

Mary Lederer, *In Conversation with Bessie Head*

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 156 pages, ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-5140-2.

Very few writers are able to infuse an academic piece of writing with the right balance of emotion and objective content. Mary Lederer is one such writer. Her latest engagement with Bessie Head is both a personal journey with an iconic writer and an insightful work about an individual who still intrigues us more than thirty years after her death.

The book opens with the writer's almost indifferent introduction to Bessie Head's *Maru* at a bookstore in Lesotho. This chance encounter leads to an abrupt change of career focus for Lederer - from the 'sterile' world of teaching mathematics to the fertile world of studying and teaching Bessie Head. This beginning helps one to appreciate the immense power of writing and how it can totally absorb a person in ways that writers and readers of literature are all too familiar, 'Who was this woman who changed the course of my intellectual and spiritual life?' (p.1). The book's opening chapter is somewhat autobiographical in that it helps situate the reader into the writer's evolving relationship with Bessie Head. 'This book will attempt to trace, explore and open up the experience –my experience– of reading and of understanding Head's work by addressing the totality of her thought' (p.9) However, at no point does the reader get bogged down in the writer's life. It is a conversation, as the title states, that is much about the author as it is about Bessie Head. 'Whatever epiphanies I experience through the medium of Head's writing encompass more than just revealing things about myself: I am also interested in how those epiphanies happen and how my reading evolves' (p.27)

In the second chapter of the book the writer interrogates the meaning of madness, a theme that shadows Bessie Head both as an author and as an individual. It is a chapter that looks at the views of Foucault and Laing in relation to Bessie Head's writing. Foucault was a French philosopher while RD Laing was a psychotherapist and so these authors are important to Lederer in that they examined how madness is socially constructed and how madness operates within a society. Of particular interest here is how one's psychological make-up can help a reader understand the trilogy that is *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. The writer avoids swathing the reader with theoretical frameworks of psychology and this means that for the most part the chapter reads just as smoothly as the first one. Quite some time is given to an analysis of *A Question of Power*, which is not surprising. What can be understood here is that the line between the real world and the imagined is one that is moulded by a person's definition of self as much as it is by society. As Lederer writes, 'The power of Bessie Head's writing is that she acknowledges both how we are made to believe that there is something wrong with us and also that in fact we are responsible for our own lives' (p.44).

In Conversation with Bessie Head is divided into six chapters, each of which is roughly the same length. However, the question of identity is ever present throughout the text and one realises that for Bessie Head, colour and its politics have greatly affected her life and material. Lederer points out that Bessie Head was against the notion of being compartmentalised because she saw her writing as going beyond tribal boundaries. 'She objected strongly to being labelled an African writer and being consigned to the ghetto that would only allow her to write about "African issues"... She rejected any accusation that she was not black enough, or white enough, or anything enough' (p.81). This gem of a book carries a lot of new insights into Bessie Head as a writer, but more importantly of Bessie Head as a person.

Scholars and armchair critics alike will be satisfied at the balance that writer attains in her choice of writing style. As a conversation, the book already sets the tone for the type of writing that it is. This is a journey for the reader as much as it is for the writer and it is easy for one to finish it in one sitting

without being exhausted by the analysis. It is the last chapter, 'Rereading Bessie Head', where the reader understands both the transformation of the writer from the first paragraph, as well as a somewhat frustrating (yet strangely satisfying) awareness that a lot of work still needs to be done on this iconic writer. Lederer writes, 'And so like the spider who sheds her skin, I must now rest and reacquaint myself with myself, and begin to prepare for the next changes' (p.143)

A gripe that readers of this book may have is the lack of pictures, save for a delightful one on the cover page. It's unfortunate but the writer's fluid style more than atones for this. Perhaps, a picture biography of sorts could be a journey for another book. If there is one visual image that the book leaves us with, it is that we all have the Lederer bug in our relationship with Bessie Head.

Reviewed by Wahza Lopang