

In search of the spirit of Bessie Head

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A visit to Serowe, village of the rainwind, in 2005

Bessie Head's complex quest for understanding, and for a place for love and tenderness in a world damaged by the evil of power, makes her writing so compelling. She wrote in 1978 that "I have always reserved a special category for myself, as a writer — that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future." [*A Woman Alone*: 64] Original, combative, lyrical, enduring, Head ventured alone into new territories of the imagination, returning to map those places for others in her writing.

I first read Bessie Head in 1984 as a student at the University of Cape Town. I was fascinated then by the otherness of the world she described. A decade later I taught her work at the University of Namibia where she inspired students seeking to understand the complexities of a postcolonial social order. Her enraged feminism, her idealised heroes, and the mix of genres in her work resist the neatly packaged critical readings that consigns writing to oblivion. Her books continue to challenge political and social dogma.

How she wrote — poor, isolated, a maverick in a conservative and homogenous community — has continued to fascinate me. So when a friend asked me to go to Serowe with her, I jumped at the chance of seeing if I could find the spirit of Bessie Head in the remote and dusty village where she made her home.

Serowe is a shock: it is difficult to reconcile its present day chaos with the place the Bessie Head describes. It lies on the choked road between Botswana's capital, Gaborone, and Francistown. Buses, cars, taxis, cattle donkeys, pedestrians jostle for space. The road that sweeps into Serowe from Botswana's capital in the south has brought with it a frenzy of road works, construction, and dust. Serowe is scrabbling into the twenty-first century.

But like most first impressions, I am forced to reconsider. I woke during my first night at the Serowe Hotel and I lay in bed trying to work out what had woken me. I heard nothing. The miracle of that silence slowly filtered through. I listened, cradled in the deep silence of the bush, punctuated once by the mournful bellow of a donkey, twice by an owl's call. The next morning brought a renewed onslaught of noise, but I looked at the village, and Bessie Head, differently, having heard its quiet heart.

Bessie Head's life was marked by tragedy and a deep sense of homelessness. She was born in a Pietermaritzburg mental hospital in 1937 to a 42-year-old white woman, Bessie Amelia Emery, who had suffered a mental breakdown some years prior to Bessie's birth. Her father was a black man but who the father was, and the nature of her parents' relationship, remains a mystery. The little girl was put up for adoption but returned when it became apparent that she was not white.

She was then placed in foster care. She loved her foster mother, Nellie Heathcote, desperately but was removed without any warning from her care when she was 13. She was placed in an Anglican mission in Durban where she was told brutally that Nellie Heathcote was not her mother, and that her own mother had been a white woman who had died mad in an institution in 1943. Bessie Emery was devastated: the spectre of madness and the trauma of repeated loss shaped the rest of this remarkable woman's life.

Bessie trained as a primary school teacher but went to work for the *Golden City Post* in 1959. In 1960 she moved to Cape Town and married a fellow journalist, Harold Head, in 1962. The marriage did not last and in 1964 she and her infant son, Howard, left South Africa for Botswana on an exit permit. She settled in Serowe which she immortalized in *For Serowe, a village in Africa*.

It was in Botswana that Head finally felt able to write. In South Africa, “[t]he environment completely defeated me, as a writer.” Her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, 1968, was followed by *Maru* in 1971. This is a complex love story, describing the taboo relationship between a Setswana chief and a Masarwa woman. In *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind*, 1981, Head created an intimate portrait of her adoptive village with her creative working of the words of more than one hundred of Serowe’s inhabitants. *A Question of Power*, 1973, describes the harrowing mental breakdown that Bessie Head suffered in 1971. It was 1972 before she recovered. *The Collector of Treasures*, a collection of Head’s wonderful short stories was published in 1977. *A Bewitched Crossroad*, an historical novel appeared in 1984.

Bessie Head set great store by her writing and she wrote extensively in her letters about her novels, their structure and meaning. Writing was also the only means she had of earning a living. She was very poor and became increasingly furious with publishers and agents whom she thought were cheating her. “... it wrecks me to pieces — the terrible strain to write well and get nothing for it,” is how she described it in a 1975 letter to Patrick Cullinan.

