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Critical Essays on Bessie Head (review)

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(Review)

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After publishing the pioneering works of Manthia Diawara, Françoise Pfaff, and Frank Udechukwu Ukadike, and Olivier Barlet's more recent *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze* (2000), Indiana University Press and its copublishers are now providing us with this fine study, as well as two more publications on African film: my own *African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent* (2003) and Françoise Pfaff's edited *Focus on Africa* (2004). They will give fresh impetus to the study and the teaching of African film and may well lead the way toward a wider appreciation of four decades of African filmmaking.

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Maxine Sample, ed. *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger Publishers, 2003. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, No. 205. xii + 150 pp. Index. \$61.00. Cloth.

Critically hailed as one of the brightest voices in African literature at the time of her death in 1986, Bessie Head and her oeuvre have remained the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion to this day. Head was not only a fine writer but she also came to literary prominence at a time and place of great significance in the history of southern Africa. Born of the union of a white woman and a black man in racially segregated South Africa, raised in a foster home and then in an Anglican mission school "for Coloured girls," Bessie Head's earliest years were fraught with uncertainty and the unrelenting reinforcement of a fragmented identity within a divided nation. When she immigrated to Botswana in 1966 on a one-way exit visa, "a single mother without employment, passport, or a place to call home" (5), Head embarked on a harrowing journey of statelessness, loneliness, poverty, and at times mental illness. For thirteen years the Botswana government refused to grant her citizenship while, at the same time, she was rapidly becoming the nation's best-known, most celebrated writer. As her publications brought recognition and some long-sought relief from financial worry, Head's perseverance, single-minded vision, and creativity allowed her to claim a stable, integrated personal and professional identity within a shifting and often hostile environment.

One of the newer additions to the already impressive body of scholarship on Bessie Head's life and work, *Critical Essays on Bessie Head* is a nicely balanced set of eight studies. The volume's editor, Maxine Sample, provides a brief introduction and two abbreviated but informative biographical and bibliographical pieces that bracket the other contributions, as well as a third essay on the novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Stylistically and methodologically, the essays vary in their density of theoretical discourse and in their complementary reliance on more literal historical approaches. The balance

works well, alternating some deep textual and theoretical readings with some finely researched pieces that illuminate little known areas of Bessie Head's life and influences. While all the essays make contributions to the field, Helen Kapstein's "A Peculiar Shuttling Movement': Madness, Passing, and Trespassing in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*" employs a particularly impressive use of postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies approaches to reveal new and vital elements of Head's most famous novel. Kapstein writes: "All dressed up in the mismatched outfit of a South African Botswanan 'colored' mad woman writer, Bessie Head skirts the edge of the colonial imagination. Forced into liminality, she makes the margin her center, unabashedly announcing her presence there" (95).

Taking a different methodological tack in one of her two contributions to the volume, Colette Guldimmann combines some excellent historical background from Head's time as a writer for the *Golden City Post* with some theories of discourse to investigate the posthumously published novel that was written while the author still lived in South Africa; her essay is titled "*The Cardinals: Reclaiming Language through the 'Permanent Revolution of Language': Literature.*" While not exactly breaking new ground, Loretta Stec's "The Didactic Judgment of a Woman Writer: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*" makes several important observations about the intersection, in Head's short stories, of oral storytelling conventions with the exigencies of the written text. She also notes the ambivalence and duality with which Head both portrayed and seemed to value or reject actual Tswana traditional culture.

Overall, this is a worthy and valuable addition to the body of scholarship on Bessie Head's work and times, and Maxine Sample and her collaborators should be commended. My one carp has nothing to do with the quality of the volume but with its prohibitive pricing, which may, in effect, keep it from being commonly used in the classroom.

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Martin Banham, ed. *A History of Theatre in Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Bibliography. Index. \$130.00. Cloth.

Martin Banham's preface to this compendium of African theater expresses the hope "that the reader will be reminded of the extraordinary complexity of African performance culture, of its richness, agelessness and beauty; that he or she will see much that offers coherence and continuity, even within diversity, on the vast stage of Africa" (xvii). The book keeps its promise. Each of the twenty-one essays contributes to a collage intended to raise and answer questions or to revisit old themes; at the same time, they propose new directions to stimulate debates that will, undoubtedly, go on for a very long time.