

A Passionate Life

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DAYS NEVER DONE:

THE LIFE AND WORK OF HESBA FAY BRINSMEAD

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WHEN I AGREED to review this book, I began to think of the books by Hesba Brinsmead that I had enjoyed as a young reader: *A Sapphire for September* and *Beat of the City*. I also remembered the angry, passionate Ryl of *Pastures of the Blue Crane*. I searched the catalogue of the Western Suburbs Libraries in Perth. The only Brinsmead title was *Christmas at Longtime*. A neighbouring library held *Longtime Passing* and *Longtime Dreaming*. I then searched the state's resources via the LISWA catalogue: it traced two copies of *Pastures* in the Rare Children's Literature Collection at the State Library, and a sprinkling of minor works at various libraries throughout Western Australia. No *Beat of the City* or *Season of the Briar*.

Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb have produced a well-researched and comprehensive guide to Hesba Fay ('Pixie') Hungerford Brinsmead's life so far, with extensive cooperation from Brinsmead, and from her family and friends. Family photographs enhance the book, especially the youthful portrait on the cover. They have been methodical and painstaking in quoting sources and obtaining different points of view without demeaning or glossing over their subject's foibles. (As they wryly note, they heard several different versions of the same stories from Brinsmead herself.) The way they cope with discrepant accounts is to obtain firsthand reports from all the participants. Pollak and MacNabb don't over-explain or assume foreknowledge. The writing is a little repetitive in places, but this is not a serious flaw.

What makes this book really valuable in the context of the history of Australian literature for young people is that it has not been written by a teacher, librarian or bookseller. The authors have written on many subjects as journalists, with a particular interest in environmental issues. In 2000 they published *Hearts and Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment*, which had a chapter devoted to children's literature. Brinsmead's achievements were sketched there.

While treating the work with the same respect shown to its writer, their criticism is always fresh and unprejudiced.

In introducing Brinsmead's life and work, the authors juxtapose quotes from the *Longtime* books with verbal accounts from Brinsmead and her father's written reminiscences, giving readers a taste of her lovingly honest portrayals of family life. Brinsmead's dissatisfaction with the fact that they were published as children's books is interesting. Colin Thiele's *Sun on the Stubble* and its sequels were published under the same constraints and, like the *Longtime* books, give a child's-eye view of an adult world of constant work and privation. They serve the authors' purpose here in exploring the origins of her later environmental conscience. Pollak and MacNabb reveal the possible inspiration for this work in their detailing of Brinsmead's environmental activism, notably the doomed defence of Lake Pedder. Their admiration for her stance is apparent. Curiously, they don't examine the similarities with Nan Chauncy. She, too, was ahead of her time in her attitudes

to, and literary treatment of, indigenous Australians and in her lyrical praise of wilderness. They avoid comparisons with Brinsmead's contemporaries, preferring to compare her with Ethel Turner, another author who resisted being classified as a mere writer for children.

Brinsmead's early and ultimately unhappy marriage is well documented. It is not news that many a hasty marriage was made in wartime. Parts of this book resonated with Joyce Nicholson's *The Heartache of Motherhood*. These two writers are strikingly similar: both wrote in spite of domestic difficulties, and were published against the odds. Brinsmead talks frankly of her early creative difficulties and how her career was frustrated by the pressures of running a household, which forced her to find borrowed spaces for

writing: coffee shops, waiting rooms and, most bizarrely, 'spare space' at the Nunawading branch of the ANZ bank. Still, the books did get written and were published to acclaim. During Brinsmead's heyday, few Australians wrote for teenagers. While she suffered to some extent in being ahead of her time, she profited from being acknowledged as part of the emerging young adult genre. By Brinsmead's own admission, she missed the exiled writer's impetus once she had a room of her own.

Recently, a few authors whose work has lain dormant have been rediscovered by children of the twenty-first century. The Pan Macmillan reissues, marketed as John Marsden's selections, have won a new readership for works by Joan Phipson and Nan Chauncy, both contemporaries of Hesba Brinsmead. Perhaps this biography will revive interest in some of her books as well.