



Book Review:
Saturday is for
Funerals

Unity Dow and Matt
Essex (Harvard
University Press, 2010)

Jennifer Rosenbush¹¹

In Botswana, there is a saying that even the greatest calamities can induce laughter (24). Unity Dow and Matt Essex capture this

dissonant spirit of tragedy and hope in their new book *Saturday is for Funerals*. The title of the book derives from the alarming regularity with which the people of Botswana attended funerals in the mid-1990s. The rampant rate of HIV/AIDS, combined with a lack of treatment options, resulted in such a high death rate that each and every Saturday was reserved for funeral-going. Dow, a High Court judge and writer, and Essex, a professor of health sciences at Harvard University, trace the spread, treatment, and socio-cultural consequences of HIV/AIDS in Botswana. The authors detail the ways in which the crisis has been drastically curtailed through the work of individuals, researchers, and policy.

This 218 page book is divided into a total of fifteen chapters, preceded by a preface and introduction and followed by a glossary, list

¹¹ *Jennifer Rosenbush* is a graduate student of anthropology at Boston University.

of further readings, and an index. Each of the fifteen chapters include a personal narratives followed by a medical analysis.

The personal narratives beginning each chapter, featuring people from Dow's personal and professional life, are intimate and emotional. Accordingly, a primary strength of this work is that it provides a humanized account of those infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Dow shares, for example, her mother's disquiet with the number of deaths in the extended family, including an aunt who passes away before medications are available. HIV affects people in all walks of life and the staff of the court are no exception. Dow and her staff learn to recognize the warning signs and encourage ill coworkers to seek testing and medical attention. Many follow the advice, but others, such as Dow's driver, are not ready to take the leap. Dow also profiles individuals facing drug resistance, blood transfusions, and the search for a vaccine. It is clear that the judge's concern for the well-being of the community is not restricted to the courtroom. At times, she seeks out these responsibilities, at other times they are foisted upon her, however, her actions are a reminder that one person can make a difference.

Essex's expert medical analysis chronicles the changing understanding of HIV/AIDS whilst complementing the personal narratives. In the 1990s, he writes, the long incubation period of the virus caused confusion and deaths were often attributed to opportunistic infections. As time went on, awareness of transmission and the course of the virus deepened. Essex applies this knowledge when profiling high risk populations, including discordant couples, where one partner is positive and the other is not, and young women in intergenerational relationships with older men. The babies of positive mothers were at risk for mother-to-child transmission of the virus during birth or breast feeding. The development of treatment is central to the book. The potent three-drug combination known as HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) was introduced to Botswana through the efforts of a Harvard University project with funding from

the Gates Foundation and the Merck Foundation. The HAART treatment plan is widely available and so effective that many people are able to live healthy, productive lives. Drugs preventing mother-to-child transmission are also currently accessible and effective. Other important factors such as opportunistic infections, particularly tuberculosis, are also analyzed, as are drug resistance, blood transfusions, and traditional male circumcision. Throughout the book, Essex deftly explains medical developments in a way that is detailed but accessible to a reader with a social science background.

The two-part chapters illustrate and analyze the drastic social and cultural changes in Botswana resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the mid-1990s, greetings were abbreviated for fear of asking after the well-being of a family member of who might have suddenly succumbed to illness. People would refuse to sit downwind of a person living with HIV/AIDS. Since that time, increased knowledge about how the infection is transmitted, and the realization that everyone has a friend or family member infected with the virus, the stigma has greatly lessened. These factors also mean that orphaned children are usually taken in by the extended family. This contrasts with many other African countries where orphaned children have been ostracized. Dow and Essex acknowledge, however, that changing household composition introduces new stresses to families.

Advancement in the testing and treatment of HIV/AIDS has also changed the social landscape. Knowing about the efficacy of medications has increased people's willingness to get tested. Those who go for testing often express palpable relief at knowing their status. Dow recounts a chronically-ill staff member coming to her office and announcing his positive status "so firmly and with such jubilation that [she] thought he meant the opposite" (53). The people of Botswana also blend new treatment options and technologies with traditional values and practices. Some HIV-positive people consult traditional healers or the ancestors before beginning treatment; others use cell phone

messaging to remind partners to take their medications. Male circumcision practices are another example of the blending of tradition and technology. The final chapter of the book brings many themes together in its discussion of the challenges and successes of government intervention in Botswana.

While much of the content in this book has cross-cultural resonance, *Saturday is for Funerals* is truly a story of Botswana and its people. Perhaps most importantly, this book depicts a success in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It presents more than glimmer of hope in an area of the world that is often depicted as hopeless. This valuable addition to the literature is accessible to lay people would be of great value to students in a range of disciplines. The book is not a substitute for ethnographic studies or medical surveys, but the interdisciplinary approach gauges the pulse of Botswana. The authors skillfully weave together their work in a way that makes the whole more valuable than the sum of its parts. Accordingly, the book both plays on the heart strings and engages the mind.