

REMEMBERING BOSMAN

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***Remembering Bosman* (ed. Stephen Gray Penguin 2008)**

The lack of recognition for Bosman during his lifetime altered dramatically with the posthumous publication of collections of his short stories, and with the 14 volume anniversary edition of his collected works, edited by Craig Mackenzie and Stephen Gray. He is now widely regarded as our foremost storyteller, and as an English-speaking writer from an Afrikaans family who draws on a rich indigenous oral tradition of storytelling he has considerable crossover appeal. Writers as diverse as Can Themba (from the 50s) and Mbulelo Mzamane (from the 70s) have testified to his influence. This collection of tributes, memoirs, sketches, interviews and autobiographical fragments is a valuable supplement to the body of work on Bosman. And it is compiled by Stephen Gray, who must know more about the life and times of Herman Charles Bosman than anyone else. He is, of course, the author of the definitive biography of Bosman, *Life Sentence* (2005) as well as of *Bosman's Joburg* (1986).

The pieces in the present collection are culled largely from the National English Literary Museum's immense collection of Bosman material and memorabilia, much of it donated by Lionel Abrahams. They range from the ephemeral to the substantial and in their range and inclusivity add to our understanding of a complex and multifaceted man. The perspectives range from those of passing acquaintances to those of close friends or associates (George Howard, Gordon Vorster, Fred Zwarenstein, Lola Watter, Lionel Abrahams). Gray has included the testimonies of a close relative, Zita Grové ('My Cousin Herman') and of Bosman's third wife, Helena Lake ('Last Chapters'). There is even a memoir by a fellow inmate of Pretoria Central Prison, the British-born cartoonist and actor, Lago Clifford ('The Poet Prisoner'). These memoirs are supplemented by more scholarly pieces from Vivienne Mawson, who wrote the first doctorate on Bosman, and by Gray himself. Two of Gray's pieces describe his encounter with the Bosman archive in Texas. A third – 'Marico Revisited' – describes the first meeting of the Herman Charles Bosman Literary Society (at Heimweeberg in the Dwarsberge) and testifies to the undiminished power of the local mammoer ('75% proof, not a degree less').

The core of the book, as Gray rightly points out, lies in the substantial memoirs by George Howard, Zita Grové and Bosman's 'extraordinary successor', Lionel Abrahams. Howard's 'A Portrait from Memory' is published in its entirety for the first time, and provides some vivid vignettes of the young Bosman speechifying (and heckling) on the Rissik Street steps of the Johannesburg City Hall – South Africa's equivalent of Hyde Park corner: 'It was at one of these late night debates . . . that I first got talking to this tallish, broad, blue-eyed young man, with a high forehead, thinning wild fair hair, knitted tie, wide black leather belt, a high merry laugh, large actor's hands and a wide-brimmed hat, worn like a ship with a heavy list.' He also provides an insight into Bosman's relation to his younger brother, Pierre, also an aspirant writer, but in a realist style that

Bosman disparaged: 'Pierre's a realist. Who wants realism? It's only poetry that counts. Pierre's writing is just so much bricklaying.' He also offers valuable glimpses of Bosman's association with the flamboyant Aegidius Jean Blignaut, co-producer with Bosman of *The Touleier* (and its successors *The New Sjambok* and *The New LSD*). Of all the contributors to this collection, Howard seems to have had the longest association with Bosman (he was even a pallbearer at his funeral).

The interview with Gordon and Yvonne Vorster is a valuable supplement to Howard's 'Portrait'. He refers to Bosman as 'an English-speaking South African' and comments on Bosman's determination to have his work published in South Africa first – as a matter of principle. He also testifies to Bosman's intolerance of any criticism of his work – 'He took no criticism, not even from Helena' – and he recalls Bosman's abortive attempt (with Uys Krige) to produce an anthology of South African poetry (Bosman's criteria for inclusion were, to put it mildly, eccentric!). He testifies to the infectious power of Bosman's laughter: 'Three hours in that bloke's company, with all the laughter, you had no jawbone left!' He also gives what seems to be a reliable account of the 'final party' that preceded Bosman's death (from a heart attack).

Zita Grové's 'My Cousin Herman' helps to fill out the picture of the man who initially wrote using the pseudonym 'Herman Malan' (his mother was a Malan). Her contribution is partly a response to the allegations made by Rosenberg in the first edition of her somewhat sensational biography of Bosman, *Sunflower to the Sun*. She sketches in the family background, and recalls that it was 'taboo' to even mention Herman's name. She recalls both Herman and Pierre as 'vivid personalities' at family gatherings, and remembers her own 'childish delight' at her cousin's storytelling. When Bosman was released from prison, he came to stay on their farm. Zita, as an only child on an isolated farm, was 'enthralled' at the prospect. Her memoir reveals another side of Bosman – his gentleness (she found it impossible to think of him as a murderer) and his ability to enter into the imaginative world of a young girl. She uses the word 'idyllic' to describe this period of his (or their) life – an idyll which was brought to an end by a row between her father and Bosman. Much later, as an adult, she renewed her acquaintance with her cousin. Bosman wrote a cautionary letter to her in which he describes an interest in writing as 'a form of insanity for which there is no known cure'.

Lionel Abrahams's 'A Protégé's Memoir' offers the most extended description of Bosman's attitude to the art or craft of writing. He was employed by Abrahams's father as a literary tutor to Lionel, who suffered from cerebral palsy. This places Abrahams in a unique position, and Bosman's generosity towards him is evident: 'He had the art or generosity of spirit from the first to fill me with a thrilling idea of my own potentialities'. Abrahams comments in particular on his tutor's 'extraordinary freedom from egotism' and his reluctance to impose a style on his eager pupil. From their relationship we get a clear-sighted impression of Bosman the man and the artist – 'one who attached prime importance to the dictates of the heart and the imagination, and who, moreover, was by temperament and vocation dedicated to humour, laughter and play'. His memoir includes a large number of aphorisms which encapsulate Bosman's attitude to life and art, and which reveal the obvious influence of Wilde, Poe, Baudelaire and the 'French decadents'. The Bosman that Abrahams knew was an 'older, humbler, gentler persona' than the

‘Herman Malan’ of the early *Touleier* days, who, he suggests ‘adopted a posture of arrogance, contempt and defiance’ to the Johannesburg of their day.

Fittingly, perhaps, the final contribution is that of Helena Lake, Bosman’s third wife. Her recollections of Bosman are published here for the first time. She provides a detailed account of her meeting with Bosman in Pietersburg when he was editing the *Zoutspansberg Review*. She is ‘overwhelmed’ when he gives her a short story to read, and likens him to the French impressionists. It is clear that she provided a measure of stability, security and support for Bosman in his final years. She seems in fact to have had a real appreciation for her husband’s distinctive qualities: ‘Writing was a delight to him. Often I would hear crackles coming from his sparsely furnished little study, door and window tightly closed, cigarette fumes escaping under the door.’

In compiling this collection of tributes, anecdotes, memoirs and interviews, Stephen Gray has provided a valuable supplement to his other work on Bosman (as editor, biographer and literary critic). No student of Bosman should be without it. The multiple perspectives provided by the collection help to illuminate the life and times of one of our most talented and unusual writers – someone who defies easy categorisation. In Gordon Vorster’s words, ‘He really was a most contrary chap.’