

Bessie Head's House a Monument

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GABORONE - The late Bessie Head, who was a world-renowned novelist and one of the earliest writers in Botswana, is to be honoured by declaring her house in Serowe a protected cultural site.

One of the organisers of the event, Tom Holzinger, said the proclamation will be part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of her birth.

The celebrations will be held around June next year in Serowe. This is an effort to honour her. We are celebrating her life and writings in Serowe, Gaborone, Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town.

To that end, we also seek to establish the Bessie Head Heritage Trust, a non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving her legacy, he said.

As part of the celebrations, a writing award in her honour will be established, and school children will also have an opportunity to honour the writer by planting trees.

A new book of her letters and recollections will also be published, said Holzinger. He also said it is possible that they will unravel the secret of her father's identity.

Head, who died 20 years ago this month at the age of 49, has left a legacy of diverse writings and was just at the peak of enjoying international recognition.

She is remembered as an active novelist and story writer whose works focus on issues surrounding African concerns such as village and tribal life, effects of colonialism, traditional and contemporary culture as well as the roles of women.

Head was born in South Africa to a white mother and a black father. She enrolled in teaching, but because of her status and discrimination, she decided to take up a teaching post in Botswana and was eventually granted citizenship.

Holzinger, who is one of Head's old friends says, it is in Botswana where she felt at home and had a feeling that she was appreciated.

However, for many years she felt insecure as a refugee, and she used to frequent the district commissioners office seeking citizenship.

Being a persistent person, she was eventually granted citizenship. Her works include three novels, a volume of short stories, an oral history, and three volumes of collected writings published after her death.

One of her novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is used in Junior Secondary Schools while the Department of English at the University of Botswana has a course which focuses on her works.

Her three major novels: *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, were written in Botswana.

It was through her writings that she gained recognition and prominence to a point where she represented Botswana at international writers' conferences.

Going abroad and being recognised as a writer gave her satisfaction. Since she died her reputation both in Botswana and South Africa has increased.

She is still recognised internationally. An English department in one of the Canadian universities has a course on Bessie Head, he said.

Holzinger, who describes Head as a strong woman, says when she started writing her first novel which was published in 1969, she was in a way marking the beginning of the liberation for women.

This showed how strong she was as there were very few writers who had a strong original view of the world. No one has expressed his or her feelings the way Head has, he said.

He pointed out that while she did not have any writing tools such as a typewriter, it did not deter her from accomplishing her goals.

Holzinger says Head's fictional novels are about herself. She is basically writing the story of her life as a refugee in Botswana, the country which accepted her as one of its people.

He added that once in Botswana she was able to feel free as there was no apartheid, and the country also had intact traditions.

Head was able to portray this through her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, which is a story of Makhaya, a political refugee from South Africa who escapes to Botswana after serving time in prison.

He moves to a village named Golema-Mmidi and finds it populated with people who are seeking a better life.

While the villagers have set up an agricultural project and cattle co-operative, the initiative has become unpopular with the local village chief who has vested interest in maintaining their traditions.

In the novel *Maru* she continues the story of her life as she realises that Botswana also has an element of discrimination towards Basarwa.

A Question of Power is her third novel. It also revolves around an expatriate in Botswana, and is considerably more autobiographical.

The main character, Elizabeth, has settled in a rural town. Like Head, she is a Coloured South African, and is also overcome by loneliness in her new home.

She eventually loses her mind. The first part of the novel deals with her relationship with a man in the village named Sello.

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