as well as the need to leave a trace of one’s life beyond physical existence.

Keywords: ecocriticism, post-apartheid literature and society, globalisation, confrontation with ageing and death

And what a rich mix it is... we have... elements of...even green consciousness
(long before the Greens existed, we had green in our flag, representing land).
(Albie Sachs)

We must take responsibility for nature.
(Frederick Turner)

Nadine Gordimer's most recent and presumably last novel,¹ *Get a Life* (2005), is "a minor addition to an impressive body of work produced over the decades, but it cannot be faulted for being blind to the changes of our time" (Deb 2005: 20). With less than two hundred pages, *Get a Life* is probably Gordimer's slightest novel,² and although it has been criticised on the grounds of its demanding narrative and stylistic dimension,³ it offers an incisive insight into some contemporary socio-political discussions in South Africa and beyond. In spite of many critics' hesitation to embrace *Get a Life* among Gordimer's major work, it has been longlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2006. Its importance certainly lies in the up-to-datedness in thematic terms and in its activist thrust. In *Get a Life* Gordimer lends her pen to raising awareness about the thousands of HIV-positive orphans living in South Africa, as well as the exploitation of the natural environment in the country, a pressing issue of local and global politics in the 21st century. At the same time she turns to a more philosophical but equally urgent questions of human existence – the confrontation with death as well as the need to leave a trace of one's life beyond it – and places it in the context of the 21st century. The following essay explores the way Gordimer deals with these concerns in *Get a Life* by specifically taking a look at the private lives of its characters reflecting the issues at hand, and drawing on some of her most recent short stories for support of these reflections.

Like all her other recent novels, *Get a Life* has a very contemporary feel to it, reflecting what Maureen Isaacson refers to as "the *zeitgeist*" (Isaacson 2005: 17). Apart from themes explored in the main storyline, one finds many indicators of present-day realities in South Africa in this book, as in Gordimer's other post-apartheid writings. The word 'new' comes up constantly to designate contemporary developments, both positive and negative: corruption, affirmative action, BEE (Black Economic Empowerment), government housing schemes, integrated education, landownership, etc. The most obvious one, however, is the persistence of violence. Acts of violence do not form part of the main plot, but *Get a Life* (as *None to Accompany Me* [1994] and *The Pickup* [2001]) abounds in almost

¹ Shortly after the publication of *Get a Life*, Gordimer admitted in an interview, conducted by Ampie Coetzee at a book club meeting in Cape Town, that because of her advanced age, her memory is failing her and does not allow her anymore to think in novel-terms. *Get a Life* is probably her last novel. She added that the short story would be her preferred genre in the future. True to this pronouncement, her latest publication, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), is a collection of short stories which had been previously published in several literary magazines between 2002 and 2007.

² Only *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) and *July's People* (1981) could possibly be shorter.

³ One notes a certain increase in Gordimer's narrative and stylistic experimentation in her later fiction which tends to irritate, rather than engage, her critics. To examine the development and its reception would go beyond the scope of this essay, but is certainly worth pursuing in further studies of Gordimer's work.

casual references to the alarming climate of violence in which present South Africa is steeped and which forms the main backdrop to the developments in *The House Gun* (1998).⁴ The apartheid past indirectly filters through all of these references, but it is also noticeable in "the autobiographies unburdening the ugliness of the political past" (Gordimer 2005: 26) which the Bannermans read in bed, or in the mere presence of their housekeeper, Primrose. She used to be the servant, but now she is "called housekeeper" (Gordimer 2005: 16). She "had never before been called into the livingroom to sit down and talk with her employers" (Gordimer 2005: 18), although the reader is assured that she is otherwise well treated, and well paid, yet she remains the product of the past "with her old-fashioned servitude, pre-liberation sense of propriety" (Gordimer 2005: 95). In an interview, Gordimer reflected on this character: "In Primrose we have a whole history... That is what fiction does that fact cannot do. We see it in her attitudes and even her name, which has historical connotations" (Isaacson 2005: 17).

Apart from these negative reminders, in *Get a Life* Gordimer captures the more pleasant realities of contemporary South Africa, for example the vibrancy and mixed socialising of suburbs like Johannesburg's Melville. Even if at times self-conscious, the private encounters between people of all races proliferate and the next generation of children does not realise anymore that there might be something "unexpected" in such gatherings (Gordimer 2005: 111-2). The possibility of "a new generation that might produce white multilinguists" is within reach (Gordimer 2005: 125).

Moreover, like no other of her post-apartheid novels, *Get a Life* also captures the atmosphere of globalisation sweeping the contemporary world. It manifests itself in the main character's international education (Paul went to the USA, England, and West Africa to get his qualifications). It is inherent in his family set-up: Paul's one sister (Jacqueline) is a Montessori nursery teacher, another (Susan) is married to an ostrich farmer who prospers because of "worldwide demand for low-cholesterol steaks" (Gordimer 2005: 35), and the third (Emma) is a foreign correspondent for a British newspaper and lives in South America with her Brazilian husband. To keep in touch they all communicate via the internet. When Adrian and Lyndsay Bannerman go to Mexico their guide is Norwegian.

⁴ In *Get a Life*, Adrian wakes up in the night to hear Lyndsay cry, his first impression is that "she is being attacked, desperate intruders know how to defuse suburban burglar alarms" (Gordimer 2005: 27). But then he realises: "There was no-one" (Gordimer 2005: 27). Their housekeeper Primrose listens to the news of "the latest holdup" (Gordimer 2005: 29). At one stage Lyndsay actually confronts an intruder in their garden at night (cf. Gordimer 2005: 52). Adrian's reaction is to hire "a permanent night watchman equipped with intercommunication to a security patrol company" (Gordimer 2005: 53). He deals with the incident in the only way possible "among present living conditions" [emphasis mine] (Gordimer 2005: 53).

The Chinese restaurant they find there is an “unexpected find in Mexico, like herself” (Gordimer 2005: 108), but it is there. Adrian eventually moves to Norway. All of these references might seem insignificant in themselves, but they are the most obvious signs of globalisation. And, most importantly, just as Gordimer has drawn the connections that exist between a Norwegian woman and a South African man, she has exposed the links between ecological systems deep inside Africa and a predatory Australian company (cf. Deb 2005: 20). Deb writes:

There is the suggestion that the affliction of these characters is more universal than was the case with their predecessors. Berenice’s advertising agency, Paul’s ecological campaigns and Lyndsay’s legal work all point to the fact that South Africa has successfully transformed itself into a late capitalist society, committed to universal forms of inequality rather than its own special brand of injustice. This blurring of boundaries between the local and the global is sketched out swiftly in the context of the proposed nuclear plant Paul and his colleague Thapelo hope to prevent. (Deb 2005: 20)

In 1995, in her Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, reprinted as “Our Century” in *Living in Hope and History* (1999), Gordimer recalled: “T.S. Eliot’s prediction was that we would end with a whimper; ours is that we could go out with a bang” (Gordimer 1999: 217). And then she asked: “The mushroom cloud still hangs over us; will it be there as a bequest to the new century?” (Gordimer 1999: 217). Ten years later, in *Get a Life*, she answers that it is still the case. But in the twenty-first century the mushroom cloud is not the only danger to humanity. The South African *Bill of Rights* (1996) states:

Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation; promote conservation; and secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development (*Bill of Rights* Chapter 2, Section 24).

In *Get a Life* Gordimer addresses the state of affairs concerning the violation of these rights in South Africa. All threats to the environment discussed in the novel mirror disturbing real-life developments in the country. The discussion of the construction of a pebble-bed reactor, “hugely adjunct to existing dangers of Koeberg” (Gordimer 2005: 113) is certainly the most prominent one.⁵ Other “slower means of development taking the form of destruction” (Gordimer 2005: 84)

⁵ Koeberg is a nuclear power station located near Cape Town. In the course of recent years Koeberg has been constantly in the headlines because of, among other management problems, numerous power failures.

in the novel echo concerns over disturbing ecological developments in South Africa: the extinction of numerous animal and plant species; the building of a national toll highway planned in Pondoland, which will displace the Amadiba people living on the Wild Coast; or an Australian company wanting to mine dunes and destroy the coastline of the same area. And this happens while, Gordimer tells us, South Africa has signed and ratified the International Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan. She lets one of her characters ask, "how's the Minister heading off to tell the World Convention we're going to allow a four-lane highway through one of the named hotspots of global diversity?" (Gordimer 2005: 185). In her review of the novel, Jacqueline Rose suggests that "[i]t is one of the productive tensions of *Get a Life* that Gordimer looks to the earth, the political control of which has never ceased to be her topic" (Rose 2006: 20). Rose quotes a crucial statement Gordimer once made about the meaningless human attachment to the land: "The only attachment that makes claims valid in human terms is some sort of vital attachment to the people; you cannot be 'attached' to soil and thorn trees, because these do not respond; you can kiss the earth in bliss or be hanged from one of the trees in terror – the landscape is totally unaffected by either" (Gordimer in Rose 2006: 20). Indirectly, Gordimer refers here to land as a purely topographical 'space,' as opposed to 'place,' i.e. a setting for social relations and a space which has meaning ascribed to it by the people identifying with it (cf. Buell 2005: 63). When one thinks of the infinite renewal of natural ecosystems in *Get a Life*, one understands the unaffectedness Gordimer speaks about – the landscape's nonexistent emotional response to human predicaments. In this sense, Rose perceptively points out: "There is, then, no land to speak of outside the social relations embedded within it. This is no less true in today's South Africa than it was under apartheid, as the struggle over mining, dams and reactors at the core of *Get a Life* makes clear. Gordimer does not ignore the ethical complexities of these developments" (Rose 2006: 20). But in this novel, Gordimer also acknowledges another relationship embedded in the landscape by which it is affected: human intervention in a purely physical sense. In the long run, land, as Rose suggests, "without or despite human intervention, oblivious to the social behaviour of its inhabitants, renews itself" (Rose 2006: 21). She concludes this line of thought by saying that "the pull of the earth against the worst of history in *Get a Life* [. . .] inherits in new guise one of the central political and aesthetical tensions of Gordimer's writing and her life" (Rose 2006: 21-2). Here, Rose specifically refers to Gordimer's earlier fiction, in particular to *The Conservationist* (1974), to make her point and to establish the connection, but this kind of dichotomy also exists in the post-1994 fiction, most apparent in *The Pickup*, in Gordimer's portrayal of the desert. In *Get a Life*, however, Gordimer adds another dimension to the topic, the possibility of total destruction of the planet, not only its individual landscapes

and the aforementioned "social relations embedded within it" (Rose 2006: 20). By making one of her protagonists an environmental activist, she addresses the issue from a completely different perspective.

