

Bessie Head Immortalized

07 September, 2006 - Botswana Daily News - Lorato Galeage

GABORONE - Beneath that death there is life, wrote the late Bessie Head in one of her novels in 1985.

The world-renowned novelist's words echo more, as it seems she forecasted that her compelling works, even in the midst of her death, would continue to reverberate throughout the world as more and more people -- both locally and internationally -- become interested in her literary works.

The Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe, which has always had a large collection of Head's works and letters, is in the process of declaring one of its rooms a permanent Bessie Head exhibit room.

The room will house a collection of Bessie's photos, a biographical outline of Bessie's life, her writing desk, her typewriter, and the Order of Ikhamanga, awarded by South Africa.

The room will also give scholars interested in Head and her works an opportunity to read her letters, memoirs, and other documents and to get a feel of how she used to do her writing.

Prepared for public viewing by Hans Christian Vorting and Jonna Vorting, who are former curators of the museum, the preparation is part of the **BessieFest** anniversary that will take place next year to coincide with her would-be 70th birthday.

One of the organizers of the anniversary, Tom Holzinger, said the Bessiefest is scheduled to take place next year around July, as she would have turned 70 years old during the month.

Her friends and colleagues will honour her for her literary works. Head lived in Serowe for about 20 years.

Her house in the village will also be declared a protected cultural site. A series of activities have been planned with Cape Town as the first stop in May. Gaborone and Pietermaritzburg will host the event. The event will be characterized by renaming of libraries and other places, planting of trees, and publications of Head's books, Holzinger said.

He added that because of her compelling books, Head has been able to advertise Botswana to the world, and that people from far away places such as Britain, India, and the United States have shown interest in participating at the celebrations.

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

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

Head gained recognition and prominence through her writings and had represented Botswana at different international writers conferences.

Since her death, her reputation both in Botswana and South Africa has continued to increase.

An English department in one of the Canadian universities has a course on Bessie Head. Her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, tells 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 seeking a better life.

The village kgosi who has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, however, does not appreciate their initiatives.

In the novel *Maru*, Head tells the story of her life as she realises that Botswana also have an element of discrimination against Basarwa.

Her third novel, *A Question of Power*, is considerably more autobiographical and it also revolves around an expatriate's experience in Botswana.

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

© 2006 Botswana Press Association

Downloaded from <http://www.gov.bw/cgi-bin/news.cgi?d=20060907>