**Contributor: Craig MacKenzie**

**Entry: Head, Bessie Amelia (1937–1986)**

Novelist, short-story and non-fiction writer Bessie Head was born in a Pietermaritzburg psychiatric institution, her white mother Bessie Amelia Emery (née Birch), who had had a long history of mental illness, having unexpectedly fallen pregnant (the identity of Head’s black father has never been discovered). Head grew up in foster care until the age of thirteen; thereafter the welfare authorities placed her in an Anglican mission orphanage in Durban. In 1961 she met and married fellow journalist Harold Head in Cape Town; their only child, Howard, was born in 1962. After the break-up of her marriage in 1964 she relinquished South African citizenship and took up a teaching post in Serowe, Botswana. Plagued by ill health and mental instability, she died in Serowe with six published works to her name and an international reputation as one of Africa’s foremost woman writers.

Head’s first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), deals in predominantly realist fashion with the flight from South Africa of a young black political activist, his resettlement in Botswana and marriage to a Batswana woman. Her second novel, *Maru* (1971), which derives its name from its eponymous central character, is an altogether more complex work. It has a surface realism that describes the conflicts which arise between Maru and Moleka in their love for the same woman. They are both in line for the chieftaincy of their tribe and Margaret is a ‘Masarwa’, a member of the despised Bushman (San) race who for generations had been the slaves of the Batswana.

*A Question of Power* (1973) is Head’s most unusual and perplexing novel, and it is also the work that has received the most critical attention. Although all four of Head’s novels have an autobiographical dimension, elements of *A Question of Power* are most conspicuously drawn from the life experience of the author. After a disastrous early life in South Africa, the protagonist Elizabeth leaves on an exit permit for Motabeng village in Botswana, where she engages in co-operative gardening ventures with the local Batswana and an international group of volunteer workers. It is in this context that Elizabeth’s mental breakdown occurs. The narrative, which often takes the form of stream-of-consciousness, constantly switches between her tormented mind and the ‘real world’ of the novel – the bustling village life, communal gardening and daily activities of Elizabeth and her son. The novel charts the terrifying course of her breakdown and recovery, and ultimately affirms the primary human values of decency, generosity and compassion.

Head’s first collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), is remarkable for its skilful evocation of aspects of Botswana village life: tribal history, the influence of the missionaries, religious conflict, witchcraft, rising illegitimacy and, most importantly, problems that women in the society encounter. She also wrote a social history, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), and the historical novel *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984).

Three texts have appeared posthumously: the short-story collection *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989), *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (1990), and *The Cardinals: With Meditations and Stories* (1993), a previously unpublished novella (which Head wrote in Cape Town in the early 1960s) and a set of seven shorter pieces.

Head has achieved a posthumous fame that places her in the forefront of African literature. Doggedly individualistic and courageous, she has been a pioneering, inspirational figure for African writers in general and for African woman writers in particular.

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