Head’s voluminous papers are now housed in the Khama III Memorial Museum. It is in her vast correspondence that Bessie Head’s iconoclastic spirit reveals itself. There are some published volumes — Randolph Vigne’s and more recently Patrick Cullinan’s — but fascinating are the boxes of unpublished letters. To Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Yoko Ono, Mongane Wally Serote, James Matthews, Robert Sobukwe, Marquez, Alex la Guma, Michelle Cliff. The list seems endless. I read through these elegant, often humorous letters, amazed at who she knew and corresponded with from this “quiet backwater”. Shocked too at the vitriol with which she wrote of people with whom she has fallen out.

Head’s letters bring to life the world she inhabited, and so often struggled against. But Serowe — the village itself — is also where Bessie Head’s spirit resides. Scobie Lekhutile, the Museum’s curator, offers to take me around.

“I want to see Bessie Head’s Serowe,” I say, as we drive off.

Scobie laughs. “Everywhere you see is Bessie’s Serowe. She wrote it.”

We visit the school where Bessie Head first taught and the teacher’s quarters where she first stayed. It is on the top of one of Serowe’s gentle hills and offers a bird’s-eye view of the homesteads. Women sweep their yards or stir their cooking pots. The older men drift towards the *kgotlas* at the centre of each neighbourhood. Goats graze on sparse bushes. It was this quiet rhythm of life that so appealed to Bessie Head and that she portrayed in her letters and her literature.

We drive to Bessie Head’s house where her son Howard continues to live. Head wrote about her garden to friends all over the world, telling them what she was producing, swapping recipes for jams and asking for seeds of herbs or vegetables she did not yet have. She sent her Cape gooseberry jam to those who she could, and recipes for it to others. Sadly, her beloved garden is now a desolate and sandy wasteland, the only thing intact is the view that she loved when she looked up from her writing or her gardening.

The Boiteko Gardens, a collective project that provided Head with rich material for her novels, was central to Head's life for many years. I asked my guide to take me there.

He gave me a wry look. "Are you sure you want to see it?"

"Of course," I said. "it is so important to Bessie and to Serowe." We drove along a rutted road that curved up a gentle incline. The ground water must be good in that area because the trees are huge and were laden with pungent blossom.

"There it is," Lekhutile pointed to an enormous wasteland. At the far end earth-moving equipment scoured blunt snouts through the rich, red soil. Uprooted trees lay awkwardly along the periphery, their leaves withering. Clustered around the edge of this wasteland were thick-trunked old trees. The gardens where the women grew vegetables are gone. So are the weaving and the workshops. They were bulldozed the previous week to make way for a filling station and a strip mall. The gentle pace of life that Bessie Head knew and recorded — one that she took pains to point out then was fast disappearing — has been replaced with rapacious and uncontrolled development.

But the old still co-exists with the new. There are still traditional wards, the shape of a horseshoe, the same shape as Serowe hill, intact. Here the houses are arranged around the kgotlas, the large central area where the focus is an enormous tree. It is here that issues of any importance are discussed. The homestead facing the kgotlas I visit is preparing a wedding. I am invited to see how the special bridal hut is prepared. The rondavel is a work of art, shaped by women's hands, the soft red plaster offset by an ochre trim. The din of the bulldozers is muffled here.

For Head, who struggled throughout her life with demons of her own, Serowe was sometimes loving and enveloping, at other times, malign and filled with evil. This glimpse behind a perimeter fence gives me the beginning of an understanding of the heart of a place that Bessie Head wrote about. Bessie Head is an enigmatic, difficult writer, but one of great insight into the lives of the insignificant and the powerless. Serowe, for all its paradoxes, was the lifeblood of the enduring literary legacy she bequeathed us.

Bessie Head died, aged 48, of alcohol-induced hepatitis in 1986. She is buried in a crowded graveyard in Serowe, her grave marked by a simple, rough-hewn stone and the epitaph *Courage, Selflessness and Love conquer all*.

The moon has risen, almost full above the thorn trees but the village is dark, enveloped in contented silence. I walk through the village thinking about what Bessie Head would make of the list of scholars who have visited the her archive. Bessie Head may be dead, but her voice, which echoes in Serowe, is as strong and as insistent on being heard as ever. Her admirers and friends in Serowe and further afield are planning a celebration of Bessie Head's seventieth birthday in 2007. I try to imagine the letters she would write to absent friends describing such an event. It would, I'm sure, be acerbic, funny and furious — like Bessie Head herself.

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