

and deviant perspectives" [181]) while denigrating it on the other ("postmodernism may devalue . . . our group membership" [190]).

Devlin's suspect employment of "postmodernism" is similar to the editors' strategy of framing the collection's cultural politics with the assertion that "the essays expound a politics of postmodernism" (18). As a unifying manoeuvre, their account of the ongoing debate between Habermas and Lyotard on the legitimacy of totalizing discourses puts a strange spin on the text as a whole: not only does this emphasis elide many important arenas of debate in the text (issues of rights, law and difference, or construction of community, for example) and privilege essays which engage postmodernism directly at the expense of other interesting articles, but it flouts Norris's contention (with which I would agree) that "truth is best arrived at . . . through a process of open dialogical exchange" (109). According to Norris, postmodernist thought is most seriously flawed in its inability to combat injustice and oppression, "since it offers no arguments, no critical resources, or validating grounds for perceiving them as inherently unjust and oppressive" (95). Thus the editors' totalizing insistence on a politics of postmodernism threatens to jeopardize the politics of identity with which they also aspire to cluster the collection; perhaps an account of debates within and/or organizational principles of the conference itself would have supplied the "dialogic exchange" requisite to interline these two projects.

JEFF SCRABA



Gillian Stead Eilersen. *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears—Her Life and Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. Pp. 312. \$17.95.

In 1990, Craig Mackenzie recognized the need for biographical data on Bessie Head and responded with *A Woman Alone*, a compilation of Head's autobiographical writings. Mackenzie's introduction to this collection expresses discomfort over the uncertain veracity of the information contained in the collected pieces and recognizes the need for a biography, noting that what is known about Head's life has been told by "the author herself" and "she proved to be an unreliable witness to her own life" (ix).

Head is one of those writers whose works intrigue and seem to originate at the juncture where the ineffable and the empirical sometimes conjoin and sometimes clash. Moreover, Head is unquestionably one of Africa's outstanding and most original writers and her novels have been subjected to a great deal of literary analysis. That a reliable biography was needed to guide, even censor, critics was evident. Exciting as the news of the forthcoming biography was, there was still the feeling that the task of capturing on paper something significant of this woman's awesome self was insuperable. The vast array of information

and analysis in *Thunder Behind Her Ears* demonstrates Gillian Stead Eilersen's success in this monumental task.

The most important service a writer's biography offers is the link it provides between the author's life and thought and his or her works. *Thunder Behind Her Ears* amply succeeds in this regard. For scholars wishing to evaluate Head's creative use of the raw material she encountered, it is a boon. Take, for example, Head's first published novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*. One knows that much of the novel incorporates many of the efforts being then undertaken by foreign aid workers and native Botswanans to contain the encroachment of the desert; but the desert seems to function as a symbol in the novel. To make such a claim, however, one needs to know the extent to which the characters are Head's inventions. *Thunder Behind Her Ears* answers this question definitively. Indeed, much of what has been written, especially as regards Head's dissociation from apartheid South Africa, will have to be revised, especially because we now know that her letters showed an ongoing preoccupation with the politics of her home country.

Head always maintained that her books were her attempts at seeking to understand the forces in herself and in the world around her. Head herself died without knowing the truth about her origins. An important aspect of Eilersen's research is that Head's only surviving white uncle came forward with the truth about Head's white ancestry, thus correcting Head's version that was part fact and part imagination. Her African ancestry is still a mystery.

Eilersen also provides much information for those scholars interested in how biology and environment shape or impact upon the creative imagination. This biography helps one understand the determining role of apartheid in both Head's life and writings. Almost all of Head's characters are in revolt against traditional practices and beliefs and are engaged in forging relationships with people outside of their culture, race, or social class. One easily understands this as her response to apartheid, of which she had been a victim. Some would argue too that much of Head's penetrating insight into evil resulted in part from her uncertain sanity, and there undoubtedly would be much speculation about whether Head inherited her mental instability from her mother, who was insane when Head was conceived and continued to be so when she died seven years later.

An aspect of *Thunder Behind Her Ears* that some critics will probably damn and others laud is the extensive sociopolitical information that it contains of the various places Head inhabited. One could question, for example, whether in fact it is necessary to have a the description of the troop trains passing through Pietermaritzburg. On the other hand, such passages furnish concrete descriptions and a strong sense of place and time—qualities for which Head's writing is noteworthy.

One of the outstanding features of this biography is the information it provides on Head's turbulent relationships. That she considered

herself to be alone is also true. But the biography shows that several people were willing to endure her paranoia and her occasional or frequent abuse, and provide her with encouragement she sometimes needed to write and monetary gifts and "loans" to tide her over difficult times. Eilersen does not attempt to interpret the reasons for Head's very difficult relationships and her tendency to see almost everyone as dishonest. If Head managed to hold on to a very fragile sanity after a recovery or partial recovery from a serious bout of psychosis in 1971, the biography suggests, it was due to the support of these many people, most of whom lived abroad; Head's egregious individuality kept her alienated from the more communal, traditional residents of Serowe for most of the twenty-two years she lived there.

Eilersen chose to organize the biography around place. The first four chapters fall under the section entitled "South Africa: Against Heavy Odds 1937-1964." They emphasize the different South African localities in which Head lived and the development (and trauma) she experienced in them. They cover material that includes Head's birth, her life with her adopted mother in Pietermaritzburg and at St Monica's Home, her attempts at teaching and later journalism, her brief involvement with politics, as well as her marriage and the writing of *The Cardinals* (Head's earliest but posthumously published novel and her only novel set in South Africa). The largest section, "Botswana: A Fresh Start," focuses primarily on the difficulties of Head's precarious mental health, her development as a writer of fiction, her difficulties with publishers, the critical reception of her work, the unreliable living she earned from her writing as well as the anxiety she felt because of her refugee status in Botswana. The chapters of the final section, "Outside Africa: A Broader View 1977-1986," emphasize the increasing international recognition Head received during this period, the many trips she took abroad in connection with her writing, and then culminates with her death. This excellent biography is an invaluable tool for scholars of Head's work; it already has proved useful in correcting misinformation in print about Bessie Head.

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