

A Brief Sketch of the Life of Bessie Head

Bessie Amelia Head never knew her real parents: an unstable white woman and an unknown black man. She was born and raised in apartheid South Africa. There she suffered from poverty, racial segregation, and gender discrimination. She also had to worry about her own "delicate nervous balance".

As a young woman she left South Africa to come to Botswana. She lived the rest of her life in this country, mostly in Serowe. Bit by bit she overcame her many formidable obstacles. One of her passions was letter-writing; she corresponded with hundreds of people from many countries during her life. At the end she was a famous writer known all around the world. This is her story.*

Childhood and Schooling

Bessie Head was born on July 6, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. Her mother, Bessie Amelia Emery (nicknamed 'Toby'), was a patient at the Fort Napier Mental Hospital in that city. Toby insisted that her daughter should be given the same full name as herself. So the baby became Bessie Amelia Emery.

Toby was too ill to raise the child. Infant Bessie was first given to a white family for adoption. They soon realised that Bessie was not 'white' and returned her. Bessie was then put into the care of Nellie and George Heathcote, a 'Coloured' couple who were devout Catholics. She grew up their home, believing that Nellie was her real mother.

Alice Birch, Toby's mother and Bessie's grandmother, was concerned for Bessie's welfare. She sent monthly cheques to the Heathcotes. However, Toby died in the Fort Napier Hospital when Bessie was only 6. After Toby's death, Alice stopped sending money and ended her connection with her granddaughter. Little Bessie would never learn anything about Toby except her name — which was her own.

(It is likely that only Toby and Alice, and possibly Toby's brother, knew the identity of Bessie's father, but they kept it a closely guarded secret. Alice died in 1964 at age 93, taking her family's secrets with her).

After finishing Standard 4 at the age of 12, Bessie was taken from Nellie's home and sent to St Monica's Home near Durban. This was an Anglican boarding school for 'Coloured girls'. It meant an enormous change in her life, and at first she didn't like either the strict discipline or the new religion. But soon she loved her new school, especially the library, where she spent a lot of her time.

When she was 14, a dreadful thing happened. St Monica's refused to allow her to visit Nellie for Christmas. Instead they took her to the magistrate's court where they told her that Nellie was not her mother. "Your mother was a white woman and your father was a Native," they said. Bessie cried and cried to go home to Nellie, to no avail. For the rest of her life she never forgot the shock and cruelty of that day.

She retreated into books. At age 16, just after writing her Junior Certificate examination, she ran away from school and went home to Pietermaritzburg.

Fortunately she agreed to return to school and fortunately she passed the exams! She started a 2-year course for primary school teachers. She qualified well except in Physical Training.

In January 1956, at age 18, Bessie left St Monica's. She had enjoyed the protected life of a girls' boarding school for 6 years. Real life was about to begin.

Teacher and Seeker

Bessie immediately began teaching at the Clairwood Coloured School in Durban. For the next 2½ years she enjoyed intense intellectual growth. She became aware of the political turmoil in South Africa. Hinduism fascinated her, and for a time she became a Hindu. (She never rejoined a Christian church).

But she did not enjoy teaching. Her students were ill-disciplined and seemed not appreciate her efforts. Together with the religious turmoil in her mind, it was too much for Bessie. She felt that she was on the brink of a mental breakdown.

In June 1958 she resigned from her teaching job. She had decided to become a journalist in the Cape. Together with Nellie Heathcote she celebrated her 21st birthday in July. Using most of her savings, she excitedly bought a ticket and said goodbyes. At the end of the month she boarded a train to Cape Town and rode away into a totally new life.

Life as a Journalist

Bessie had good luck finding a job. She became a freelance reporter, and the only woman reporter, at the *Golden City Post*. This was an important newspaper for 'non-white' readers. She rented a room in the poor 'Coloured' community of District Six. However, most of her neighbours spoke Afrikaans. Fair-skinned 'Coloureds' acted as if they were more cultured than others. (Bessie was too dark for them). At home and at work she was rudely confronted with her own identity.

The next year, 1959, she moved to Johannesburg to work for the weekend magazine *Home Post*. Here she met well-known African journalists and learned certain writing skills from them. She encountered a militant liberation movement, the Pan-Africanist Congress, and later joined it. Its leader, Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, remained one of her heroes all her life.

Bessie herself was a failure at politics. In 1960, following the Sharpeville massacre, she was arrested for her PAC activities. She gave the police some unimportant evidence, a mistake which tormented her. Then a well-known artist, whom she greatly admired, sexually assaulted her. In despair she tried to commit suicide.

