

A passion for the past

Writer
Elaine Davie

Esje du Toit grew up on a farm just outside Stanford during the war years and from an early age she wanted to know more about the 'olden days'. She wondered what the places she knew had looked like before, and who the people were who had once lived there. As she grew into adulthood, the history of Stanford and later, Hermanus, became a passion which was to last her whole life.

She unearthed old-timers and encouraged them to dredge up memories of an earlier age. With encouragement from her mother, whatever she heard, she wrote down. This was social history straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. She relentlessly followed leads, digging deep into people's lives and creating an interlocking historical tapestry of the area.

The more she discovered, the more she wanted to find out. Eventually, she had become so caught up in the excitement of this narrative of the past that she wanted to share it. First, she began writing articles, and then came the books, one on top of the other: *Stanford Stories*, Volumes I and II; then *Hermanus Stories*, I, II and III and after that, *Whale Capital Chronicles* I and II.

There seemed to be no end to the stories she had to tell and the lives long past that she was able to recreate. Her main sources were not dusty tomes on sagging shelves, but the real people she interviewed. She wrote in both English and Afrikaans, because she wanted as many people as possible to read them. History

was important, she believed, and needed to be preserved.

Actually, it's surprising that she managed to maintain this impetus, handicapped as she was by mental illness, which was identified many years after it first manifested, as Bipolar Disorder. Often exhausted by her uncontrollable mood swings, she also found the stigma and shame associated with it, deeply distressing. So a second passion emerged, for creating an understanding of the condition amongst the uninformed. She wrote three books on the subject: *Swing High, Swing Low*; *Skoppelmaaijare* and *Struggling with Sanity*. Interestingly, these three books were published under her own name, Esje du Toit, whilst for all the others, she used the more enigmatic, SJ du Toit.

Although she was a well-known personality in Hermanus, many people found her unpredictable behaviour difficult to handle and she herself had no desire to lead a social life. Hermanus resident, Angela Heslop first met her when they were both members of a local walking group in the late 90s, and later, in a writing collective, the Southern Writers' Group. They became close friends.

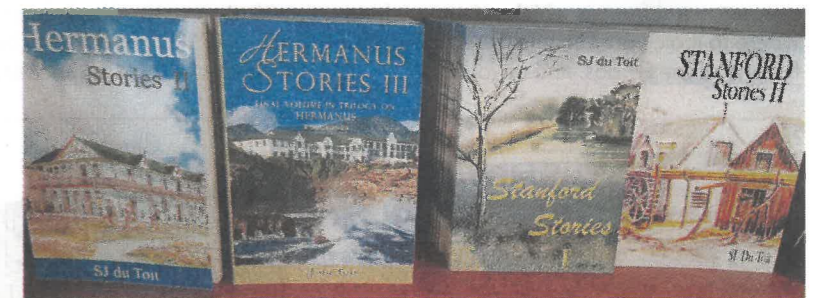
As a farmer's daughter, Esje taught Angela about gardening, as well as local history, and together with Dr Robin Lee, another history buff, they launched the Hermanus History Society in 2012. In broad outline, its aims were to bring the history of Hermanus alive to residents and visitors; create an awareness of history among people in the Hermanus area whose ancestors lived here, and to encourage the collection and preservation of historical resources.

Popular 'stoep kuiers' organised by the History Society at the instigation of Renée Hartsliet took participants on extended walking tours through areas of historic significance, like the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Onrus and Hermanus old town. It also erected two information boards and eight plaques at various historically important sites around Hermanus. Although Esje had passed away by the time the pedestrianisation of High Street had become a reality, she very actively worked towards the adoption of the proposal by the municipal authorities. One feels she would have approved of the placards subsequently placed along the paved road to indicate which historic buildings had once stood there.

Esje was concerned that Hermanus's sense of community was rapidly eroding as the town grew bigger, and she saw it as her personal mission to keep its past alive. It was what gave meaning to her life, says Angela. Although she was careful to check her facts, her account of its history was directly aligned to the African oral tradition, where history is passed down from one generation to the next. Until she began to write her books about the area, no comprehensive and integrated written record of its past existed.

"Through her passion for making the history of these communities accessible to residents, both long-time and recent, as well as visitors to the town, Esje made a mega contribution to the life of Hermanus," says Angela. "Her greatest gift was the ability to convey her own enthusiasm through her writing."

Sadly, many of the 17 books she



TOP: Long-time friend and co-founder of the Hermanus History Society, Angela Heslop holds one of Esje's three books on Bipolar Disorder, *Struggle with Sanity*. **ABOVE:** Of the 17 books published by SJ du Toit, many are now out of print, but fortunately, some of her most popular books are still available from The Book Cottage and other local booksellers.

PHOTOS: Elaine Davie

wrote are now out of print, but since she gave the Book Cottage exclusive rights to the sale of some of them locally, it still has a number available. In smaller quantities, so do other book sellers in the area. As we approach Heritage Day, our readers can do no better than lay their hands on whichever of them they can. In her own way, Esje du

Toit has become part of the heritage she fought so hard to protect.

It is fitting, therefore, that we end with the inscription which appears on the front page of all her history stories: *A town which does not honour its own past would be like the newly rich who are ashamed of their parents.* (Anon.)