Gordimer's awareness of the importance of environmental protection should be viewed not only as a reaction to the more recent wave of environmental studies and Armageddon predictions flooding the mass media, specifically following the devastating Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. It can already be noted in a much earlier interview with Karen Lazar in November 1993, when Gordimer identified the environment as one of the two issues which should have been discussed at the World Trade Center that year, but which were missing from the agenda: "[I]f you look at what's hotly discussed, there are two issues that don't get attention: the one is culture – completely forgotten – and the other, of course, is the environment. These things come low on the list" (Gordimer in Lazar 1993: 14). Not anymore, and certainly not for Gordimer. After the numerous environmental disasters which have taken place around the world in the last decade, especially the ravaging floods of 1997 in Europe, the Tsunami of 2004, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, public awareness of the urgency to do something about the environmental changes threatening human existence as we know it on the planet has risen enormously. The environment has become one of the most widely discussed issues in mass media and world politics today. No wonder then, that Gordimer makes it one of the main focus points of her latest novel, claiming, as she does, that her "books always run concurrently with the time of their composition" (Gordimer in Bolonik n.d.: n.pag.). For Gordimer, the novel continues to serve as "a vehicle [. . .] to address a miscellany of contemporary global and local issues" (Lovell 2005: 12). References to post-2000 international events, such as 9/11 (cf. Gordimer 2005: 107), the Iraq War (cf. Gordimer 2005: 89, 99), Gaddafi's "decision to announce and renounce Libya's possession of nuclear capability" (Gordimer 2005: 100), or the reference to contemporary events in South Africa like "the last election"⁶ and the President's appointment of a woman as Minister of Justice" (Gordimer 2005: 164), and the pledge of the third democratically elected government to end poverty (cf. Gordimer 2005: 168), definitely weave the narrative into its specific present-day context. Most importantly, *Get a Life* fulfils the function which Scott Slovic has identified as potentially the most important one for contemporary literature: "to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world" (Slovic 1999: 1102-3 in Lemmer 2007: 223). As the South African critic, Erika Lemmer, points out, "social commentators are in agreement that the past century has been marked by three important discourses:

⁶ The election of 2004 after which Thabo Mbeki appointed Brigitte Sylvia Mabandla as Minister of Justice.

the civil rights movement, feminism(s) and, more recently, environmental activism. Despite obvious differences, all these movements seem to have a common purpose, namely ultimately rejection of hierarchical and patriarchal patterns of possession and domination" (Lemmer 2007: 223). For at least half of the last century Nadine Gordimer has been a leading literary activist fighting on behalf of the first two movements, challenging colonial oppression in the form of apartheid and believing in the equality of all humans, black or white, female or male (even if she would not call herself a feminist). In the new century, with *Get a Life*, she takes on the task of supporting the last of the three, environmental activism, rising to Slovic's challenge of redirecting her readers' consciousness to consider their place in a threatened natural world (cf. Slovic 1999: 1102-3 in Lemmer 2007: 223). With this shift of focus, what ecocritics refer to as a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perception of the world (cf. Love 2003, Buell 2005), Gordimer takes a fundamental step towards a new field of inquiry. By centring the plot on the contradictions between popular protest against nuclear energy and the politics of danger opposing opportunity for multinational expansion, Gordimer "brings her writing firmly into the 21st century" (Rose 2006: 20). It is not the first time that Gordimer's work fulfils a pioneering function, and it should not surprise that with *Get a Life* she contributed the first truly 'green' novel to South African fiction.⁷ It certainly shares the common motivation of ecocritical work, as outlined by Cheryll Glotfelty in her seminal work on ecocriticism, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996): "the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems" (Glotfelty 1996: xx). As with all her other work, in *Get a Life* Gordimer returns to the Brechtian idea of "thinking"⁸ as the process which follows up problems and precedes action (Bertolt Brecht in Prausmüller 2003: 16). Donald Worster astutely identified the root of our ecological crisis not in the functioning of our ecosystems but in the functioning of our ethical systems and proposed to overcome the crisis by understanding both (Worster 1993: 27 in Glotfelty 1996: xxi). By embracing the environment as "the new, post-apartheid frontier" (Jones 2005: 14), Gordimer investigates this process of understanding in her novel.

When during a *braai*⁹ the three ecologists in *Get a Life*, Paul, Derek and Thapelo, point out to their friends that in their work they are facing "businessmen who've usually got other things on their calculators than extinction by nuclear leaks"

⁷ 'Green' in the sense that it is an ecological novel with environment-conscious interests.

⁸ "Denken ist etwas, das auf Probleme folgt, und dem Handeln vorausgeht." [Thinking is something which follows problems and proceeds actions] (Bertolt Brecht in Prausmüller 2003: 16).

⁹ South African form of barbecue.

(Gordimer 2005: 114), one of them says that she cannot believe the situation is as dire as that. Thapelo's response to her disbelief addresses Slovic's identification of the lack of consciousness about our place in a threatened environment: "That's the problem, we can't get people to believe. That's why Eskom's¹⁰ big bosses have been allowed by the government to spend one billion on developing the pebble-bed technology" (Gordimer 2005: 114). The disbeliever stops eating her food, and the narrator poignantly tells us that "she can't take a clean breath, away from the smoke off the meat over fire" (Gordimer 2005: 114). At the end of the *braai*, the friends watch a "spectacular" sunset "because of pollution in the air, according to Derek – everyone laughed at him for spoiling the effect, better be ignorant of some phenomena" (Gordimer 2005: 116). *Get a Life* makes clear that we live in a time of environmental and other threats which can endanger our survival as a species, and that ignorance is out of place under these circumstances. At the same time, it thematizes our longing for the acknowledgement of the very existence which is threatened. One of the most basic human needs is to leave something behind to be remembered by, which will continue existing long after we are dead. In some concentration camps during the Second World War prisoners were forbidden to leave any marks, signs, traces of their existence in the prison world they inhabited. It was one of the cruellest forms of torture imaginable. Faced with death, those prisoners were deprived of this basic need, however futile a carved name into the plaster of a wall might have seemed. It is not the futility of the undertaking, but the possibility of it being discovered that satisfied this human urgency for remembrance. In a recent article on David Goldblatt's remarkable photography album *Some Afrikaners Revisited* (2007) André Brink recounted an anecdote about a Russian woman standing in a long line of prisoners to be executed. She noticed Anna Akhmatova standing in the crowd. In passing, she reached out for Akhmatova's hand and inquired, "Will you write about this?" When Akhmatova replied in the positive the woman was visibly relieved. Brink explains that this made her realise "that her life had not been in vain: someone had taken note" (Brink 2007: 14).

¹⁰ Eskom is the government-owned company, generating, transmitting and distributing electricity in South Africa. For the latest developments in nuclear power supply in South Africa see <www.eskom.co.za>. In 2007, the building of pebble-bed nuclear reactors in South Africa remains controversial. Eskom has identified four, and acquired two, potential sites in South Africa's coastal areas for the reactors, but it is still uncertain whether the company will proceed with further developments. It is not the purpose of this essay to debate the advantages or disadvantages of nuclear energy. It suffices to say that the environment-conscious characters in *Get a Life* definitely oppose the construction of pebble-bed reactors.

The threat of nuclear annihilation or environmental catastrophe also collides with this urgency. If there is nobody left to take note, there is no point in leaving any sign behind, thus the basis of being human is undermined by the threat. The idea is not new. Ever since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki philosophers and artists have been trying to come to terms with the human potential of self-destruction of the entire species. Gordimer refers to the catastrophe and its shock effect, the incomprehensibility of the event which has to be dealt with, in *Get a Life*: "Only the Japanese would understand, maybe; they have had to make 'ordinary' ('normal' is a word that can't be used on this subject) the presence of children born, generations after the light greater than a thousand suns, with a limb or some faculty of the brain missing" (Gordimer 2005: 67). The nuclear threat still exists: "The direst of all threats in the world's collective fear – beyond terrorism, suicide bombings, introduction of deadly viruses, fatal chemical substances in innocent packaging, Mad Cow disease – is still 'nuclear capability'" (Gordimer 2005: 99). The last threat on the list "is the most haunting of all, and this is precisely because of its ready availability as a metaphor, as well as a mechanism, of destruction" (Swift 2006: n.pag.). Now, as if "Weapons of Mass Destruction" (Gordimer 2005: 100) were not enough, with one global environmental crisis following another, we have added to the stakes. Gordimer's novel "is about all of our fears: of destruction, but also of contamination, alienation and enforced solitude" (Swift 2006: n.pag.). And it raises awareness about disturbing environmental developments not only in South Africa, but globally.