After a time in hospital, she returned to Cape Town. She began to write again for the *Golden City Post*, but became depressed and quit. For several months she was 'invisible'. When she re-emerged, she started her own little homemade newspaper, *The Citizen*, which expressed her strong pro-Africanist views.

Marriage

In mid-1961, while selling *The Citizen*, she met Harold Head, a journalist and a member of the non-racial Liberal Party. They were quick to fall in love; they married in September. Harold got a job helping to publish *Contact*, the Liberal newspaper. They moved into a crowded house in District Six.

Married life, initially, seemed happy. Harold calmly accepted Bessie's quick temper and changes of mood. Their son, Howard, was born the following year in May 1962. Underneath, however, Bessie began to feel angry and alienated from both her country and her marriage. Apartheid grew more cruel every day. She experimented with poetry and fiction, publishing a short piece in *The New African* with a memorable last line: "I've just got to tell a story." A writer waiting to be born!

In September Harold accepted a reporting job in Port Elizabeth, and the Heads briefly relocated. A few months later, in 1963, Harold became editor of *Contact* and returned to Cape Town. Bessie and Howard followed him in October, but not for long. Bessie knew her marriage had failed. Toward the end of the year she moved to her mother-in-law's house near Pretoria, taking Howard with her.

Early in 1964 she dreamed of leaving South Africa altogether. She had spent almost 6 years in the turmoil of South Africa's largest cities, and she felt defeated. She had written one short novel, *The Cardinals*, but felt that it was childish. In a free African country, she thought, she would find new inspiration for her writing. She applied for a teaching post in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, in a village called Serowe. She was overjoyed when she was accepted.

The South African government, however, refused to give her a passport. Desperately she sought the aid of a writer friend, Patrick Cullinan, who helped her to obtain a one-way exit permit. It meant that she would never return to South Africa, but Bessie did not mind.

In March 1964 she packed everything and bought train tickets to Mafeking [now Mafikeng] and Palapye. From Palapye she would take a bus to Serowe. She was happy but fearful. For the third time in her life, she was about to make a new beginning in unfamiliar surroundings. This time, however, she would leave the curse of apartheid behind.

Serowe: the First Period, 1964–1965

In 1964 Serowe was a large and thriving traditional African town. It was the centre of regional politics, stirring with the political winds of *Boipuso* [Independence] just 2 years away. It was also a meeting place for an increasing number of South African political refugees, including Patrick van Rensburg at Swaneng Hill School.

In April Bessie went to work at the Tshekedi Khama Memorial primary school. She and Howard lived in a rondavel in Sebina ward, near the centre of Serowe. They received a surprise when Harold Head suddenly visited on his way into exile in Canada. He had evaded the South African police by crossing illegally into Bechuanaland at night. (Bessie later used his adventure in *Rain Clouds*).

During her first year she was enthusiastic about village life, and she wrote a number of stories about it. But things gradually turned sour. After a nasty incident with her school Principal — she thought he had made a sexual advance to her and she bit him — the school authorities ordered her to take a sanity test. Humiliated and angry, she abandoned her teaching job.

In late 1965 she began writing seriously, often at night by candlelight. Moral support and a little money came by post from Patrick Cullinan in Cape Town and Randolph Vigne in London. However, she remained desperately poor. She met Patrick van Rensburg for the first time, and he came to her assistance. He would help her often during her years in Botswana.

In February 1966 she left for Radisele, south of Palapye. This small village was the home of the Bamangwato Development Association. Bessie enjoyed the agricultural work at the BDA farm and gained a lasting interest in farming and gardening methods. She also had her first vision of God, an omen of the future.

After 5 months Bessie and Howard had to leave the farm in a dispute over accommodation. Luckily she found a job in Palapye, working as a typist. There she received the news — and £30! — that she had sold a story in the UK, "The Woman from America". She didn't know it yet, but this was her turning point.

After 2 months Bessie quarrelled with her Palapye boss and was fired. This time she believed she no choice: she would have to become a political refugee. She and Howard took the northbound train to Francistown. There was a large refugee settlement there.

Francistown: 1966–1968

Francistown was where refugees waited for educational opportunities outside southern Africa. Bessie and Howard settled into a 2-roomed cottage that was said to be haunted. Bessie applied to several countries for resettlement, but in vain. She had no passport and her finances were often desperate.

What she did have was her burning desire to write. At Randolph Vigne's request she wrote a short article about Botswana's Boipuso celebrations on September 30, 1966, "Chibuku Beer and Independence". She also made plans for a full-length novel based on her experiences at Radisele.

Half a world away, in New York, the publishers Simon & Schuster had read "The Woman from America". In December 1966 they asked her for a novel and sent £80 as an advance payment for the book. Bessie went to work at once. At last having a typewriter, she wrote *When Rain Clouds Gather* in just under a year.

