

## Life Sentence. A biography of Herman Charles Bosman.

Stephen Gray. Cape Town, Pretoria: Human & Rousseau. 2005. 320 pp. ISBN 0-798-14484-X.

Stephen Gray's detailed and well-researched biography of Herman Charles Bosman affords the reader with what feels like a face-to-face encounter with Bosman himself. Bosman's true artistic talent is revealed in his contradictory nature as well as in his superb quality of writing. Emotionally, he can be likened to a whirlwind because of his uneven temperament and what appears to be his inability to behave according to the norm (appropriately). His sensitive yet unpredictable nature is evident in a childhood incident in Kuils River, his birthplace where Bosman himself recalls being "seated on the grass, wrapped around in a blanket, and there was a soft wind blowing, because it was getting on towards sunset, and two young girl cousins a few years older than I, were dancing about me on the grass. And I suddenly burst into tears, just like that, without reason." (45)

One Jeanette Marshall relates another incident, which demonstrates his tender streak, where she and Bosman met in a party soon after he was released from gaol. She recalls: "Suddenly he noticed a beetle on the carpet. He opened a window and threw it out to prevent people from tramping on it. This tender streak from a man who in a fit of temper killed his step-brother impressed me deeply." (143)

Bosman's unpredictable nature persisted throughout his life. Adèle Lezard, the editor of the hardback version of *Mafeking Road*, likens him to a "'faun, a 'satyr'" (304). Bosman could not be classified. A man of extremes, he was either "bubbling over with excitement" (296) and saying "something so happy, so immediately funny, that you'd be absolutely rocking with laughter all the way down Eloff street ..." (304) or "he'd be glowering at you with eyes of molten steel and he'd say some-

thing bitter, using words so pungent that they practically smelled of scotch-marks" (304).

Bosman's talent as a potential writer became evident very early during his school years at Jeppe High where unlike other boys who distinguished themselves in sporting activities, Bosman preserved his reputation in the Jeppe High School Magazine, where he published two pieces entitled "The Mystery of the Ex-M.P." and the "Mystery of Lenin Trotsky" in July and December 1921. At the University of the Witwatersrand where he pursued his studies in English he equally distinguished himself, winning various awards. After his release from prison his partnership with Aegidius Jean Blignaut began an immortal and reciprocal literary friendship in which "if Jean went over the top a bit, Bosman had to tug him back" (141).

The book *My Friend Herman Charles Bosman* by Aegidius Jean Blignaut (1980) records this important association of two great South African literary figures of the 1930s. A list of some of Bosman's earlier publications appears in *The Touleier*, *The New L.S.D.* and *The New Sjabok*. Although Bosman's union with Blignaut gained them local and to some extent, international fame, due to the independent and non-conformist nature of the content of their articles, Bosman and Blignaut repeatedly came into conflict with society and as a result often found themselves in court with charges ranging from libel, *crimen injuria* to obscenity. In spite of this bad publicity, Bosman and Blignaut imprinted their names forever as South Africa's great literary writers.

Bosman proved himself beyond these journalistic endeavours into poetry where he published *The Blue Princess*. Leon Hugo asserts that it was in poetry that Bosman began really to discover himself. Blignaut agreed with this view arguing that he was indeed underrated as a poet an opinion shared by Bosman himself as suggested in his claim that he was one of "the greatest poets since Keats" (Blignaut

1980: 11). Bosman's ability as an accomplished writer in most of genres is proved in the fame he received for publications such as *The Jacaranda*, *The South African Opinion*, *Mafeking Road* and *Cold Stone Jug* (his prison memoirs).

Of Bosman's years at Jeppe High School, Wits and first year of teaching in the Marico Bushveld (the remotest end north of Nietverdiend in what was called Agterbosveld) where he was posted by Mr MacGregor the disciplinarian head of the Normal College as revenge for one of Bosman's many misdemeanours, Gray paints a picture of Bosman as a rebel and a social misfit, whose soul was in turmoil. This often manifested itself in various desperate acts or inappropriate behaviour, which almost became second nature to him. Thus, Bosman attracted attention by doing the most bizarre things one could ever imagine. These ranged from "cut[ting] his wrists open with a razor-blade" (64) in protest against overly harsh corporal punishment at Jeppe High, offering "to shoot himself in recompense" for shooting and killing his step-brother or "have his step-father shoot [him] for what [he had] done" to actually "tak[ing] out the carving knife and slash[ing] his own throat" (113).

More examples of his abnormal behaviour include entering the courtroom "munching a sandwich" thus appearing "unconcerned and smiling occasionally to his mother in front, to his own brother with her and to others in the courtroom." Such behaviour from one on the brink of disaster (he was facing a death sentence for shooting and killing his step-brother) makes Bosman the most complex and controversial figure of all times.

Gray's portrayal of Bosman as a man caught "betwixt and in between" recurs in relation to his dual identity, which resulted in his being a balanced bilingual in English and Afrikaans, two dominant yet competing languages. Although born of Afrikaans speaking parents from prominent families on both sides: (the Bosmans and the Malans), at home

the Bosmans used English and thus, in speaking and writing, he preferred to use "English, always English" (316). His love for writing in English persists in spite of the obvious advantages he would have gained had he chosen Afrikaans as his medium. Bosman's resolve to use English and not Afrikaans while fully aware of limitations in local reading public and fierce overseas competition, suggests both his confidence in his ability as a writer and his command of the English language.

Thus, in this biography of the late Herman Charles Bosman entitled *Life Sentence*, Gray not only manages to reveal the genius behind the social misfit Bosman was, he also successfully conveys the true meaning of Bosman's true purpose in life – one whose life sentence was writing, with Death being the only thing that could and did stop him. Bosman himself confirms the truth of this assertion to Helena (his wife): "I'm a ghost; people see me as a ghost. They look through me. The only contact I have with human beings is through my writing. Through my writing I reach them and they reach me. Therefore I must write – or go mad." (332)

Thus, the decision to commute Bosman's death sentence into a life sentence and later his release from prison after approximately four years imprisonment, afforded South African readers with an encounter with the man Gray refers to as the most famous and best loved writer in South Africa of the first half of the twentieth century. It is difficult to tell whether it is his unorthodox attitude towards life or his genius as a writer that makes Bosman's life story such a compelling one.

#### *Reference*

Blignaut, Aegidius Jean. 1980. *My Friend Herman Charles Bosman*. Johannesburg, Cape Town: Perskor.

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