In *Get a Life*, Gordimer addresses all these issues in her usual trenchant fashion by focusing on the private lives of a handful of individuals, the Bannerman family, to illustrate the broader implications. Adrian and Paul Bannerman, father and son, represent the two forces at play in the eternal quest for recognition; their last name speaks for itself, they are the men symbolically carrying the banners: Paul is an ecologist protecting the environment from diverse threats, a nuclear power station among them; Adrian is an archaeologist at heart, taking note of the signs left behind by previous generations and entire civilizations. At sixty-five he retires as the managing director of an agricultural vehicle and equipment plan, a job he only took on to allow his wife Lyndsay her pursuit of a career in law. Now, the entire family has to confront a private catastrophe in the form of thyroid gland cancer which affects Paul – it is his "confrontation with an unimaginable state of *self*. [. . .] It is a state of existence outside the continuity of his life" (Gordimer 2005: 67). With the onset of Paul's illness the members of his family do not just begin to question "the point of their lives, but [. . .] life itself, as the societal constructs of law, politics, race, gender, and others prove frivolous in the face of what it means to be human" (Braile 2005: n.pag.). For Braile, "those constructs crumble under the weight of societal absurdities that become apparent only when Paul's survival

is in question" (Braile 2005: n.pag.). The novel opens with Paul's arrival at his parents' house after his operation and cancer treatment with radioactive iodine. As a result, he becomes radioactive himself and has to be quarantined for a period of two weeks to protect his wife Bernice and their three-year old son Nicholas from the radiation until he is fully recovered. The disruption the illness causes in Paul's life and the lives of the members of his family is an excellent example of what a reviewer called Gordimer's "superb talent for isolating moments of shaken realities" ("101 Books for Christmas" 2005: n.pag.). Gordimer quotes from W.H. Auden for the epigraph of her novel: "O what authority gives / Existence its surprise?" (Auden 1944 in Gordimer 2005).¹¹ Surprise as the authority given to existence is immediately recognisable in the unexpected turns of events in Paul's life. Ironically, as an ecologist fighting against nuclear power, he becomes his "own pebble-bed nuclear reactor" (Gordimer 2005: 59). Earlier, we are told, "[t]he emanation irradiates the hidden or undiscovered" (Gordimer 2005: 55). For Paul and his parents the illness is a turning point.¹² Although Paul does recover exactly halfway through the novel, "there has been a shift. Cracks have appeared beneath the surface of all their lives" (Gardam 2005: n.pag.). Some of these "cracks" appear only as doubts which are put aside again once Paul recovers, others widen and leave behind irreparable damage. Freeman suggests that cancer is "an apt metaphor" for what is happening to the family, as the novel is "a meditation on the dangers of self-interest, the frisson of anxiety that ripples through individuals (and society) when they have been forced to cut back on what they claim as theirs – and what happens when they choose to keep growing anyway, to get more" (Freeman 2005: n.pag.). Paul's illness and his confrontation with "an unimaginable state of self" stirs in his mother the "unwanted recognition that there are other states of alienated existence" (Gordimer 2005: 68). In an interview, Gordimer explained her understanding of the kind of effect Paul's cancer has on himself and his family:

Illness itself is a kind of disruption, a totally unforeseen situation in your private life that you wouldn't have thought about before. I think that many of us have in our 'normal,' satisfactory lives some element we suppress or

¹¹ From *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944).

¹² Although the time of Paul's recovery is an indispensable part of the plot, there is a flaw in its presentation. Paul is in his parents' house for sixteen days, but the way the time span is described it would seem that it is much longer. Gordimer emphasises all the habits which seem to be interrupted by his presence and tells us about the sacrifices everybody has to make for that period of time, which sounds more like a few weeks than just sixteen days. Nickie's reaction to his father's illness is also surprising when one considers that in his job Paul must sometimes be away from home for more than just two weeks, but now his absence is described as a potential 'trauma' for his child (cf. Gordimer 2005: 31).

ignore, and it is often something quite vital. Only when some incredible change like this happens – not only an illness, but something that alters your whole relationship to the world, such as the isolation that Paul suffers – do you begin to face those things that surface, things you probably would have suppressed for the rest of your life. You remember the quote at the beginning of the book? [cf. epigraph to *Get a Life*] So, what makes people question their lives? This is one of the book's subthemes. Sometimes a crisis comes along, causing everything to collapse, and you've got to start putting together your sense of self and your place in the world all over again. (Gordimer in Bolonik n.d.: n.pag.)

For Lyndsay, the events surrounding Paul's cancer suddenly allow memories of a four-year long love affair she had had fifteen years before to resurface. Some critics suggest that the memory of the affair itself takes on the form of cancer for Lyndsay; as it "becomes aggressively malignant" (Freeman 2005: n.pag.), and the guilt it brings about becomes "an emotional malignancy" (Isaacson 2005: 17). Lyndsay remembers the words of her husband who knew about the affair, "I thought you were going to tell me you were leaving" (Gordimer 2005: 68). But, although she decided to stay married and ended the affair, now it comes back to haunt her. She is troubled by her "ruthless, cunning ingenuity" (Gordimer 2005: 76) of the past and the fact that she had an abortion of twins because she did not know whose children they were at the time. Lyndsay reproaches herself for the affair, even though she realises that there is no need anymore to "recognise the *artifact*¹³ of that four-year state of existence" [emphasis mine] (Gordimer 2005: 80), she also knows that she will never be able to make up for the lost years, either to her husband nor to herself (cf. Gordimer 2005: 81). It is important to note that she remembers thinking about the affair in terms of Simone de Beauvoir's "contingent loves" – she began it because of shared intellectual interests with her lover which they placed in the context of their intimacy (cf. Gordimer 2005: 71).

This is important because, while Lyndsay is coming to terms with the transgressions in her past, Adrian unexpectedly begins a relationship with another woman based on the same idea of "contingent loves." The choice of the word "artefact" to describe the resurfacing of Lyndsay's memory gains additional significance in the context of Adrian's affair. Adrian falls in love with a young Norwegian woman when shortly after Paul's recovery he and Lyndsay travel to Mexico to visit archaeological excavations sites there. The trip is a kind of new beginning for Adrian, who had always wanted to be an archaeologist, but had to become a breadwinner for his family instead. The Norwegian woman, Hilde, is their tour guide. The affair begins after Lyndsay returns to South Africa leaving

¹³ The edition I am referring to uses American spelling of the word 'artifact/artefact.'

Adrian behind in Mexico to explore some more of the archaeological sites. In a letter to his wife, Adrian explains about the affair: "It's had to happen in Mexico, where I've been able to follow the dream of anyone interested in archaeology to get to sites you've only read about. [. . .] I've even been able to spend a day sifting the dust on a current dig" (Gordimer 2005: 127). Lyndsay thinks of the affair as she does of Adrian's archaeological pursuits, as an "avocation," and she realises that the two belong together: "The woman and the archaeology. The lovemaking and the digs" (Gordimer 2005: 136). Eventually, the older Bannerman couple decides to divorce. While Adrian and Hilde continue their travels in Mexico and eventually go to Stavanger to live together in Norway (and where Adrian dies soon after), Lyndsay begins meeting a retired lawyer, who shares her professional and leisure interests and considers asking her to marry him (cf. Gordimer 2005: 165-6). The "cracks" in Lyndsay's and Adrian's relationship open up completely new lives for both of them.

"Adultery is a recurrent motif in Gordimer's work" (Deb 2005: 19). It has been addressed in one form or another in most of her novels and many of her stories. Contrary to popular belief that men are more adulterous than women, in Gordimer's fiction usually the female characters are not committed to fidelity. Adultery is often presented as perfectly acceptable, a kind of freedom every individual is entitled to. Whereas in Gordimer's previous work, sexuality – and (in)fidelity – were often closely linked with politics, in *Get a Life* the relationships of the Bannermans are contextualised within the threatened natural environment. The novel is as much "an unsparing analysis of the permutations – and ramifications – of commitment and fidelity, [as an analysis of] endangerment and survival" ("Review of *Get a Life*" 2005: 871). At the beginning of the novel, Lyndsay's and Adrian's marriage in particular seems like an "unassailable entity" (Shilling 2005: n.pag.), to use Jane Shilling's phrase out of context. However, marriage and family life are revealed as "infinitely fragile" (Shilling 2005: n.pag.) in the course of the narrative. The fragility of this "unassailable entity" is exposed only through the introspection induced by radioactivity. By analogy, in *Get a Life* the survival of the planet, until recently an "unassailable entity" itself, is also revealed as fragile when faced with the threat of nuclear capability, among other endangerments.

The connection between the instability of relationships and the instability of ecosystems is reinforced in the exploration of Paul's life. His illness and recovery do not only affect his own relationship with his wife, but also the one with his

parents, especially his mother.¹⁴ The dynamics of nuclear families have always inhabited Gordimer's fiction. In *Get a Life* the term gains new meaning through Paul's literal radioactive emanation which returns him to his parents' house: "The *nuclear family*, father mother son, is asleep in reconstitution, *reduced by quarantine*" [emphasis mine] (Gordimer 2005: 51). We are told early on that this new "state of existence"¹⁵ is unusual not only because of the radioactive treatment, but because of the lack of closeness between the family members (cf. Gordimer 2005: 10). Paul's sudden presence in the house, however, reinstates a closeness between Lyndsay and her son which has not existed since his childhood. The realisation of her previous lack of contact with her son is a real shock to her, another "crack" in the makeup of their previously stable world. After a talk with Paul she breaks out in tears at night: "Why did it have to be like this for him, so we could talk. Talk. Why not before? What were we doing. Waited for this. What happened to us. What's the matter with me so it couldn't be these years that've been going by so satisfied with what was supposed to be loving" (Gordimer 2005: 27). There is also a new bond between the men, because the father understands how troubling the situation must be for his son. Adrian knows that it "is a castrating frustration" (Gordimer 2005: 31) for Paul not to be able to touch his wife when she comes to visit.¹⁶ For Paul, living at home returns the concept of his parents as one entity to him, as they were when he was young, and not the separate individuals of later years (cf. Gordimer 2005: 33). Their oneness is however quickly disrupted for Paul when Lyndsay shares with him the news of Adrian's decision to begin a new life with Hilde and later the news of his father's sudden death in Norway.

The confrontation with his own possible death forces Paul into some uncomfortable realisations about his marriage to Bernice, a successful copywriter who advanced to management level in an international advertising company which promotes developers, the very people Paul is fighting against in his profession. Because of his illness Paul is faced with the contradictions between his personal and private life; his situation is expressed in terms of literal and figurative isolation. By forcing Paul to consider his marriage "Gordimer depicts the essential

¹⁴ In the book we are told that Paul "wouldn't have come to adolescence, physical and mental maturity, without it" (Gordimer 2005: 20). Cf. "The thyroid gland controls the proper development to maturity, and without it, Paul is a child once more" (Swift 2006: n.pag.).

¹⁵ "States of Existence" is the subtitle of one of the novel's four parts: "Child's Play," "States of Existence," "It Happens," and "Get a Life."