After the book was finished, Bessie encountered personal problems in Francistown. Again she had religious visions that seemed to place her in a special relationship with God. Howard reported trouble at school because he was 'Coloured'. By the end of 1968 they were ready to move back to Serowe.

Serowe: the Second Period, 1969–1986

When Bessie returned to Serowe in January 1969, she brought with her high optimism and advance copies of *Rain Clouds*. However, the move proved to be

difficult. She became the subject of gossip. She refused when the owner of her rented house asked her to move out, and she was taken to court. Fortunately she received timely assistance from Lenyeletse Seretse, the Council Secretary and future Vice-President. As before, she felt victimised.

A mental breakdown ensued and she was briefly hospitalised. Surprisingly, this setback had two helpful outcomes. First, the villagers who had resented her now accepted her as crazy and left her alone. Their gossip subsided. Second, Bessie's anger against the village disappeared. She became calm and creative once again.

More good news followed. *Rain Clouds* was published in New York and London; it received excellent reviews. With encouragement from new friends, and in a wave of creativity, she began a new novel, *Maru*. With money from *Rain Clouds* she began to build her own house. *Maru* was finished in September 1969; the house was completed in November.

She called her new house "Rain Clouds". It was her home for the next 16 years. It had a gas stove — a luxury at that time — and running water in the bathroom. But Serowe still did not have electricity, and for years she continued to write by candlelight. She didn't buy a refrigerator until the end of her life and she never had a telephone.

The Boiteko project, a self-help scheme started by Patrick van Rensburg, brought new activities into Bessie's life during 1970. She became an instructor of the gardening group. In the garden she established a long and unique friendship with Bosele Sianana. Bosele was her confidant, interpreter, and the friend who taught her many old Tswana traditions.

Sadly, she became involved in personal disputes again, and after 9 months she was asked to leave the garden. It was her pattern. Bessie entered a period of depression; she also became overweight. Her spiritual visions and hallucinations became more frequent and more extreme. She spent Christmas Day in bed. Nonetheless, throughout 1970 she was able to write and to make final corrections to *Maru*.

The Breaking Point and Renewal

When *Maru* was published in February 1971, Bessie was seriously ill with depression and delusions. In the end she snapped. She punched a neighbour woman in the face, drafted a hysterical letter to Vigne, and wrote a wild denunciation of the President. The next day she pasted up her accusations at the post office.

The authorities, including the President, were gentle with her. After a court hearing she was sent to the mental hospital in Lobatse. Howard stayed with neighbours. In the hospital she was left alone. Bit by bit her delusions faded away. Toward the end of June, Bessie was well enough to leave the hospital and return home.

Once on the road to recovery, she started her most difficult book, *A Question of Power*. It is an autobiographical novel, using incidents from her early life as well as her recent nightmares. She wrote rapidly, finishing the book in April 1972. But several publishers thought it needed rewriting. She had 8 months of nervous

worry before it finally accepted for publication. During this time she resumed her friendship, by mail, with Robert Sobukwe, who had recently been released after many years of solitary confinement in prison.

A Question of Power appeared in October 1973 to immediate praise and acclaim. None of Bessie's other books received so much attention. She was soon known to readers and writers in many countries.

Her next book was about Serowe itself, built around the lives and times of three of its important personalities: Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama, and Patrick van Rensburg. Although she completed the book in 1974, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* was not published until 1981. The delay was due to a clash with publishers and several poor decisions by Bessie.

Also in 1974, she assembled some of her short stories to be published together as a book. Unfortunately, *The Collector of Treasures & Other Botswana Village Tales* was delayed until 1977, for the same reasons. One result of the delays was that Bessie went into debt and was desperate for money for several years.

In April 1976 she had better news. She was invited to attend the first Writers' Workshop organised by the completely new University of Botswana in Gaborone. Here Bessie presented her first academic paper. It was also her first attempt at public speaking. She was terrified and spoke in a tiny voice that few people could hear. But it was an excellent paper.

The Final Decade

Bessie often worried about her security in Botswana. Technically she was still a refugee, reporting weekly to the police office! She applied for citizenship in 1977 and was upset when she was refused. Paradoxically, she was granted Botswana citizenship in 1979 without asking for it. Perhaps it was because she had already become an international traveller and unofficial ambassador for Botswana.

Bessie published one more book in her lifetime, the long historical novel *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga*. It appeared in 1984 after many years of research and complicated writing. It follows the Sebina clan as they seek protection from Khama the Great in Shoshong, followed by the political manoeuvring that led to the visit of the *Three Dikgosi* [three famous Tswana chiefs] to London in 1895. Although this book is the least known of her writings, it is her greatest celebration of African history and traditions.

