

Bessie Head: Thunder behind her ears
(Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2007)
Gillian Stead Eilersen

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Biographer Gillian Stead Eilersen starts her take on the life and writings of Bessie Head with the sentence “Bessie Amelia Head seemed singularly alone in the world.” Her penultimate chapter ends with a note asserting “In actual fact A Bewitched Crossroad becomes Bessie Head’s final tribute to the Ordinary Man; her final condemnation of the power people.” Contained in these sentences and in the text between resides the life work of one of Africa’s finest writers, this one singularly unique Bessie Head. And a Coloured woman writer at that, and I think Bessie Head would forgive me for defining her so. Indeed, she was alone in her Coloured-ness in African society, in her woman-ness (her sex) in patriarchal society, and in her writer-ness in an art and industry dominated by powerful white men and sometimes patronising white women. But as Eilersen asserts, using Bessie’s voice for the most part but sometimes interpreting on her behalf, she (Bessie) always stood up to power. The itinerant poet and activist Dennis Brutus’s oft used phrase that the writer has to “speak truth to power” can certainly be applied to Bessie Head.

Eilersen’s full length biography of Bessie Head first appeared in 1995, published simultaneously by Heinemann, James Currey, and David Philip. This second edition 2007 is brought us by Wits University Press. Although offered as a second edition it seems only the layout and design have been changed, with photos (some of them used for the first time in this title) bunched rather than contextually dispersed as in the first edition. Also, the

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new publisher got rid of that embarrassing Chapter 13 title “Ohio, 1977”, correcting it to “Iowa, 1977”, that after the American state where Head attended the prestigious international Writing Programme at the University of Iowa. But that aside.

Eilersen unfolds the Bessie Head story in chronological order, aligning the salient themes of each period of her life accordingly, and does so in a most pleasing narrative, sprinkled liberally with Bessie’s direct voice. In fact, courtesy the Head’s mountain of letters, it is difficult to pin down Eilersen’s free indirect discourse – except to say, here and there, that she agrees or empathises with her subject – and the text derives its power from the direct voice.

Growing up in Natal, a relatively normal yet poor childhood, minority status of Bessie Emery (that was her birth surname) as a Coloured in a multi-“racial” – Zulu, white, Indian and Coloured – province and a strict “missionary” boarding school ethos suffused her life. Unbeknownst to little Bessie though were both the origin of her mixed descent (a white mother and black, as in African, father) and the alleged insanity of her biological mother. Growing up on East Street, Pietermaritzburg, and then on to St Monica’s Home where she schooled, together with her genetic baggage, fashioned Bessie Emery into an intense and complex young woman. It was here that the volatility of her character was formed, here her life on the edge of sanity – or on the edge of the horizon, as she would later have it – commenced. Eilersen draws a sensitive portrayal of the young Bessie, but implies storms to come.

The writer then shows Bessie as young teacher, going through rapid intellectual growth and intense spiritual experimentation, including with Indian philosophy and religion but temperamentally unsuited for her profession (35-36). Stints of journalism in Cape Town and Johannesburg followed. Amid and after Sharpeville, the triumph of apartheid style racism, and the ups and downs of her personal life, Bessie found it increasingly difficult to stay in South Africa. After all, Eilersen points out, she had left teaching, her journalism did not quite take off, relationships failed, she tried to commit suicide, and her dabbling with Pan-Africanism à la George Padmore and Robert Sobukwe, although influential in her political education, fizzled before she could really become politically involved.

By Eilersen's account, Bessie Emery was fickle, especially when it came to relationships with men. Her account of what might have been Bessie's first sexual encounter, implies or could suggest that she was morally suspect. Could this be innuendo about the alleged insanity in her background or of her Colouredness being manifested? Important to note is that the author here (59) gives no attribution. So the reader wonders why this incident enters the text un-referenced. This notwithstanding, Bessie Emery and Harold Head got married in 1961. A son, Howard, was born. The marriage did not last, but that is neither here nor there.

Having dispensed with opening gambit pleasantries, Eilersen tackles four broad topics. One, she analyses Bessie's novels – from *The Cardinals* through *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* to *A Bewitched Crossroad* – and other writings; two she revivifies Bessie's struggles as a stateless person in Botswana; then she interrogates her ongoing inner and real world struggles, including with the people of power in the publishing industry; and finally she delineates the writer's successes on a world stage.

Let us take Bessie's novellas / novels – there were five of them – first, and there we find a dissertation-like pre-publication build-up, textual critique, and post-publication analyses of her works. In this regard, students of Head's works will find useful entry points for study. The analyses often find parallels between text and real life, for instance in *The Cardinals*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. Indeed Bessie does “live” in these texts; she gives them (her own) voice. She wrote most of her work in Botswana, “with thunder behind her ears”, energised by life in and the elements of Africa. Her narratives stand independently also, addressing timeless and universal issues about gender relations, the nature of power, and racism. Always there is the struggle for justice (fairness) in an “evil” world. In this regard Head's cosmology is starkly clear – evil and injustice is loosed upon the world and must be fought so ordinary folk can also live meaningfully.

Bessie's struggle as a refugee in Botswana, where she had gone to escape apartheid style racism, is exacerbated by her (and her son Howard's) experience of African racism. She was accepted nowhere, her son is tormented. She was gossiped about and denigrated and this drove her to the edge of beserk. This subtle racism surfaced in Zimbabwe also where Africans doubt her because she was “not African” and her not-so African character for “She is not African”, completely missing the universal message she tries to convey through these characters and texts. One could call this black on black racism

“ethnicism” – even the Shona persecuted the Ndebele for being Ndebele in Zimbabwe (See MJ Matshazi’s *Zimbabwe: With Robert Mugabe to the Brink of the Abyss*). Racism or ethnicism, it does not matter, because the recipients of such treatment suffered gravely, as Bessie and Howard Head did.

In dealing with Bessie Head’s inner struggles, Eilersen’s narration is empathetic, often defending or benignly contextualising the antics of her subject. In dealing with the consequences of her (inner) struggles, the common fare of the white liberal to the rescue runs as a golden thread through the text. Only occasionally, once or twice, in Head’s altercations with “power” does Eilersen “desert” her, thinking her unreasonable in dealing with a certain interviewers and publishers.

Head embraced Botswana (Africa) and found her inspiration in the continent where she, it seems from the text, was hurt more than joyed. It is ironic that only when Bessie entered the international stage, starting with the Writers Programme in Iowa and ending in Australia (1984) did she find freedom, productive happiness and recognition. Eilersen’s text will go along way to remedy the fact that only “out of Africa” did / does Bessie Head flourish.

In 1986 the thunder behind her ears grew still, for various reasons, and the moment is most poignantly imagined and captured by Eilersen. She was not yet fifty years old. But she bequeathed a rich literary legacy and much food for thought about how far we humans had not yet come.

This biography, exquisitely written and unfolding with ease if dissertation-like at times, is certainly an education – both in African literature and in terms of the psyche of the woman writer in a patriarchal and racist society. It calls for a closer interrogation of race relations (that’s a euphemism for there are racists everywhere and of every colour) and power, period. It is a text which proffers every Bessie Head scholar, and there will be many, an entry point into the writings of one of southern Africa’s finest writers, or, if you will, “the best woman novelist Africa has [thus far] produced”.