¹⁶ Although one understands why Gordimer constructs this reunion between Paul and his parents, the indicators she chooses to emphasise are not always plausible. Once again, it is difficult to imagine that Paul would suffer this "castrating frustration" only now, when we know that he is frequently away from home for more than two weeks at a time.

aloneness of people whose relationships are successful on the surface, but fragmentary and mendacious at deeper levels" (Bower 2006: 18). From the onset of the novel, Paul is constantly depicted as somebody in isolation, his story is "the intimate story of the 'untouchable' in your home and in yourself" (Rochman 2005: n.pag.). Thus, when Paul receives the cancer news from his doctor, we are told that: "He stood there. [. . .] Stood, alone" (Gordimer 2005: 7). There is a corresponding sparseness in syntax. Paul is "[l]iterally radiant," "[t]he pestilent one, the leper," the "lit-up leper," "he's alone, apart, with anybody – everyone" (Gordimer 2005: 3, 6, 33, 16). Furthermore, when their only way to communicate is by phone or from the distance across the garden of his parents' house, he suddenly feels that he has nothing to say to his wife (cf. Gordimer 2005: 21). Realising that Berenice's world clashes with his own, Paul asks himself, "[w]hat's her conviction within herself," and comes to understand that in her working life she "has no need of convictions" (Gordimer 2005: 57). While they might be sharing the same bed, they do not "occupy the same fundament" (Gordimer 2005: 57). The discrepancy between Paul's and his wife's convictions, is linked to his sense of isolation: "How could he, himself, whose work, reason-to-be is preserving life, live so long with an intimate, herself, who was successfully complicit in destroying it. / Living in isolation, all along. Even when inside the woman" (Gordimer 2005: 58). Jane Stevenson speaks of Berenice's "operational persona" (2005: n.pag.) in her working life, which does not correspond to the private one. This is reflected in her two names, Berenice for the professional woman and Benni for the private one. Paul's illness makes him aware of the contradictions, but he does not leave Benni, he decides to overcome their differences.

Significantly, Paul's analysis of his present situation takes place in the garden of his parents' home, the garden of his childhood, the very place where he discovered his later vocation: "What do you do when you have no obligation, no everyday expectation of yourself and others? / You get out of where you are. Leave the walls of gaping emptiness behind. His feet took the way used in childhood [. . .] to the garden" (Gordimer 2005: 22). It is not the first time that a Gordimer protagonist finds him or herself in a garden and lives through a moment of epiphany. In the last scene of *None to Accompany Me*, Vera walks out into the garden and the signature of her breath confirms her newly found identity. In *The House Gun*, Duncan recalls his crime, "I found myself in the garden" (Gordimer 1998: 217); it is also in the garden that he drops the gun he shoots his victim with. Similarly, the young protagonist of "L,U,C,I,E." is confronted with her own mortality in a kind of garden, the churchyard where her grandmother is buried, surrounded by a moss-covered wall, with cypresses growing between the graves on which there are "flowers in green water, withered" (Gordimer 2003c: 102). Meanwhile, Paul's childhood garden is strongly linked, as several critics point

out, with the biblical Garden of Eden (cf. Stevenson 2005, Isaacson 2005, Gardam 2005). It is a place of lost innocence, of Paul's first confrontation with sexuality and death. The narrative clearly identifies Paul's garden with the metaphorical concept of wilderness, with all its rich literary intertextuality as a place of transgressions. Thus, Paul remembers the garden as his own childhood "wilderness" (Gordimer 2005: 50) where he and his friends played and experimented "with mutual masturbation" (Gordimer 2005: 50), and fought each other. It is also the place where he killed snails, and even once a dove which he buried in the garden (cf. Gordimer 2005: 37). He now realises that "[t]here's a ceiling at which compassion begins, lowly creatures are below it. That's the innocence that remains unchanged in a garden" (Gordimer 2005: 38-9). During his recuperation he takes recourse to the garden to escape the "staring emptiness, of himself," because he feels that it is "the place to be yourself" (Gordimer 2005: 48, 49). The garden is the "No-Man's-Land" (Gordimer 2005: 30) across which Paul receives his visitors, but it is also directly linked to the real wilderness of Paul's occupation. Here he remembers the wetlands of St Lucia he walked recently: "Only out there, the garden, could the wilderness be gained" (Gordimer 2005: 51). But Paul realises that now the garden is as much a barrier between him and his wife as his trips to the wilderness are in more than just physical sense; his occupation separates him from his wife in ideological terms. In the garden "there is the wise presence that changes solitude of monologue into some kind of dialogue. A dialogue with questions; or answers never sought, heard, in the elsewhere. Not even the wilderness" (Gordimer 2005: 54). After questioning his relationship with Benni, Paul walks in the garden and remembers "the innocence of the tree that was climbed" when he was a boy and the bird he killed with a slingshot: "But it was in the Garden that expulsion came once there was Knowledge" (Gordimer 2005: 58). And his knowledge is the discrepancy between his and his wife's convictions, so he considers, "Divorce?" (Gordimer 2005: 58). But then he remembers the way she has endured his illness, the child they share, and eventually, remains with her without ever confronting her with his doubts. Although Paul's "new perceptions can no more be unlearned than the knowledge of good and evil, so he is expelled from unthinking happiness" (Stevenson 2005: n.pag.), his marriage survives the strain, while his parents' marriage never recovers from the "cracks" induced by their son's illness and its aftermath. Isaacson thinks of Paul's decision as a "waste of hard-won insight," but Gordimer defends it: "He realises that he is but a mote in the universe. I sense more that he had better carry on with his life as it is. There is human decency in it as well. There is a baby. And he does not give up his work" (Gordimer in Isaacson 2005: 17). Braile also suggests that the second child they have affirms "his recovery, her purpose, and the possibility their marriage may improve" (Braile 2005: n.pag.). After all, we are told that as the novel progresses,

Benni's two personae become "more and more mingled in the life they lived now" (Gordimer 2005: 116). Gradually, Paul also takes a more pragmatic stance toward his wife's work and realises that it might be advantageous to his own projects, that her agency's slogan, "get a life" – one of the many allusions to the book's title – and what is later referred to as its "effectiveness in the finite" (Gordimer 2005: 183) can actually support his cause. Paul's friend Thapelo suggests: "Get a life, man! – Let's make up and bring a high-profile party of save-the-earthers to come and as observers of what's at stake – not the low-voltage ones we've had – some pop stars who'll compose songs for us, *Come rap for the planet*, prove they're good world citizens... it's cool now for the famous to take up causes" (Gordimer 2005: 146). And Paul understands that the advertising agency might just "know exactly how to manipulate this, now desperately become like any other public campaign" (Gordimer 2005: 146). The plan of "rapping for the planet" recalls, of course, the Band Aid initiative, and consequently, Gordimer's own 'rapping' for another cause (HIV, Aids) in *Telling Tales* (2004).¹⁷ *Get a Life* is itself a rap song for the planet, and it does not eschew its "effectiveness in the finite" to promote the cause of a much larger project like the survival of the planet. Paul's decision to continue his marriage with Bernice further advances the novel's leading argument – manifested mainly in Paul's recovery through radioactive treatment – that what is potentially harmful can also be of use within the proper ethical system.¹⁸ Luke Stubbs calls this predicament "the first irony of the book" (Stubbs 2005: 12), and refers to responsibility as the determining factor between the harmfulness or helpfulness of radioactivity. According to Bolonik "radiancy pervades" Gordimer's novel; but the time of Paul's recovery, aided by the radioactive iodine, "*illuminates* for him the issues he has with his marriage" [emphasis mine] (Bolonik n.d.: n.pag.) In an interview Gordimer strengthens this reading of the novel. When Isaacson tells her that "[i]n the many dangers described in the novel" she sees "a resounding threat"

¹⁷ In 2004, inspired by Band Aid and its musicians' support for humanitarian causes in Africa, Nadine Gordimer edited and published *Telling Tales*, an anthology of short stories by world-famous authors. The proceeds from the anthology's sales are being donated to the South African Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). Mainly by advocating for life-saving HIV/Aids-treatment in South African communities TAC supports and protects the rights of people living with HIV/Aids. The fight against HIV and Aids is one of the most urgent problems South Africa has been facing in the last two decades. Today, the state of affairs concerning HIV and Aids in the country has long passed the crisis point. The government's unsatisfactory response to the crisis is constantly debated in the media, not only in South Africa but around the world. By engaging in the fight against the disease, Gordimer demonstrated once again her awareness of the pressing issues troubling her home country and employed her writer's skills in combating injustice.

¹⁸ Cf. Worster's suggestion of overcoming the ecological crisis by understanding ethical systems within which we operate (Worster 1993: 27).

(Isaacson 2005: 17), Gordimer denies firmly, defending her novel: "I see it as about survival" (Gordimer in Isaacson 2005: 17).

When earlier on in the book Thapelo visits Paul, the garden becomes "the quarters, now, where two men are absorbed in the work that informs their understanding of the world and their place as agents within it, from the perspective that everyone, like it or not, admit it or not, acts upon the world in some way" (Gordimer 2005: 83). Thus, it is in the garden that Paul and Thapelo are described as "connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (cf. Glotfelty 1996: xix). The truth of this connectedness might seem simple, but it is the fundamental premise of all ecological considerations (cf. Glotfelty 1996). The fact that into this realm of the garden Thapelo brings with him the wilderness he and Paul share, represented by a mangrove root from the wetlands they recently investigated together and a piece of a bird eggshell which belongs to a bird which "would soon be extinct" (Gordimer 2005: 86), adds to the layers of meaning which the garden accumulates in the course of the novel. In an interview Gordimer draws attention to this specific scene:

When Thapelo has visited Paul, he is gone but on the table is a twig from one of these trees – and the shell of a bird's egg – I don't explain it. It is very meaningful...that twig stands for what is happening. It is the dying part of the tree and that empty eggshell of the little bird is also an indication of how we are breaking the chain of nature. This is the kind of thing in other people's books which means a lot to me. I was looking at *The Conservationist* the other night and was reminded of my description of eggs there (Gordimer in Isaacson 2005: 17).¹⁹

Eggs reappear in a later scene in the book, when on a family holiday Paul reads a pamphlet about the breeding of eagles: "Only two eggs, that's the entire clutch. [. . .] The first egg laid hatches and is followed about a week later by a second. The two chicks, known as Cain and Abel. The first-born, Cain, has already grown when Abel comes out of his shell. Cain and Abel fight and generally Abel is killed by Cain and thrown out of the nest. The survivor is fed by both parents" (Gordimer 2005: 167). This passage is immediately followed by a reflection on the morality of survival. Endangering an ecosystem for the development of industrialisation can be considered morally viable when the economic advantage of the project is used to uplift the poor. "And if Abel has to be thrown out of the nest by Cain; isn't that for a greater survival" (Gordimer 2005: 168). This passage suggests to read

