

## BESSIE HEAD: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Authors: Susan Gardner and Patricia E Scott  
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Reviewed by M J Daymond

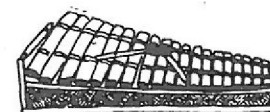
Bessie Head's sudden death in Botswana in April last year does, as Gareth Cornwall says, cast a shadow over the publication of this *Bibliography* of her work. It is the first in a projected series on Southern African writers which is intended to meet the need, given the burgeoning interest in our literature, for adequate, accessible reference tools. As such, it also forms, although it was obviously not planned for this sad purpose, a tribute to one of our foremost writers. Bessie Head was not a prolific writer but her three novels, collection of short stories and her folk histories have, as the Bibliography makes clear, been receiving increasing critical attention.

The Bibliography is divided into a chronological listing of Bessie Head's writing, including details of translations and reprints of her work; critical writing on Bessie Head; book reviews. The entries are not annotated but the book is fully indexed and cross-referencing has been undertaken. There is a useful introductory essay by Susan Gardner, in which she touches briefly on the numerous questions which Head's writing poses for the literary critic. She considers the function of the "ideal biographical legend" in our concept of the relationship of personality to creativity and for the bearing this has on what Bessie Head revealed about her own life. The connection between Head and the *Drum* writers is reconsidered, as is the question of whether she should be discussed as a South African writer at all. The possible assimilation of Head's fiction into the current discussion of women, sexuality and madness is indicated together with Head's apparently sentimental reliance on romance as the basis of good relationships between women and men. All in all, the essay is a skillful indication of the variety in Head's writing and of the strands of debate being set up in the critical literature. But the value of this essay is spoiled by a breakdown in the cross referencing to the numbered entries in the Bibliography. The numbers do not correspond. This means, for example, that tracing a quotation in the introduction, especially if it is something said by Head herself and which might be from any one of four interviews given in a single year, is likely to prove time-consuming. As researchers in most South African libraries have to rely on inter-library loan services, it will also prove expensive; the *Bibliography* will less readily fulfill its declared purpose of promoting local literary studies.

One of the problems which most exercised Gardner and Scott was that of categorising Head's writings. They cite *Maru* to illustrate the difficulties: it has been variously placed as a "painful tale", a "children's book" and a "kind of African fairy tale". Instead of using annotations, which could indicate the range and complexity of Head's works, the bibliographers have set up their own list of categories with which they try to indicate what Head is doing. But clarity is not always gained from their method or, really, from the categories evolved. For instance, *Maru* appears in the list of Head's writing simply as *Maru : a novel*. Gardner and Scott supply no category, but then one finds that Head's previous long work of fiction (oh dear, categories!) which has a similar subtitle, *When Rain Clouds Gather : a novel*, does receive one : it is "fictional prose". It is undoubtedly an economy for a researcher to know that items entitled "Life" (1977) or "Witchcraft" (1975) can be classified as "fictional prose", but what is the value of being told that *The Collector of Treasure and Other Botswana Village Tales* is "semi-fictional prose"? It would seem that either a fuller description of each entry, or a system of keywords for computer retrieval, or the occasional note would have been better.

The Bibliography covers Head's own work from her early journalism, dating from 1959, to what turned out to be her last major work, *The Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), and seems to have covered the literature quite thoroughly. As the bibliographers themselves say, they have "unearthed over 200 items" while Berrian's *Bibliography* (1985) contains only 64. Nevertheless, there are some omissions and some oddities. A quick check shows that Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (Macmillan, 1984) is not in and "Some Notes on Novel Writing", published in *New Classic* in 1978, is entered under 1976 as a paper given at the Gaborone Writers Workshop. Its subsequent publication is noted in the '76 entry, but the article is too important to scholars for its publication to be obscured.

Despite these blemishes, the Bessie Head *Bibliography* inaugurates what promises to be a much needed and invaluable series. It should help greatly in gaining proper attention for our writers and should assist local scholars to assert some of the authority which has been, until recently, too easily yielded to others. Just as Bessie Head saw fit to have her last work published here, by Ad Donker, so may this first in the promised NELM series prompt local criticism to accord Southern African writers their due recognition.



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