

We Are All the Same – A Story of a Boy’s Courage and a Mother’s Love

The Penguin Press, 2004. 243 pp. \$19.95 ISBN: 1594200289

Over twenty-five million people are infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for almost two-thirds of cases world wide, followed by Asia which holds a fifth of the world’s cases. Last year alone, 3.1 million new infections were reported in Sub-Saharan Africa and 2.3 million people died of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in this region. AIDS has become the biggest killer in Africa, responsible for over 20% of all deaths on the continent—twice the rate of Lower Respiratory Syndrome and malaria, and more than that of diarrhoeal disease, perinatal condition, measles and tuberculosis combined. Fifteen million children are orphaned worldwide by the loss of either one or both parents due to AIDS, and as of 2000, AIDS accounted for 5% of orphaned children in South Africa. With an infection rate between 15-39% in adults, the orphan rate is projected to climb to over 15% by the year 2010 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005; UNAIDS, 2005; UNAIDS and USAID, 2002). Faced with such staggering numbers and seemingly no hope for change in the near future, where does one begin to write about the plight of the people suffering from such a devastating pandemic?

Jim Wooten, a senior correspondent with ABC News’s Nightline and a recipient of the 2002 John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism, has attempted to do just that with his book entitled “We Are All The Same—A Story of a Boy’s Courage and a Mother’s Love.” This is a story about a black Zulu boy, Nkosi Johnson, who was born in February 1989 with HIV from his mother, and ended up in the care of a white South Africa woman, Gail Johnson. Wooten begins the book brilliantly by exploring the fate of the Zulu tribe which once ruled over two-thirds of the land now known as the Republic of South Africa, and how the British colonial powers and later the Afrikaners broke the backbone of this once proud clan. Men were forced to leave their villages for work (typically mining jobs) that paid cash which they could use to pay imposed taxes; the result was shattered families and the erosion of a traditional way of life. It is in this context that we learn that a young 19-year-old girl—Daphne, the daughter of Ruth Khumalo—gives birth to a second child, Xolani Nkosi, and both mother and child are HIV positive. Both the pregnancy and HIV infection stemmed from an affair that took place when Daphne left her desolate village to experience a new lifestyle in Johannesburg.

We Are All The Same is a captivating book recounting the courage of a young boy born with an incurable disease, and the love of an adoptive mother who will-

ingly takes on the task to care for the sick child. The author skillfully tells the story in the context of an evolving geopolitical and social landscape, in a country emerging from over 40 years of apartheid. After the brief history of the Zulu tribe, we are introduced to how Nkosi Johnson’s life began in a small village, surrounded by a family of women—mother, grandmother, aunt and sister. Although Nkosi is the child of a single mother with an unknown father (a seemingly normal occurrence) the family begins to care for the child but suspect that there is something terribly wrong. Ironically, Gail Johnson’s life begins in a somewhat similar fashion, being born to a single teacher. However, at a time when having children out of wedlock was considered taboo in the white community in South Africa, Gail was adopted by a middle class family that moved from one town to another as the father was marginally promoted through the ranks in a bank. Both stories are carefully woven into the social and economic environment of the country, both from the black and white points of view—which are obviously very different. As Daphne, Nkosi’s mother, struggles to survive and provide for her family, she is forced to move to squatters’ camps outside of Johannesburg, bringing her mother, sister and daughter (Mbali) along. At the same time, on the other side of town, Gail, now a mother of two, finds her marriage to be at a breaking point. Spurred by an accidental encounter with a friend’s brother dying from AIDS, Gail is inspired to establish the ‘Guest House,’ a small home which serves as a place where gay men with AIDS could live out their final years. It is here that Nkosi and Gail’s paths crossed, when Daphne, who was desperate to do something to help her ailing child, bravely traveled from her squatters’ camp to Houghton, Johannesburg, and asked if they would take her son into the Guest House.