¹⁹ The eggs in *The Conservationist* play an important part in the assertion of landownership. In an early scene of the novel Mehring, the white farmer, is troubled by his black labourers' children claiming the bird eggs laid on his farm. In the end, the black labourers take control of the land.

the parable of Cain and Abel in terms of the conflict between nature and progress: industrialisation and development might destroy ecosystems, but they strengthen the economy and counter poverty. Paul is aware "that saving the environment and the struggle for economic justice go hand in hand" (Stubbs 2005: 12). The passage on morality of survival continues: "Civilisation goes against nature," but Paul also knows that "whatever civilisation does to destroy nature, nature will find its solution in a measure of time we [humans] don't have (the pamphlet informs that this area was a sea, unaccountable time before the rocks were pushed upward)" (Gordimer 2005: 168). Reflections on nature's solutions for human exploitation pervade the novel. Earlier, when the project to build ten dams in the Okavango is mentioned, the dams are referred to as "total negations" of the elaborate natural ecosystem (Gordimer 2005: 92). To control it is madness: "The Okavango could never have been planned on a drawing-board by the human brain. [. . .] [It is the] primal feature of creation, so vast it can be seen by astronauts from Outer Space" (Gordimer 2005: 90, 91). We are told that through the dams, which will not be visible from outer space, "[a]ll this beautifully managed balance will be wrecked. Forever" (Gordimer 2005: 92). At the same time there is the awareness that the fragility of ecosystems loses its meaning within the framework of infinite time and renewal. "In millennia, what does it count that the white rhino becomes extinct, the dinosaur's extinct, the mastodon, the mammoth, but we have the ingenuity of the evolved design of the giraffe, the elephant with its massive hulk standing vestigially web-footed with the memory of the fish. The first fish that dragged itself out of the amniotic element" (Gordimer 2005: 94). To think of it in these terms, is a "heresy," Paul thinks and reminds himself: "I'm a conservationist, I'm one of the new missionaries here not to save souls but to save the earth" (Gordimer 2005: 94). He feels that as a participant in nature's cycles, he has to remain true to his finite existence and try to secure his place in the evolutionary chain. "Whatever 'forever' means, irrevocably lost, or surviving eternally, himself in this garden is part of the complexity, the necessity" (Gordimer 2005: 94). He is filled with doubt, but in the end he knows his place, and knows that doubt is part of the lost innocence of the garden he now finds himself in during his recovery: "Doubt had come to him in the garden where he had begun to apprehend life as a boy. Biodiversity" (Gordimer 2005: 94). There is no escape from the aforementioned "connected[ness] to the physical world," the fundamental premise of all ecological considerations (Glotfelty 1996: xix): "The inevitable grace, zest, in being a microcosm of the macrocosm's marvel. / Doubt is part of it; the salt content" (Gordimer 2005: 95). The mentioning of the "salt content" immediately refers us back to the complex ecosystem of the Okavango delta itself, where, we are told, large amounts of salt which could lead to the destruction of the ecosystem, are being "managed" by the delta. Paul explains, "we don't know how the salt is

managed. *It is*" (Gordimer 2005: 92). Nature's solution will prevail in the end: "the entire organism named Okavango renews itself" (Gordimer 2005: 181). And Paul knows that it will continue to renew itself, "as long as the earth is not ended by explosions of irreversible radiance. People don't live eternity; they live a finite Now" (Gordimer 2005: 182). If in all her other novels Gordimer exposes the various relations between people and the world, i.e. their immediate social, political, economic and, in some cases, natural environments, in *Get a Life* she expands this particular notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere, and its endangerment. In theory, that is the role ecocriticism claims for itself as a critical approach (cf. Glotfelty 1996: xix). The novel's perspective on the Okavango is reminiscent of Loren Acton's²⁰ observation from his trip on board of Challenger Eight space shuttle, which Glotfelty quotes as a reminder of the "global context of ecocritical work": "Looking outward to the blankness of space, sprinkled with the glory of a universe of lights, I saw majesty – but no welcome. Below was a welcoming planet. There, contained in a thin, moving, incredibly fragile shell of the biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama and comedy. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is" (Acton 1988 in Glotfelty 1996: xxv). And it is worth fighting for, because that is the only place where humans can exist. Despite the fact that Paul knows that what he is doing to save the planet is "child's play, a fantasy, when you admit the pragmatism in nature" (Gordimer 2005: 169), he cannot help himself. The instinct to survive is there. The term "child's play," also the title of the first part of the novel, refers to Paul's childhood and ultimately to the garden of his childhood where he discovered his vocation for conservationism. After his father's death, he feels that he must carry on with his job, that nature does need him, even if in his almost insignificant capacity:

He had his sense of loss carried with him in the wilderness that still needed him and his team, Derek, Thapelo, always new threats to which there must be human solutions (if your father dies do you now exist in his place, nature's solution). If there's a possibility for the dune mining project or the pebble-bed nuclear reactor to be outlawed that's proof that what is a vocation and an avocation may be worth pursuing in the limited span of one individual's minuscule existence, not seen from Space. (Gordimer 2005: 177)

Early in the novel, we read that Paul's parents abide by "an unwritten covenant that the life of the child, and by descent the child's child, is to be valued above that of the original progenitors" (Gordimer 2005: 4). Life is passed on from one generation to the next, in this sense humans as part of nature undergo the same process of renewal. Knowing that only "[w]hen the wilderness received him he

²⁰ Cheryll Glotfelty's father.

would believe the oncologists' guarded edict that he was all clear, belonged among humankind, animals, birds, reptiles, insects, trees and plants without taint or threat" (Gordimer 2005: 89) makes Paul go back to the wilderness for confirmation. And only then when he has been back "home" in the wilderness, was he "utterly renewed" (Gordimer 2005: 101). He and the wilderness have the same 'nature.' But part of human nature is also the knowing of where one came from. Symbolically, Adrian not only represents that knowledge as a father, but also as an archaeologist. With Adrian and Paul as protagonists, the narrative constantly moves between the two spheres of conservationism they represent: the preservation of the past as production of culture and meaning through archaeology, and the sheer physical preservation of the future through ecological activism.

Gordimer juxtaposes these two spheres in the novel, but not always with the desired effect of strengthening the novel's reading as one about "survival" as opposed to Isaacson's reading of "resounding threat" (Isaacson 2005: 17). In the course of the narrative the reference to the insane era in which we live, in which "there are wars going on over who possesses weapons that could destroy all trace of it," comes up "more or less verbatim three times, [and] on each occasion with reference to archaeological artefacts which, miraculously preserved and unearthed from their ancient past, silently reproach our modern-day recklessness" (Rose 2006: 20). What Rose does not mention is that in all three instances there is also reference to the task of preserving the knowledge about the past and its artefacts in writing.²¹ The fact that Adrian is already dead when in the third instance these references are related to each other, seems to undermine Gordimer's initial proposal of the necessity of conservation. All that remains of Adrian's life is a box of artefacts which will amount to very little if the university decides not to

²¹ "In one letter, he [Adrian] said he was thinking of writing something. The experience of seeing these unearthed accomplishments of the ancient past when you belong to an era where there are wars going on over weapons that could destroy all trace of it" (Gordimer 2005: 143); "Adrian is in Stavanger, taken retirement and presumably writing his thoughts on seeing – what was it – the dug-up accomplishments of ancient times while living in an era of weapons that could destroy itself without trace" (Gordimer 2005: 157); "A well-secured box addressed in the same unfamiliar hand eventually was delivered, containing a few small archaeological artifacts, a reproduction feather headdress of the kind seen being made with delicate ancestral skill by vendors outside the Museum of Anthropology, and what was evidently a draft of thoughts on the experience of seeing unearthed accomplishments of the ancient past when you belong to an era where there are wars that could destroy all traces of it. She [Lyndsay] gave the artifacts, headdress, and the manuscript to the Department of Archaeology at a university where one of the academics was a friend. She asked, maybe the university press would publish the draft in some form" (Gordimer 2005: 178).

publish his draft on them.²² His position in the continuity of human existence is not secured. The narrative seems to undermine Adrian's ambitions by indirectly exposing the futility of his enterprise, just as it indirectly exposes the futility of Paul's with the reference to the aforementioned pamphlet Paul reads on the eagles and the area where they live which used to be a sea (cf. Gordimer 2005: 168): "the language of the pamphlet in hand fails to represent the being of the withdrawn black entity on the bed of dead wood and the other disappearing off into the sky and returning in the guise of a menace or as deliverance of omniscience, as the surveyor's plans and the reports he writes fail to represent the Okavango or the Pondoland dunes" (Gordimer 2005: 167). The reader is left with the uncomfortable conclusion that just as Adrian does not really achieve anything, his son might not be able to either, since his reports fail to represent the regions he wants to protect, whereas we know that their protection from developers depends on his representation. The reference to the eagles in this context gains additional importance when we think back to the statue of a "giant Mayan eagle" Adrian and Lyndsay see in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City – remembering the statue and a comment Adrian makes about the hubris of the ancient people, Lyndsay comments in their hotel room on "relics of an exalted civilisation that Cortés and his successors toppled," which brings to her mind "a flashback of the plane plunging into the second of the World Trade Center towers" (Gordimer 2005: 107). To which Adrian, almost naively, responds: "Of course, we understand the present a bit better by knowing the past" (Gordimer 2005: 107). But understanding, here the narrative context seems to propose, does not mean being able to prevent the same devastating socio-political developments from happening all over again. However, the ending of the novel suggests that not all is as bleak as that. Two lines of argument run parallel to each other. On the one hand, we are left with the inconclusiveness of the success of Paul's activism and Adrian's attempts at preserving the past, on the other with a high dose of optimism. On the one hand, we are confronted with the uncomfortable facts that all that remains to Paul and his team in the end are "delaying tactics" (cf. Gordimer 2005: 185). Some dangerous plans are either "set aside," "halted," "pending," or "shelved, not torn up," so that Paul and his colleagues must be "prepared to hang in there" because shelved does not mean "abandoned" (cf. Gordimer 2005: 185-7). Meanwhile, Paul continues going for his scans, and hears a similar verdict: "All clear for the present; another scan, maybe, delayed for another decision"

²² As an aside, I would like to point out a possible case of intertextual affinity. Adrian's artefact box strangely echoes the stone cases J.M. Coetzee's magistrate tries to decipher and preserve for prosperity in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). But just as he cannot write history, Adrian's task remains unfulfilled. The pining down of history is a fragile act.

