

**Book Review:***Three Letter Plague*

---

Reviewer: *Emma O'Shaughnessy*

*Three Letter Plague* (2007)

Author: Jonny Steinberg

Publisher: Jonathan Ball

The place that HIV and Aids occupy in the South African mindset is one generally beset by contradiction. Over the last decade, policy and governmental response to the pandemic, as well as its treatment, has been ambiguous, at best. An unshakeable stigma, which operates on multiple levels, surrounds the very idea of the disease. An evasive myopia blankets the country as the emergency of HIV and Aids is largely ignored, by government and citizens alike. The fact that it is usually transmitted sexually appears to be the main reason for this, but such stigmas are usually perpetuated by more pervasive socio-political belief systems and patterns. If we look at the statistics, one sees a far greater number of poor and black South Africans afflicted. This feeds into a variety of residual race and class issues which local society, as well as government, seem unable to properly address. However, certain individuals, activists and non-governmental bodies have proven to be determined to address the nature and reality of the pandemic and remove it from these associations. Aimed at society at large, but especially towards the government, underlying the drive of such groups is the ethos that without sound policy and education, the disease and its stigmas will continue to spread uncontrollably. Local NGO's such as the TAC and international aid groups like *Medécins sans Frontières* (MSF) are calling for affordable and accessible treatment through the public health care system, which inevitably requires a willingness from government to accept the dangers of the pandemic. This is an on-going battle. Hopefully though, through an understanding of the nature of the disease and the miracle of ARV's and treatment, South Africa society will find its own voice and begin its own battle to conquer its fears. The individual and the organisations that support local society are thus central to this struggle.

In his newest book, *Three Letter Plague* (2007), Jonny Steinberg addresses these issues. Steinberg's aim is to seek out the multiple reasons perpetuating the stigmas around HIV and Aids and what steps need to be taken in order to dismantle them. Moreover, what is also central to the novel is what steps need to be taken to treat the disease. The author addresses perceptions around HIV and AIDs, and how this may affect its treatment and control. For a period of about eighteen months during the last three years, Steinberg spent a considerable amount of time in what was once known as the Transkei, a former apartheid 'Homeland.' The research gathered, as well as the relationships he formed during this time infuse the book. The author links two overarching narratives. The first is the story of a young man, Sizwe Mabandla and the predominantly rural

community of Ithanga, near the town of Lusikisiki. The other is the presence and the work of the MSF in the area, spearheaded by the dynamic and powerful figure of Hermann Reuter. Reuter, who headed up the MSF's Lusikisiki programme, forms a strong allegorical juxtaposition with Sizwe's vulnerable yet steadfast character in the text. By intersecting the life of a typical young, black male South African with the aims and approaches of a prolifically active organisation, we are able to witness how deeply sensitive the issue of HIV and AIDS is in South Africa. Furthermore, we are able to understand the nature of the obstacles facing those affected by it as well as those trying to treat and control it. A complex and nuanced character, Sizwe constantly grapples with a shifting world, at once conceding the need for a more transparent approach to HIV and AIDS in his own community and life, while simultaneously guarding deep-set and traditional belief systems that in many ways seem responsible for keeping the disease in the shadows of his community's minds and lives. Reuter's belief is that if a community of people is able to access proper, decentralised health care in the form of local clinics and medical staff, the AIDS virus can be brought under control—through the administration of drugs, treatment and counseling. His vision extends to the training of individual community members to assist the staff of these clinics, who act as intermediaries between public health care systems and the communities who will grow to depend on them.

Steinberg subtly sets up an antagonism between what Sizwe and Reuter represent. Reuter stubbornly pushes the idea that systemic change in health care is enough to curb the virus, treating those who are sick, where the relief of treatment of the disease is stronger than the stigmas. Sizwe's character on the other hand shows a more complex version of these relationships. Throughout the text, Sizwe refuses to be tested for HIV; inducing Steinberg's investigation into what may be preventing him from doing so. The character then exposes some of the residual misunderstandings stemming from the intersection between 'traditional' 'African' ways of life and Western discursive practice. Steinberg pays particular attention to scientific discourses, both Western and South African. Moreover, what we are able to access as readers is the nature of fear itself and how it is harboured within belief systems and social practice.

A difficult task Steinberg has taken on, weaving the personal story of Sizwe with the history of HIV and AIDS in this country. The text reads like a novel, linear in its temporality, yet circular in its engagement with its themes. Richly told and with integrity, Steinberg moves between discussions on the socio-political landscape of the country, the present-day stories of his characters and dips into the past, where the stories of Pondoland, or the Transkei, reach out to shape the reader's impressions of a changing land and a people's struggle. His own position fluctuates between wanting to believe in the power of modern medicine and a pragmatic approach to the disease, as displayed by Reuter, and the understanding that in a country that bears the traces of a complicated colonial and apartheid history, this is not so simple. Strongly ethical in his approach, the handling of his research and the identity of the Ithanga and surrounding communities, Steinberg asks the reader to make her own conclusions about what

he has witnessed, while constantly interrogating his position as author. His role as storyteller is made credible by his background in social and anthropological research and the honest appraisal of his own life.

As in *The Number*, his questions surrounding the role of storyteller are central. Setting out to understand the nature of people's fears as well as their secrets, Steinberg is deeply conscious of exposing too much. Driven, however, by the need to uncover enough to understand the disease and the place it occupies in the public imagination, the author endeavours – and I think succeeds – in finding an honest place where he can mediate between the two extremes. *Three Letter Plague* is an invigorating and sensitive book, urgent in its subject matter and intriguing in its telling. It stands to challenge and to inform those who read it, least of which by its capacity to induce the same level of honesty in its audience. Hopefully, its powerful, truthful and compassionate ideas are synonymous with a new era in South Africa where state and society, where system and individual, can collaborate in fighting the pandemic and all its manifestations.