

HEINEMANN

AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

A WOMAN
ALONE

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A PAPERBACK ORIGINAL

I need a quiet backwater and a sense of living as though I am
barely alive on the earth, treading a small, careful pathway
through life

Intense personal experiences of South Africa's brutal social
system, a sense of stifled creativity and a distaste for politics made
Bessie Head leave for Botswana on an exit permit at the age of 27.
There, in her chosen rural 'haven' of Serowe, and despite a severe
mental breakdown, she wrote the novels and stories that earned
her international recognition as one of Africa's most remarkable
and individual writers,

A Woman Alone is a collection of autobiographical writings, sketches
and essays which covers the entire span of Bessie Head's creative
life, up to her death in 1986 at the age of 49. It reveals a woman of
great sensitivity and vitality, inspired through her knowledge of
suffering in a 'reverence for ordinary people' and finding some
healing for her own anguish in a quiet corner of Africa.

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and a passiveness overcome you and you get into the dangerous state of mind of being wrapped up in your own troubles and miseries. You cannot think. You cannot live. It's just yourself all the time. For another, a fatal feeling of doom pervades everything. It is like those faces in pictures that you see of the people who had to live in the Warsaw ghetto. They were finally forced to face the fact that they had a ruthless and unrelenting enemy and help was nowhere in sight. Every white face that you see passing by churns you up till you could just cry to be delivered from this unceasing torment of hate, hate, hate. You wonder if that fat, smug complacent white matronly face was the one who wrote the letter in last night's paper . . . We have people in our midst who have just recently emerged from savagery . . . She was complaining about an advert in the paper for slimming pills which showed a naked white woman on a scale. They still write these crazy letters. Aren't they scared enough?

| Maybe I am going to pieces. One of the slobs who are left behind told me rather scornfully the other day that I was not a freedom fighter. I have to admit that it is the truth. I never joined fund-raising campaigns because I can't ask for money. I never paid at fund-raising parties because I was always broke and yet drank as much wine as I could and talked as loud as I could and quarrelled with the whites who were there. The liberal whites seemed to like me to fight because they always provoked the arguments as far as I was concerned and always laughed at offensive remarks. Yes, maybe I am going to pieces because I was never the type to rush around doing things. I just sat around talking all the time and now all those beautiful ideas have blown up in my face. You can't think straight about anything if you're hating all the time. You even get scared to write because everything has turned cock-eyed and sour. This would never have happened if my friend D.B. were around. He hated that kind of mentality, and with his sarcastic wit and optimism would have made me seem a complete fool. That is why you need friends like that. They have something you lack, like optimism. They make you feel everything is going to be all right with the world as long as

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they are around, It may seem a childish thing to be so dependent on friends .. But is it really?

The fantastic thing about friendships in South Africa is that one always and only meets one's friends through politics. Every and any man, woman who ever thinks in this country gravitates to some political party. Outside this you may have friends but none

that you could carry on a reasonable or intelligent conversation with. Many people prefer not to be enlightened. The world terrifies â\200\230hem and yet their very refusal to be enlightened terrifies them more. They are vaguely aware that â\200\230all is not right in the state of Denmarkâ\200\231, they are constantly tugged this way and shatteresâ\200\231 by this so they flee to God to protect them from their fears. One canâ\200\231t help admiring political people. They never talk about G od. I do not, of course, wish to imply that my political friends are non-believers like myself. It is just that we have been too busy arguing about George Padmore to have any time left over for such subject.

Now they are all gone, those brave optimistic characters! One misses them furiously! One is left with all the believers and the slob an:! the enemy. One longs for a place

t> give whatâ\200\231s left of love again,

to friends, now strangers,â\200\231

1963

Gladys Mgudlandlu: the exuberant innocent

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cate ee with god-like indifference near a clump o! bushes. The chiefâ\200\231s wife, with a sharp glint of mischief in her shrewish eyes paling stay hercely at a corn pipe, listens to the latest gossip. The hot, orange velvet flowers; the deep green valleys; â\200\230he hard brown sunbaked hills, and â\200\224 the large crowd of

eager ac'mirers and eager buyers showering an astonishing and almost unbelievable adulation on the artist, Miss Gladys Mgud-

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landlu. Since her last exhibition in Cape Town, which was a Sweeping success, the crowd of admirers has doubled and trebled, so much so that almost four hundred of the eight hundred people who attended the opening of her exhibition this month could not gain admittance.

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What is the secret of the phenomenal success of Miss Mgudlandlu? Undoubtedly much of her work is strong. Each piece is a new, fresh idea. In fact new ideas seem to crowd in on her all the time and she appears to be in such haste to rush after the new burst of inspiration that one is left with the uneasy impression that each picture is slapdash and incomplete. Compared to the clean-cut, sharp and brilliant technique of the Johannesburg artist, Ephraim Ngatane, Miss Mgudlandlu indulges in mere childish scrawl. It is interesting briefly to make a comparison between Mr. Ngatane and Miss Mgudlandlu. When he exhibited in Cape Town two months ago he received a dead-cold snub. He is an intense, passionate controlled, vividly imaginative artist and his Township Scenes rebound and vibrate with life. The trouble with Mr. Ngatane, it seems, is that his intensity and realistic approach is irksome. He reminds people, who would rather forget, that townships are nasty places where people have to walk some two hundred yards to fetch water from a communal tap shared by some 80,000 township's inhabitants. He is annoying too, because, behind the colour, the hysterical exhilaration of his massed and teeming streets, is the degradation of poverty. Who wants to be reminded of the terrors of township living? It is ugly, horrible and sordid. So, let the ambiguous Mr. Ngatane rot; the fate of all those who shatter the calm of society's built-in illusions.

Miss Mgudlandlu, on the other hand, performs a kindly service. She is an escapist. Her message is: Leave it all to God. God is in his heaven and all is right with South Africa. In her calm green valleys through which half-naked tribal women wend their peaceful way homeward in the late African sunset one can recline restfully with a cocktail and the past is the future and the present is the past while Miss Mgudlandlu soothingly murmurs: Come Deep

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in the Forest. Gaze at the Velvet Flowers; the Birds and Lilies; the Forest Rockery; the Hills and Dongas; the Precipice; the Migrant ares, the Elephant Trunk ... Ah, . . . there's No Life Without Religion, Who can resist her hypnotic call when life and reality mean ninety-day detentions and banning orders and bang, bang, bang? For a few seconds I could see the attraction in those cool dark clumps of trees and birds and lilies and elephant trunks! I too would care for a brief escape from the permanent madness of reality! And, I believe that it is on the appeal of this escape release that she profusely and exuberantly provides, that Miss Mgudlandlu's phenomenal success rests. Miss Mgudlandlu is too innocent and unaware to have deliberately contrived this state of affairs. As an artist I believe her to be truthful within her capacities and limitations. There is simply a demand for escape and she is the unconscious supply. Had there not been this demand I for one do not believe that Miss Mgudlandlu would be basking in warmth of overwhelming public adulation. In fact, such sweeping, hysterical uncritical acclaim is disastrous for an artist who must always be subjected to those agonising doubts which spur him on to ever higher achievements. It amused me to hear Miss Mgudlandlu continuously exclaim to visitors: This is my best picture. Why don't you buy it?

1968

Snowball: a story

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It is autumn in Cape Town. Each day the sunset is new, with a new theme, but the underlying mood is always the same. Always the still, chilled autumn air controls the earth's scent with a nostalgic sweetness that is unlike any other season of the year. Sharp, and distinct, these scents blend with the yellow-gold eats it imperceptibly changes to a powdery mauve and then a vivid,

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