(Gordimer 2005: 186). Like the ecologically fatal projects which are on hold, Paul's cancer is also halted. In the case of environment protection, the "final licence of destruction must never be admitted, granted. That's the creed. Work to be done" (Gordimer 2005: 187). This attitude echoes an earlier statement in the novel: "Success sometimes may be defined as a disaster put on hold" (Gordimer 2005: 99). However, just as it is not in Paul's power to determine the recurrence of his cancer, it might not be in his power to delay the developments he is fighting against forever. Yet, on the other hand, the final sentence of the novel offers plenty of optimism. Paul's second child is born, "Wet the baby's head! Derek toasts" (Gordimer 2005: 187). A page earlier we are told that this baby, Paul's son and Adrian's grandson, "has emerged to take on the world with all the necessary equipment, weapons – two arms, two hands, ten prehensile fingers, two legs, feet and [ten] toes" (Gordimer 2005: 186). Like his predecessors he has all he needs to take on the tasks which might lie ahead of him. According to Jane Gardam the books exemplifies "Gordimer's unfaltering belief that there is always someone ready to do battle against evil (or idiot) notions and scientific coups, and to question easy solutions" (Gardam 2005: n.pag.). After all, a family excursion to the Roodekrans territory, a "half-wilderness" where the eagle is still free, is a lesson of ecology for the kids; Paul explains to them how species relate to each other and their environment (cf. Gordimer 2005: 159-60), symbolically preparing them to take the baton from him in the next generation. Somehow we are left with a feeling, however construed, of everything being under control. One has the impression that in spite of contrary evidence, the narrative wants to close with an upbeat ending, and some critics actually describe *Get a Life* as a novel of hope.²³ Gordimer's own insistence on the book being about survival certainly reveals her own intentions. With all the critical projects which could endanger the environment on halt and the new baby born, the final note is upbeat (cf. Rose 2006: 23). It is not the first time that Gordimer deploys, in Shilling's words, "children as symbols of enduring hope" (Shilling 2005: n.pag.). At the end of Gordimer's three out of four post-1994 novels children point to a hopeful future: the black baby adopted in *None to Accompany Me*, Duncan's son in *The House Gun*, and now two babies in *Get a Life*, Klara and Paul's newborn son. Yet, whereas in the first two instances the symbolism the children carry is without any doubt that of hope, in *Get a Life*, their presence is tinted by darker undertones.

²³ Cf. Hoover 2005: "Framed by the history of South Africa, Gordimer's novel is a small and precious gift of hope and renewal, a message that the world is still worth saving and that we, in our individual actions, can do it" (Hoover 2005: n.pag.); or Braile 2005: "This is a hopeful novel" (Braile 2005: n.p.); or Rose 2005: "[. . .] with the reactor halted, and the birth of a new baby to Paul and his wife on the last page, the final note is upbeat" (Rose 2005: 23).

In the case of Paul's second son, the conception is surrounded by scepticism. When Benni first proposes to Paul to have a second child, he is very sceptical. In the beginning she cannot conceive, and he, after the cancer treatment, cannot face the idea of more tests to investigate the possible causes. Besides he is also scared that his sperm might carry residues of the poisonous radioactivity he has been treated with (cf. Gordimer 2005: 119). His worry is: "What kind of a child could come of it" (Gordimer 2005: 119). This inevitably echoes rape victim Lucy's predicament²⁴ in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), and one of Gordimer's own subplots in the novella "Karma" (2003) where a lesbian couple decides to abandon the thought of having a baby through artificial insemination, fearing that the sperm donor might carry the atrocities of the apartheid past in his genes. Moreover, Paul does not really know that eventually Benni decides to have the baby on her own. Without his knowledge she stops taking the pill and conceives after all. When she tells him about the pregnancy, he is scared the baby might be deformed and indirectly suggests abortion to her. Instead of celebrating, he stretches out his hand to her "as if she were to be pulled from a foundering boat or a landfall" (Gordimer 2005: 170). He tells himself that until the baby is born he has to trust Benni's instinct that everything will be all right (cf. Gordimer 2005: 172). Her instinct proves correct, but their son's birth is an occasion filled with doubt and insecurity until more hope is infused into it by the final baptism scene.

Klara's presence in the novel as a symbol of hope is just as problematic. By adopting her, "Lyndsay goes out to get a life," the 'life' announced in the title, as Isaacson suggests (Isaacson 2005: 17). The same can be said of Benni's conception, she also "gets a life." But Klara is a little black girl who is HIV positive, has been brutally raped and abandoned by her mother to live in a hospice for children of similar fate. Lyndsay's adoption of her is highly unlikely in realistic terms. At the onset of the novel, Lyndsay is 59. By the time of the adoption she is even older and on the verge of a divorce. A single, ageing woman is usually not considered for an adoptive parent. Two facts might have helped her cause: in the course of the novel she is appointed to serve as a judge on the Constitutional Court; and she supports Charlene's (the social worker in charge of Klara's case) brother-in-law's claim against his employer who dismissed him from work because of his HIV status (cf. Gordimer 2005: 142). However, both would implicate corruption, and one has the feeling that this was not Gordimer's intention, especially since corruption is harshly criticised throughout the novel and is never

²⁴ "What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred..." [emphasis mine]. This quote from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) was used by Ken Barris as an epigraph to his 2006 novel which also uses part of the sentence for its title: *What Kind of Child* (2006).

directly linked to Lyndsay. Her professional record is compared to the likes of Bizos and Chaskalson, both known as lawyers of utmost integrity (cf. Gordimer 2005: 69). The improbability of the circumstances aside, Lyndsay's decision to adopt Klara seems unlikely in the light of what Paul knows about his mother: "He could not place, with Lyndsay, this action. She had never been particularly fond of children, it seemed, kept a kind of privacy even before herself and the four she bore [. . .] and she did not drool and coo over her grandchildren although she and Nickie were rather companionable, he loved this special friend" (Gordimer 2005: 153). In this context Benni's opinion on her mother-in-law's action is spot-on; she thinks that Lyndsay adopts Klara because it is "trendy to adopt a black child, or an orphan from, say Sarajevo or India" (Gordimer 2005: 153). Although Benni keeps the thought to herself, Lyndsay is not oblivious of the possibility: "Her own motives were suspect to her" (Gordimer 2005: 150). Rose suggests that Gordimer allows her character to admit to this doubt, as if to forestall objections (cf. Rose 2006: 23). Isaacson leaves it at that, stating that the "possibility that Lyndsay is simply 'showing off' exists, just as it exists for Vera Stark's lesbian daughter Annike [sic] and her partner" (Isaacson 2005: 17). In one of Gordimer's stories, "The Generation Gap" (2003), we find the reference to the attractiveness of the child of colour to the white parent in post-apartheid South Africa (the white woman with whom the father of the story has an affair has a child of colour): "The matter of the child might be an added attraction for him. The rainbow child. Many well-meaning people in the past now want some way to prove in practice the abstract positions they hid in, then" (Gordimer 2003b: 85). Bob Hoover sees Klara's adoption in positive terms, as an "action [which] could symbolize the kind of personal response needed from South Africans" (Hoover 2005: n.pag.). Isaacson argues along similar lines and refers to the adoptions in both novels, *None to Accompany Me* and *Get a Life*, as "constructive," as "a positive bridge in a society ravaged by illness and poverty" (Isaacson 2005: 17). However, Rose rightly points out that in the case of the latter, it is not clear who is saving whom – Lyndsay seems to need Klara as much as the baby needs her – and "Gordimer knows from TAC²⁵ that individual acts of redemption, as opposed to state intervention, will not save South Africa from Aids" (Rose 2006: 23). Rose also refers to the trope of a white woman saving a black Aids orphan; it "hovers perilously close to patronage (abandoned wife finds new cause). An act of atonement for apartheid, with disquieting echoes of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, in which the white woman, Lucy, who is raped by blacks and becomes pregnant resolves to keep the child" (Rose 2006: 23). Most likely unintentionally, but both babies, Klara as well as Paul's and Benni's second child, carry with them echoes of the tragic predicament of Lucy's

²⁵ TAC stands for Treatment Action Campaign.

baby. In spite of these echoes, Klara's symbolic value as a carrier of hope is reinforced when we are told that "[t]here was a good chance [. . .] that her HIV-positive status would correct itself shortly; the blood count was encouragingly mounting. This reprieve could happen only in children" (Gordimer 2005: 151). Against all odds, Klara is given a chance. Yet with its darker overtones her symbolic presence in the novel is very inconclusive.

However, no matter how insecure it might be, Klara certainly 'gets a life' through Lyndsay and vice versa. Benni's and Paul's new child or Adrian's romance are also manifestations of the titular process of getting a life. In his work, Paul is symbolically getting a life for the planet. These changes are directly or indirectly provoked by Paul's illness and fill the novel "with the possibility of desire and fulfilment" (Deb 2005: 19). The "slightly contemptuous phrase-of-the-moment," as Gardam calls the phrase of the title (Gardam 2005: n.pag.), applies to all members of the Bannerman family (cf. Hoover 2005: n.pag.), and on a philosophical level, to humanity on the whole. If one does not follow the command, death is the alternative. Not surprisingly, therefore, death looms large in *Get a Life*, implicit in the very title of the novel which seems to counter death by demanding a life for its characters, even those facing death either because of illness or impending old age. *Get a Life* is about Paul's brush with death and the resulting reevaluation of his life, his realisation about the Okavango's "eternity" (Gordimer 2005: 182) (if not annihilated by human folly). In the face of the immortality of the Okavango, Paul is confronted with his own mortality, additionally so because of his illness. Paul's "return home as an infectious child is echoed, later, when his mother adopts an HIV-positive black baby" (Swift 2006: n.pag.). Klara, albeit only a baby, incorporates the possibility of death, and is a constant reminder of the thousands of people living in South Africa with HIV and Aids.

