

Review

The Endless Trail...

Sarudzayi Elizabeth Chifamba-Barnes (*The African Arts Promoters Publishing Company, UK, 2008*)

Reviewed by Joyce Jenje Makwenda



The book highlights the plight and extent of HIV and AIDS among African women and children. It also challenges the virgin-cure myth, which has seen a rise in the number of infant and child rape cases across southern Africa in recent years. As Lord Chris Smith of Finsbury (House of Lords) said in his review of the *The Endless Trail...* it “Highlights the extent and seriousness of the HIV crisis facing Southern Africa, and charts the human consequences for individuals, families, and especially children. It can alert us all to the continuing need to fight stigma, superstition and poverty...”

The book highlights the problems associated with poverty and migration in relation to the spread of HIV.

In particular it deals with the recent wave of emigration of the Zimbabwean population due to economic and political hardships, which has resulted in many families being torn apart. It is not unusual in such situations to have siblings caring for each other when both parents, or one of the parents, especially the mother, is away in a foreign country, working and repatriating money and goods to the families left behind. This increases the vulnerability of children to paedophiles and other sex predators, as happens to Jenny's daughter Tafadzwa in the story.

The story begins with the main character, Jenny, as a 13-year-old girl full of ambition and anticipation, going to a boarding school accompanied by her mother, a peasant woman who sells her livestock to raise money for school fees. At the boarding school she is bullied by other girls because of her poverty and rural background. She overcomes bullying by establishing herself as the best student the Good Shepherd Mission School has had.

Jenny's life takes a different twist when her father dies from an AIDS-related illness in the middle of her studies, leaving her educational prospects hanging in the balance. Ironically, prior to Jenny's father's death, Jenny's mother watches a drama being performed by a local theatre group at their rural clinic about the devastating effects of AIDS. The seriousness of the AIDS pandemic is eroded when one spectator shouts that AIDS is an American Idea of Discouraging Sex, to the amusement of spectators.

The 1980s were characterised by many debates and myths regarding HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. Debates such as whether it really existed or whether it was just a form of 'having sex with a woman who was fenced' (in Shona known as 'runyoka' meaning a woman whose husband has performed 'juju' on her so that she does

not sleep with other men even if he dies, and if she does these men may die or suffer from an incurable illness); or if it was just mere witchcraft, as the writer shows us through the village spirit medium, the sangoma, who tells Jenny's family that their father, who two weeks later is diagnosed with full-blown AIDS, has been bewitched by envious co-workers.

The story ends in the 2000s when the full impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to be felt. Through Jenny's mother, a peasant woman with limited education, the writer highlights the shortcomings of some of the adverts and posters regarding AIDS. This is illustrated by Jenny's mother seeing a huge poster bearing the words "AIDS Kills. Use a Condom" with no further explanation of how the virus is spread and who was at risk of catching the virus. Jenny's mother, like many married women at the time, sees no relevance in the play and posters because she is married, and was a virgin when she got married. She sees AIDS as too remote and distant from her, only affecting prostitutes, so she does not prepare for safer sex when her husband visits her and the family a few times per year.

The story is set both in Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom. It gives the reader an insight into the rural life in Zimbabwe in the 1980s after Zimbabwean independence when people were enjoying a free Zimbabwe. This was a short lived celebration for many people owing to the outbreak of HIV/AIDS.

It also gives an insight into the problems faced by African immigrants in the UK. Such things as the need to hold down three jobs to survive in order to support the immigrant herself and families left behind.

It also highlights immigration issues and the vulnerability of illegal immigrants to fake immigration sharks, and in general how immigrants view each other with suspicion: the housemaid in Zimbabwe now works alongside her previous employer in the factories and industries packing fruits; the former house-owner works side by side with his tenant in nursing homes looking after elderly people; and the once oppressed wife in Zimbabwe now earns more than her husband prompting other Zimbabweans to say in the UK its only your physical strength which matters (*simba rako chete*), or Gatwick *ndimaenzanise* (Gatwick is an equaliser).

Jenny escapes an abusive marriage by joining the exodus of frustrated Zimbabwean professionals going to the UK to escape poverty. But the British pound sterling does not pave the streets of London, contrary to what many people thought. In the UK, like many immigrants, she puts aside her academic credentials and works in a nursing home doing a dot.com job (associated with changing pads and faeces) – 'dot' standing for the Zimbabwean Shona word for faeces.

If Jenny overcame bullying in school and domineering male relatives, the one thing she could not overcome is HIV. Like her mother, she is a virgin when she gets married, but her life turns upside down when she discovers that she too has been infected by the HI virus by her husband. Faced with the problems of coping with a positive diagnosis and stigma, Jenny also has to deal with the problem of disclosure. She is forced to disclose her status to her brother in Zimbabwe so that he can take her children for HIV screening.

In this process she discovers that one of her daughter in Zimbabwe had been born with the virus, while the other two daughters are negative. Trouble begins when her brother's wife refuses to care for the children, who end up in the care of paid domestic carers. Readers are drawn to tears when Tafadzwa, one of Jenny's daughters is raped and infected with HIV by a male carer who is advised by a traditional healer to sleep with a virgin in order to get rid of the virus.

The Endless Trail... makes worthwhile reading, especially for women, as it educates people not to be complacent but vigilant when it comes to practising safer sex. The writer displays her poetic skills when she starts the book with a poem, in which the human immunodeficiency virus is personified and talks about the way it attacks its victims.

The Endless Trail... was published by two different companies, and appears in two different cover designs. The story begins with Jenny carrying a suitcase going to a boarding school, and ends with Jenny packing a suitcase to return to Zimbabwe. One of the cover designs shows a woman in despair, sitting on a bed next to a packed suitcase, while the other cover shows a newly diagnosed woman reflecting on her past relationships. *The Endless Trail...* is indeed an endless trail of recurring misfortunes, but Jenny like many others, fights on. LB

The book can be purchased directly from the publisher by visiting www.theendlesstrail.com, for £6.80 or through major internet retailers. In Johannesburg readers can buy it from Xarra Books in Newtown (R100).