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Bessie Head thunders from beyond the grave

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Hundreds of international writers, scholars, book critics, publishers and fans converged on Serowe, the Ngwato capital, over the President's holidays to honour the memory of celebrated writer Bessie Head.

Head settled in Botswana after being exiled from South Africa in 1964 for her political views and it was while here that she wrote some of her works that include *Maru*; *A Question of Power*; *When The Rain Clouds Gather*; *Serowe: Village of Rain Wind*, and others. Once the headstrong author had settled in Botswana, she started carving a writing career for herself, eventually gaining international acclaim. The festival attracted Bessie Head-lovers from as far as the United States of America (US), Denmark and Japan.



Speaking at the official opening of the event dubbed 'BessieFest 2007', gender activist and High Court judge Unity Dow described her as a woman who did not fit in the communities that she dwelled amongst because of the colour of her skin.

"At Swaneng Hill School white expatriates are gathering, exchanging ideas, building a school – does she belong to this group? In the village women of her age are getting married, collecting water, cooking meals, curtsying as they offer male relatives their food. Does she belong to this group? Amongst the community

of exiles; she would have been browner than most – did she feel she belonged to this group? Did any or all of these groups consider her one of them? Or was she always the other? Lurking in the margins? Flirting and darting trying to find a home? Trying to be embraced? Or did she boldly stand on the margins, accepting her 'otherness'?" asked Justice Dow.

Dow went on to describe Head as a woman with no physical address. She wondered if Batswana really embraced the famous writer after the apartheid South African regime had rejected her.

"This (Botswana) is not her home because we offered to her, very little was offered to her during her life; this is her home because she staked a claim in its history in a powerful, everlasting way," Dow said.

In her speech, Dow said that despite the mental and emotional turmoil that surrounded her life she persevered and continued to write.

According to some of Bessie Head's former acquaintances and friends, her mental breakdowns at times alienated her from other people. The Danish historian and former curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum, Maria Rytter recalled that at one point, she once visited the author at a time when she had a bout of deep depression. The purpose of the visit was to read Rytter's finished article about the publication of Head's *Maru* in Danish. As the historian started reading the article, the author expressed her financial situation before shouting, "They steal my work, they steal my work" after which she grabbed a table knife

and chased her (Rytter) out of the house – and that was the end of their friendship.

During the event international guests were taken on a guided tour that covered Tshekedi Memorial School (where the author once taught) and Sebina ward, where she once stayed. From there the motorcade went to her house Rain Clouds, which she built with the proceeds from her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, in Newtown ward.

According to some of the author's acquaintances, Head wrote some of her famous works in the bedroom of the two-roomed Rain Clouds, squeezed between her bed and the wall. Although Head was an international writer, she struggled to make ends meet and supplemented her income by selling Cape Gooseberry jam to white residents of Serowe.

According to Rytter, although Bessie Head was well known to Serowe residents, she was often reclusive and almost died alone. However, a nurse at Sekgoma Memorial Hospital, where Bessie lay dying in a coma, is said to have intervened by calling Hugh and Mmatsela Pearce and saying, "Bessie Head is dying here in the hospital, and there is no one to sit with her. Everyone here is up in arms about the fact that she is lying here alone with no family around her. Will you come and sit with her?"

The Pearces sat with the author holding her hand until she died.

The guided tour also took guests to Head's final resting place in the Botlaote Cemetery. At the cemetery, the Danish historian and former curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum, Maria Rytter, recounted the events leading to author's funeral on April 27, 1986 after her death from hepatitis. "Twenty-five men are standing close together looking at two others who, sweating profusely, are digging the cement-hard sand. It is about two o'clock in the morning and the only light the men have is the incredibly enormous, starry, moonless sky arching over the tribal ground. The men are talking loudly around the hole in the sand, sometimes interrupted by a loud outburst of laughter.

"I sit behind them on the running board of the museum Toyota Land Cruiser. The car door is open because I need the light from the little lamp above the rear-view mirror. I sit and make some notes in my diary in order to try to capture the night that the writer Bessie Head's grave was dug by twenty-seven men from the Botlaote tribe in the village of Serowe in the country of Botswana in southern Africa."

In 1988 Gillian Eilersen, the writer of Bessie Head's biography, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*, together with the Bessie Head Committee, spearheaded the marking of Head's grave that had lain unmarked and unattended. They marked the grave with a large stone and attached a metal plate on it that is inscribed, "Courage, Selflessness and Love conquers all".

The festival's organising committee swore to keep Bessie Head's memory alive and to demonstrate that, they roped in Pentagon Publishers to start the annual National Bessie Head Literature Prizes.

This year's winners are: Khonani Ontebetse (novel category), Bontekanye Botumile (short-story) and Monty F Moswela (poetry).

Other activities at the festival included a play *Snapshots* by the UB Drama Group and *Death and Life of Bessie Head* by the Swaneng Hill Drama Group.