**Contributor: Hein Viljoen**

**Entry: Eybers, Elisabeth (Francoise) (1915-2007)**

Elisabeth Eybers is regarded as the first of the great Afrikaans female poets. She was born in the Western Transvaal, and lived in Johannesburg both while a student and during her marriage to the industrialist Albert Wessels. They divorced in 1961, when she moved to Amsterdam. Her initial writerly concerns were so-called female ones, like pregnancy, the home, and motherhood; but she evolved into a poet who confronted the vicissitudes of life with a strong, ironical voice. She published 22 volumes of poetry, all except the last collected in *Versamelde gedigte* (*Collected Poems*)(2004), as well as a number of short stories, reviews and essays. She was also an acclaimed poet in the Netherlands.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Elisabeth Francoise Eyberswas born in Klerksdorp and spent her early years in Schweizer-Reneke. Her father was a minister and her English-speaking mother a teacher, and the differences between language and temperament stemming from her parents are recurring themes in her poetry, part of the fruitful opposition between the male and the female principle depicted in her work.

Her early poetry records the experiences of an awakening woman and wife through the different stages of love, marriage, bearing and raising children. Her work in this phase can be described as typically feminine, limited to the home, with a tendency toward the romantic. Yet the strong generative tensions in her work – between the heart and the mind, between fluidity and rigidity – are already clear in the way the poetic persona interrogates the mother of Jesus about her own suffering in the important poem ‘Maria’.

Characteristic of Eybers’ poetry is a duality; a playing out of some tension or conflict between two concepts or attitudes: between male and female, life and death, the past and the present, emotions and thoughts, memory and experience, fluidity and rigidity. ‘Teenspraak’ (contradiction) is one of her favourite words. Rhetorically her work is remarkably dense with negations and negatives that mark a process of ironically weighing things up, of confronting longing and lack, of paring things down to what is essential. She called it ‘a choreography of avoidance’.

With her move to Amsterdam after her divorce in 1961 Eybers’ work was enriched by the experience of exile and displacement and the tension between South Africa and the Netherlands. Her work developed a new concrete sensuousness under the influence of a new environment. The speaker became more and more an old person regarding herself ironically. She developed a new Dutch-inflected language usage to express the interaction between the known and the foreign. In her last collection, *Valreep / Stirrup-cup* (2005), she continued her ironic confrontation with aging and death, returning partly to her mother’s language by including her own English versions along with her Afrikaans poems.

In 1971 Eybers was awarded a second Hertzog Prize for *Onderdak* (*Shelter*)(1968). She was taken up into the Dutch canon as a matter of course, being awarded a number of Dutch prizes, including the prestigious P.C. Hooft Prize. She died in Amsterdam in 2007, aged 92

**Recommended work:**

Elisabeth Eybers*. Versamelde gedigte* (2004)

Ena Jansen. *Afstand en Verbintenis: Elisabeth Eybers in Amsterdam* (*Distance and Connection: Elisabeth Eybers in Amsterdam* (1996)