From June 1991 until his death in the middle of 2000, Nkosi Johnson and his adopted mother became spokespeople for AIDS victims, especially mothers and children infected with the virus. At a time when South Africa was coming to grips with the change in political power, following the release of Nelson Mandela in the early part of 1990 and subsequent abandonment of apartheid, HIV/AIDS was largely ignored. As the author carefully takes us through the transforming events in Nkosi and Gail’s lives, he expands the book by covering the devastation that HIV and AIDS was having—and is still having—on the continent of Africa. Jim Wooten includes stories from a number of African countries such as Botswana, Malawi and Uganda. As a reader, you are simply overwhelmed by the sheer number of people affected by the disease. Through willpower and

We Are All the Same – A Story of a Boy’s Courage and a Mother’s Love

determination, Nkosi and Gail Johnson were able to move the Southern African country to introduce legislation which prevented schools from excluding children with HIV/AIDS from their classes. They were also able to raise money and open a small residence, appropriately named ‘Nkosi’s Haven’, which provides shelter for women and their children with HIV—the Guest House had closed not too long after Nkosi arrival due to financial constraints.

An underlying theme in the book was the lack of discussion on the subject of AIDS, and an unwillingness to do so, not only by laypeople, but also most African officials and their governments. In fact, Wooten does not use the words HIV/AIDS until well into the second chapter, a subtle but effective way to portray the situation in Africa where individuals speak only in abstract terms when referring to the disease. The book climaxes with a showdown between the government of South Africa, then led by Thabo Mbeki, and AIDS doctors, scientists and activists including Gail Johnson and her frail son Nkosi. At the time that Jim Wooten first meets the boy, Nkosi is preparing a speech for the International AIDS Conference being held in Durban, the capital city of the hardest hit province in South Africa. Both Thabo Mbeki and Nkosi Johnson gave keynote speeches on the opening day. Mbeki continued his government’s rhetoric that AIDS is not caused by the HIV virus and that the drugs AZT and nevirapine should not be given to pregnant women to prevent mother to child viral transmission. In contrast, Nkosi’s speech was advocating for HIV/AIDS sufferers to be treated as regular human beings and urging the government to make drugs available to HIV-positive pregnant women. He ended by uttering his now-famous words—‘We Are All the Same’. The book then takes a downward spiral from this point onwards, culminating in the eventual death of young Nkosi Johnson at the age of twelve, with Gail by his side. With the pending death of Nkosi looming, the author introduces yet another wrinkle to the story, describing how Nkosi’s grandmother Ruth Khumalo, perhaps with family or possibly even governmental influence, began to insinuate that Gail Johnson was taking advantage and making money off the

publicity and fame that her adopted son had generated. This simply underscores the sometimes-ugly nature of human society.

In “We Are All The Same”, Jim Wooten tells a story of how two individuals made a difference in the lives of so many people, by having courage and a will to fight for the rights of HIV/AIDS patients in a country mute to the subject. Wooten manages to write a novel that carefully integrates the lives of Nkosi and Gail Johnson with the prevailing social and political climate in South Africa. Moreover, Wooten makes a crucial point to inform the reader that the problems faced by South Africans extend all over the continent of Africa. The wealth of information contained within the pages of the book provides the reader with a fairly good understanding of the dire situation confronting people living in Sub-Sahara Africa. Despite the tragic nature of the story, the author does manage to portray an uplifting life of a little boy who did not give up, with the loving support of his adopted mother. For anyone interested in the plight of millions of people being devastated with HIV/AIDS, I would strongly recommend reading “We Are All The Same—A Story of a Boy’s Courage and a Mother’s Love” by Jim Wooten, which not only provides facts on the current situation in Africa, but also puts a human face to the devastating pandemic.

REFERENCES

British Broadcasting Corporation. (2005) The AIDS debate. Accessed March 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/special/aids/default.stm

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). (2005) 2004 Report on the global AIDS epidemic, Executive Summary. Accessed March 2005. http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004/GAR2004_html/ExecSummary_en/Execsumm_en.pdf

UNAIDS and United States Agency for International Development (2002). Children on the brink 2002: A joint report on orphan estimates and program strategies. Accessed March 2005. http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/Publications/docs/childrenbrink.pdf

Kakuri M. Omari
 Department of Pathology
 Albert Einstein College of Medicine
 Bronx, New York 10461