The omnipresent violence in the novel to which I have referred at the beginning of this essay is another such reminder of possible death. As is Lyndsay's and Adrian's confrontation with retirement, "that ominous state" (Gordimer 2005: 24), and the so-called autumn of their lives. The narrator assures us that they "are not old. The ladder of ageing has extended since medical science, sensible exercise, healthy diet have enabled people to linger longer and younger before ascending to disappear in the mystery at the top. ('Passing away' is the euphemism, but to where?)" (Gordimer 2005: 5). The question is reminiscent of the one asked by the widow in one of Gordimer's most recent stories, "Allesverloren" (first published the same year as *Get a Life*): "Gone?" (Gordimer 2007a: 89). Although they are separated by then, Lyndsay also becomes a widow as Adrian dies of a heart attack in Norway.

Shiling points out that Gordimer is in her eighties "and she handles her apocalyptic themes – birth, death, disease, divorce, the future of the planet and its

inhabitants – with the calm intelligence of a writer who has been confronting such subjects for a very long time” (Shiling 2005: n.pag.). But there is a shift in her recent writing in the urgency of that confrontation, which may simply result from Gordimer’s private preoccupation with death. *Get a Life* begins with the inscription “Reinhold 2005,” the name of Gordimer’s husband and the year of the book’s publication. *Beethoven is One-Sixteenth Black* is also inscribed in this manner: “Reinhold 2007.” Reinhold Cassirer died in 2001, and *Loot* (2003), an earlier collection of short stories, was dedicated to him, carrying his life dates and the dates of their marriage. The years 2005 and 2007 seem ominous in this respect, but many critics have noted that the amount of attention Gordimer gives the topic of death in her fiction has intensified – understandably – since her husband’s illness and death. She is also in the phase of her life in which this topic becomes naturally predominant. By no means is it absent from her earlier fiction, but there the confrontation with death took on a more unexpected, violent form, for, as the narrator of *Get a Life* points out, “dying is a remote business, has no reality when you are in your thirties, all that can happen is you’re run over by a bus. Shot by a hijacker” (Gordimer 2005: 20). We frequently encounter examples of such violent deaths in the early Gordimer: the main character of *A Guest of Honour* (1971) is murdered in ambush, Hillela’s first husband is assassinated in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), a young man is accidentally shot by his father in “The Moment Before the Gun Went Off” (1991), Oupa dies as a result of an attack on him and Vera in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), the assassin returns to his victim’s grave in “Homage” (1995), murder is at the centre of *The House Gun* (1998). In Gordimer’s later work, preoccupation with ageing, beginning most notably with Vera Stark’s journey in *None to Accompany Me*, and natural death becomes more evident. It is as if in Gordimer’s earlier fiction death was the opposite of life, while in the recent work it has become part of it, as in *The Pickup* where the young Julie’s sojourns in the desert can be read as lessons of facing her own death (cf. Coetzee 2007: 250). In its many guises death, especially natural death, is the single prevailing theme of all the stories collected in *Loot* and many in *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007). Thus, before turning to a discussion of this theme in *Get a Life*, I want to look at some of Gordimer’s short stories written around the publication of the novel and place the novel in their context.

In “Visiting George” a South African couple travelling in London believe that they have seen one of their exiled friends in the city. When they visit the apartment where he used to live, they are told that “Mr S– died four years ago” (Gordimer 2003a: 72). Ileana Șora Dimitriu points out that the story is a “meditation on an old comrade of the struggle years, exiled in England during apartheid, who decided not to return to South Africa after 1990. The narrator muses about George’s whereabouts and particularly about his disappointment with communisms in

the ex-Soviet Union" (Dimitriu 2005: 97). The story, therefore, gains a broader political significance by bringing together the death of a struggle activist who refuses to come home after the struggle is over, and the demise of two significant ideologies in the South African context, apartheid and communism.

In comparison the "The Generation Gap" and the "Diamond Mine" are meditations on ageing, on the possibility of reaching out for the last time before the inevitable, comparable to Adrian Bannerman's 'getting a life' before the end of his life. In "The Generation Gap" an ageing man has an affair with a young violinist he accidentally meets on a plane. He explains to his baffled children: "There's nothing wrong between Isabel [his wife] and me, but for a very long time there's been nothing right, either" (Gordimer 2003d: 80). The affair reveals the miscommunication levels between the family members, especially the children and their parents; also the many silences which have accumulated over the years between them (about an abortion one of the siblings had, known only to one other sibling but not to the parents, or about an interracial relationship of another who was also scared to reveal the truth to them). In the end, when the father is abandoned by his lover, he also refuses to fill his children in on the turn of events, just as he refuses to share his reasons for the affair in the first place. Only the reader is told of the final choice between two alternatives, the known predictable life with his wife and the magic of the brief affair:

In the mirror in the bathroom, there was her body as she dried herself after the love-making bath together, towelling between her spread legs, and then across the back of her neck as beautifully as she bowed across the violin, steam sending trickles of her hair over her forehead. A mirror full of her. For me, old lover she knew how to love well, so well, her old lover sixty-seven. What alternative. / Death is a blank mirror, emptied of all it has seen and shown. / Death waits, was waiting, but I took the plane to Cape Town, instead. (Gordimer 2003d: 94)

The generation gap of the title is not only a gap of communication but also of opportunity. The ageing man who decides to grasp what he can from life which he feels is ending is opposed by the young woman, still full of possibilities, reaching out to the world and having a choice of what is being offered. At the end, although she is also very much in love with her elderly lover, she takes up a job as first violinist in Canada and after a while enters a relationship with another man there. For her the mirror is still full of possibilities, things to see and show. His is approaching the blankness of death.

After the publication of *Get a Life*, Gordimer reviewed Philip Roth's *Everyman* (2006). She began by quoting the lines she used for "Allesverloren": "Nor dread nor hope attend / A dying animal. . . / Man has created death," and continued by comparing them to Roth's own epigraph for his novel, taken from Keats: "Here

where men sit and hear each other groan; / Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow" (Gordimer 2006: 10). Gordimer placed Roth's novel in the context of two other writers, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez, but she might have added herself to the list, as an author also exploring, what she calls "the violent upsurge of sexual desire in the face of old age [which] is the opposition of man to his own creation, death. / The final kick of the prostate, my old physician friend called it" (Gordimer 2006: 10). The father of "The Generation Gap" and Adrian of *Get a Life* experience an "old man's last fling" (Gordimer 2005: 127). Before the "going away," before the "silence of death, of things which are not" [cf. "Death is silence, things which are not" (Gordimer 2005: 175)] both men live through a late sexual desire similar to that of adolescence (cf. Gordimer 2006: 10). In addition, Adrian shares with other characters in Gordimer's stories the belief in what Robert N. Watson calls annihilationism, the belief in non-existence after death (cf. Watson 1995: n.pag.). It permeates Gordimer's later work, in which her characters are faced with this anxiety. She writes about Roth's Everyman, terminally ill, his "memory of a sensuous experience, relived, invokes the glory of having been alive even while 'eluding death seemed to have become the central business of life and bodily decay his entire story'" (Gordimer 2006: 10). Her characters are not necessarily terminally ill, but they elude death by either experiencing new surges in sexuality or reliving them in their memory. Examples of the first strategy certainly surface in *Get a Life*, when both Bannerman couples resort to sexuality to hold Paul's illness at bay. As Robert Braille notes, "[l]ovemaking occurs with an almost primal force in the novel, cast as the ultimate expression of being human" (Braille 2005: n.pag.). Paul and Benni make love every night before the operation: "Only at night, and in this way, could fear bury itself. The unbelievable become one flesh" (Gordimer 2005: 9). Adrian and Lyndsay deal with the same fear in the same way: "They made love, as Paul and his woman had buried their fear when the judgement came by telephone, and they were not aware of their son without this resort, this brief haven from fearful solitude" (Gordimer 2005: 28). After his recovery, lovemaking restores Paul to himself: "As he used to be. They make love more often than ever" (Gordimer 2005: 102). Yet, Benni is scared that she might be somehow endangered by receiving his sperm into her body, but her fear makes her the one to initiate sex and gradually "the shaming fear disappears under intense pleasure and its expectations of being experienced again and again" (Gordimer 2005: 103). She feels that Paul, "whoever he is" after his return, makes love to her "as if each is the last in his life" (Gordimer 2005: 103).

In comparison, in "The Diamond Mine" a woman remembers her first sexual experience with a young soldier before he headed off into battle. The narrator clearly distances herself from her younger self by introducing her with: "I'll call her

Tilla, you may call her by another name" (Gordimer 2003d: 123). But then she addresses the readers, among them possibly the young soldier, "You might have been the one: him" (Gordimer 2003d: 123). In the last line of the otherwise third-person narrative the narrator returns to the frame of the second-person and questions directly, "Is it still you; somewhere, old?" (Gordimer 2003d: 123). In this story Gordimer expresses the universal longing for remembrance of the defining moments in our lives. The last line adds a deeper meaning to the otherwise simple, beautifully rendered, sexual experience of these two young people. The threat of death lingers in-between the lines of the story, manifested in the presence of the distant war, and indeed, neither the narrator nor the reader know whether the young soldier ever made it to old age. The last line resounds in this context as a death-defying plea.

Similarly, in "L,U,C,I,E." death is omnipresent. After the death of her mother a young South African woman travels with her father to Italy in pursuit of their European ancestors. They visit the cemetery where the woman's great-grandmother, her namesake Lucie, is buried. They are disturbed by the stench of the corpse of a young motorcyclist who died in an accident, rotting in the late summer heat while waiting to be buried in the burial hall. Lucie, confronted by her own name on her great-grandmother's tombstone realises for the first time that the name carries a meaning of greater importance than just her insistence on its correct spelling. Her great-grandmother spelled her name with an 'e' instead of the usual Italian 'a' because of a mysterious story in the family's past according to which she had had an affair with a Frenchman and preferred the French 'Lucie' to the Italian 'Lucia' even when she married her later husband, the present Lucie's great-grandfather. Lucie imagines at first that the stench in the cemetery is the stench of "the secrets of the rotting past" (Gordimer 2003c: 105), her great-grandmother's secrets, but then realises that "it was the secret of the present, always present; the present was just as much there, in that walled place of the dead, as it was where the young bloods, like that one [the motorcyclist], tossed down their bright helmets in the bar, raced towards death, like that one, scattering admiring children in the church square" (Gordimer 2003d: 106). Lucie concludes by admitting, "Now when I write my name, that is what I understand by it" (Gordimer 2003d: 123). For her death becomes part of life, a secret of the present, accompanying her on her way, as perhaps it gradually becomes part of Julie's life in *The Pickup* when she is faced with the eternity of the desert in comparison to her own mortality. And as it becomes another "state of existence" (cf. the subtitle of one of the novel's four parts) for Paul, confronting the "eternity" (Gordimer 2005: 182) of the Okavango.