Bessie Head was almost worn out. In the mid-1980s she endured a painful rupture with her son Howard, then an unexpected divorce after 25 years from her far-away husband Harold. She was seriously overweight and began to drink heavily. At the end, when her liver became inflamed, it could not keep her going.

Her last great piece of writing was a brief, personal article in March 1985, "Why Do I Write?" It ends with her most famous words: "I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of mankind up there with me. That is why I write."

Bessie Head died on 17 April 1986 in Serowe. She is buried in the old cemetery, on the hillside behind Botlaote ward, amidst trees and flowers.

Philosophy and Sensibility

Bessie always emphasised that her outlook was a universal one. She refused to be called an African writer, a black writer, a feminist writer, or a revolutionary writer. She wrote for all people, everywhere.

Like many artists, her life was marked by contradictions and changes in spirit. She could be exalted one day and depressed the next. Her real-life heroes were often transformed into enemies in her mind.

She suffered from frequent nightmares. At the same time she was inspired by visionary dreams. Her worst mental suffering was at night. During the day she was characteristically cheerful and friendly.

She was famous for her quarrels as well as for her writing. She had a combative spirit, and she was sometimes rude, even hateful toward other people. She knew that she had an unstable mind. She called it 'my curse'.

One of her distinctive attitudes, in both life and writing, was to take sides with ordinary people against people with power. "I have built up a kind of people religion that is rooted in the African soil," she wrote in her final statement. "My world opposes the world of politicians ... They plan for and dictate to the people. In my world people plan for themselves ... It is a world full of love, tenderness, happiness and laughter."

Travels

As a renowned writer, Bessie Head was invited to many writers' workshops and seminars. Thus after 1976 her life was marked by frequent overseas travels. She thoroughly enjoyed these occasions, and so did her listeners and readers.

United States 1977. She attended the prestigious International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa from September to December. Established writers from all over the world were invited; Bessie represented Botswana. She delivered 10 lectures during her stay, at least one of them in Canada.

West Berlin 1979. Bessie participated in the Berlin International Literature Days and gave a paper to the Writers' Workshop. Twenty-five prominent authors from Africa and the Caribbean were invited. She was the only woman. She denounced the organisers for arrogance, and her fellow writers applauded her.

Denmark 1980. She and Howard attended the 75th anniversary of the Danish Library Association. It published an anthology of modern African literature, *The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses*. Bessie contributed the title story. She spoke often to the admiring Danish public and made several television appearances.

Holland 1981. Bessie was invited to attend a literary celebration in Amsterdam. Together with other Third World authors who wrote about day-to-day life, she was featured on a television programme and contributed a written article.

Nigeria 1982. Bessie was asked to be the keynote speaker at a conference on "African Literature and the English Language" at the University of Calabar. Here

she learned that her writings had a major place in the study of African Literature. She greatly enjoyed the company of the Nigerian intellectuals who hosted her.

Australia 1984. She gave public readings, talks, and discussions during the Writers' Week of the Adelaide Festival. Many other famous writers also participated. She was welcomed enthusiastically by the public, and all her books on display were sold. She felt triumphant.

England. On her way to and from international events, Bessie made several visits to England, where she met with old South African and English friends. On one visit her London publisher, Heinemann, gave a warm, intimate party for her.

Physical Legacy

The day after her death, Bessie's thousands of documents — letters, books, manuscripts, newspaper clippings, bank statements, and more — were gathered together and transferred to the Khama III Memorial Museum. All these materials have now been carefully sorted and catalogued. They are available for students and scholars to read and photocopy in a dedicated reading room.

Her photos, writing desk, and typewriter are on display in the Bessie Head Room of the main Museum. The Order of Ikhamanga, South Africa's highest award, was bestowed on Bessie Head in 2003, seventeen years after her death. This award is also on display.

Her house, "Rain Clouds", stands in Newtown, Serowe, almost exactly as she left it. Its corrugated iron roof now has a distinctive rusty red colour. Her son Howard continues to live in it and look after it. It is planned that one day it will become an official Heritage Site under the care of the Bessie Head Heritage Trust.

* A permanent display of Bessie's effects, the Bessie Head Room, was inaugurated at the Khama Memorial Museum in Serowe on 19 July 2006. A shorter version of this biography was first prepared to accompany the exhibits. Thus the vocabulary and tone of both pieces are appropriate to museum-goers.

Almost all of the facts are drawn from the excellent biography, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears*. (Gillian Eilersen, 1995). The initial research and structure of the piece were borrowed — with many thanks — from the authors of the Bessie Head travelling exhibit of 1987-1989. A few of the more controversial statements found above are those of the present writer, Tom Holzinger.

Serowe, 21 July 2006