Another daughter is also exposed to the secrets of the past and to the true meaning of her name by her mother's death in Gordimer's most recently published story, "A Beneficiary" (2007). The story begins with one of Gordimer's typical one-

liners: "Caches of old papers are like graves; you shouldn't open them" (Gordimer 2007b: 115). After her mother's death Charlotte, as her mother called her, or Charlie, as her father prefers to refer to her, finds a letter which reveals to her that the man she had always considered her father is not her biological parent. Charlotte's/Charlie's real father is an actor with whom her mother acted in Peter Weiss's play "Marat/Sade" at the time of their affair. The leading part in the play which the mother portrayed is that of Charlotte Corday, hence the name of her daughter. By renaming her 'Charlie' her stepfather had given her the identity he wanted to secure for her, the identity of his daughter, in spite of the missing biological connection. Thus, when Charlotte/Charlie begins to question her identity and tries to establish a relationship with her biological father – "Charlotte/Charlie (which was she?)" – he does not interfere and allows her to find out for herself that the bond they share has "[n]othing to do with DNA" (Gordimer 2007b: 135).

The death of her husband allows a woman to confront an uncomfortable part of his past in "Allesverloren." She braves a meeting with the only male lover her husband ever had. The story is fascinating in two respects: Gordimer's exploration of the two possibly greatest unknowns in her life – death and homosexuality. Death is the greatest unknown for most of us, especially non-believers (Gordimer is one), but accepted as part of life it has to be dealt with, especially by a writer declaring her own aim in fiction to be the making sense of life, making something coherent out of it (cf. Gordimer in Topping Bazin 1990: xiv). Gordimer has also stood by her conviction that "the two great drives in people in life are sex and politics" (in Bolick 2003: n.pag.) – what she refers to elsewhere as the "great themes in human existential drives" (Gordimer 2006: 10) – and her writing bears witness to this stand. However, it is quite exceptional for somebody who so vehemently pronounces herself a heterosexual, to try to explore the concept of homosexuality repeatedly in her work: through the lesbian couples in *None to Accompany Me* and in one of the sub-stories of "Karma," the gay inhabitants of the main house and the complex relationship between Duncan, Natalie and Carl in *The House Gun*, and now through the one-time gay relationship of the deceased husband in "Allesverloren." Homosexuality is also marginally mentioned in *Get a Life*, when Paul has an erection while a man massages him after recovery ("Take what he is feeling as the last alienation of that state of existence" [Gordimer 2005: 88]), and he and Benni have a lesbian friend over for the *braai*. In themselves the remarks do not seem to add to the texture of the plot, but they fascinate nevertheless, especially when one considers that neither of the two other best-known South African authors, J.M. Coetzee or André Brink, hardly ever included gay characters or mentioned homosexuality in their work. Many other South African authors do, especially of the younger generation. In Gordimer, the constant probing of

the topic in her recent work intrigues as part of her perceptiveness of the changing reality in South Africa, and the opposition it creates to the celebration of heterosexuality in her own fiction.

In "Karma" the two unknowns, death and homosexuality, but also the political drive in its historical dimension, come together again when the wandering soul is denied one of its many reincarnations after the two lesbian women planning parenthood through artificial insemination decide against the procedure. They fear the anonymous "genes from the past, in this country" (Gordimer 2003e: 209); the possibility that the sperm donor might have been a white torturer or his black victim. The fear they experience is reminiscent of Otto's explanation of his origin in *None to Accompany Me*: "The genes [of his Nazi father] are like the ones they have – the men who were beating up kids and shooting them [the policemen attacking black children in the townships]" (Gordimer 1994: 70). The two women thus abandon the idea of having a baby because of the threat of a surfacing past, the very past that would not have tolerated their intimacy as the new dispensation does with its inclusive modern Constitution.

In "Allesverloren" the widow travels to London to meet her husband's lover. As a historian, she feels the need to "bring him back, piece him together, his life that must continue to exist for his survivor," "for her survival" (Gordimer 2007a: 87, 92). She as the survivor, being able to continue her existence on the basis of the memory of her husband, finds that grief becomes boring to other people, who do not want to continue discussing him with her. She realises that many fear death themselves: "Grief is speaking a language that reaches no-one's ears, drawing hieroglyphs for which there is no cracked code. 'Nor hope nor dread attend the dying animal / Man has created death.' [Yeats] Everyone fears death but no-one admits to the fear of grief; the revulsion at that presence, there in us all" (Gordimer 2007: 88). Death, as with the young woman in "L,U,C,I,E." is "there in us all" (Gordimer 2007: 88). Aware of it, the widow also knows that the only way her husband can live on is through her memory of him:

Gone? That implies somewhere. There is no somewhere in this death that man has invented. [cf. 'Nor hope nor dread attend the dying animal / Man has created death.' (Yeats)] Because if the poet is right, man invented it, there's no Divine-supplied invention of an after-life in a fully-furnished heaven or torture-equipped hell gymnasium. The beloved hasn't gone anywhere. He is dead. He is nowhere except in the possibility of recall, a calling-up of all the times, phases, places, emotions and actions of what he was, how he lived while he *was*. (Gordimer 2007: 89)

The love affair with another man is the only episode she cannot recall or relate to her own experience. She only knows from her late husband that it happened after the failure of his first marriage, a kind of reaction to it, and that in spite of the affair

her husband did not consider himself bisexual: "It was some months but to me it's the blank you had a day when you were young and had been drunk all night, your friends told you" (Gordimer 2007: 91). Despite this assertion she clings to, the meeting with the man-lover turns out to be very disturbing for her. Like the wine bottle she gives him for his trouble – the *Allesverloren*, "everything lost," wine of the title – the life of her husband becomes lost to her; she goes away knowing only that "[y]ou know the one you knew. Cannot know the other, any other. *Allesverloren*" (Gordimer 2007: 101). The other love affair will remain beyond her understanding, thus her husband's pieces which she wants to put together form an incomplete puzzle, just as the understanding of death will remain incomplete for her. The question "Gone?" implies a somewhere she will never be able to go to and come back to tell the tale, with death everything is virtually lost, even the memories which remain are unreliable. The widow faces the ultimate challenge of comprehension and the ending of the story might reflect on Gordimer's own attempts at trying to phantom homosexuality and death as a writer, not because of lack of trying, but because of the impossibility of experiencing both, as a heterosexual woman and a living person. Thus, Gordimer herself stakes out the limits of her making sense of life, and death by extension, as an unavoidable part of it. And while she writes of Philip Roth as "a magnificent victor in attempting to disprove Georg Lukacs's dictum of the impossible aim of the writer to encompass all of life" (Gordimer 2006: 10), she herself is by no means less successful in her own attempts at trying. Now as ever, "she is still capable of the lacerating truth" ("Books Briefly Noted: *Get a Life*" 2006: n.pag.), whether it is about matters of life or death, of individual or global significance.

Get a Life allows a final allegorical reading, which might be of interest in this context. Beyond the constant confrontation with individual death, as humankind we are for the first time in history on the verge of the possible annihilation of the entire species as well as the planet, not only because of the weapons of mass destruction we have developed, but even more importantly, because of our gradual destruction of the environment. Although it would seem that countering this threat should have priority in all we do, in practice this is seldom the case. In this respect, Gordimer's last novel transcends her primary literary preoccupation with the present (notwithstanding the past's influence on it, as well as its possible consequences in the future). In spite of *Get a Life*'s up-to-datedness, it encompasses a more far-reaching allegorical dimension than any other of her novels. In this reading, the two Bannerman couples represent two spheres of engagement with the world: the older couple is predominantly occupied with the past and the present (Adrian, the manager turned archaeologist investigates the past; Lyndsay, the constitutional lawyer defends present socio-political establishments manifested in constitutional law), the younger couple is future-

orientated (Paul, the ecologist decides to combine his skills with Benni's, the advertising expert, to save the planet). While until recently it was more important in South Africa to investigate the past as well as elaborate and strengthen the new socio-political dispensation of the present, Gordimer might be suggesting with *Get a Life* that the urgency of a possible non-existence of the future is of greater importance today, globally. When faced with the threat of death, the older couple separate under the strain of the illumination. With their inability to stay committed to each other they symbolically fail, while Paul reconsiders and attempts to heal the "cracks" in his relationship, just as he continues with his work, in spite of all forces standing against him. He and Benni procreate, and their offspring is ready to continue their battle.²⁶ Adrian dies, and very little remains from his work. Lyndsay's adoption of Klara is irrelevant in the context of the possibility that she might never grow up, dying either of Aids or even having no world to grow up in. In the introduction to *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998) Richard Kerridge writes that "the challenge environmentalism poses to literature is this: show how it feels, here and now. Dramatize the occurrence of large events in individual lives. Make contact between the public and the personal, in accordance with the Green maxim: 'Think globally, act locally'" (Kerridge 1998: 6). With *Get a Life*, in her eighties Gordimer again rises to the occasion. In the 21st century an eco-conscious and eco-ethical response to our world is a matter of life and death. The problem is, as Thapelo reminds his friends, "we can't get people to believe" (Gordimer 2005: 114). The same has been said of apartheid, but Gordimer did all she could to show how *that had felt, there and then*, and made an enormous difference to the perception of apartheid in the world. Gordimer's post-apartheid work, and *Get a Life* in particular, is a worthy successor to this legacy.

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²⁶ Cf. "The son has emerged to take on the world with all the necessary equipment, weapons – two arms, two hands, ten prehensile fingers, two legs, feet and [ten] toes" (Gordimer 2005: 186).

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