Bad Bugs Bookclub Reading Guide: 28 stories of AIDS in Africa by Stephanie Nolen

The aim of the Bad Bugs Book Club is to get people interested in science, specifically microbiology, by reading books (novels) in which infectious disease forms some part of the story. We also try to associate books, where possible, with some other activity or event, to widen interest, and to broaden impact.

We have established a fairly fluid membership of our bookclub through our website In The Loop (www.sci-eng.mmu.ac.uk/intheloop), but we hope to encourage others to join, to set up their own bookclub, suggest books and accompanying activities to us, and give feedback about the books that they have read, using our website as the focus for communication.

Our bookclub comprises both microbiologists and members of the general public. We felt that this would encourage some discussion on the science – accuracy, impact etc – as well as about the book.

28 stories of AIDS in Africa by Stephanie Nolen is just that: 28 individual experiences of HIV/AIDS. The author is a journalist who narrates the stories, each of which has some unique message about the disease, whether it be related to personal aspects, such as maintenance of secrecy, an unwillingness to divorce, prejudice, denial, access to treatment, and political aspects such as civil war, capitalism, corruption, inflation, or history. There is a vague chronology, where key changes such as access to treatment is improved, treatment of pregnant women is implemented, second line drugs become available etc.

There are many questions that can be asked to stimulate discussion about the book. They can relate specifically to AIDS, or be more general in terms of accessibility and impact of the book itself.

Questions

1. Did you like the book? The style of writing (journalistic?)? Did you relate to any of the characters?
2. Did you learn anything about HIV/AIDS the virus? Does HIV cause AIDS? What about the AIDS-deniers?

3. How is AIDS transmitted? How was it primarily transmitted in the book?

4. What are the prevention/treatment strategies

5. Did any aspect of the book affect you particularly?
   a. How much did you know about Africa? How did different countries respond to AIDS
   b. Did any particular country’s story seem especially moving?
   c. Thinking about the number of AIDS orphans growing up, how would they eventually run the countries?
   d. How AIDS prevalence and infection was related to other phenomena – war, refugees, industry, prostitution

6. To me, the following issues were thought-provoking. What about you?
   a. The number of ‘first people to be open’
   b. Scandal of divorce
   c. Women thrown out of home
   d. School fees in poor countries
   e. Political/governmental/historical aspects/unfairness
   f. Wealthier more infected that the rural poor
   g. Grandparents bringing up orphans

7. Did you notice any chronology?

8. What were the key changes in Africa’s reaction to the pandemic that helped in control?

9. Have things changed recently?

10. Do you think that the AIDS pandemic in Africa has global implications?
11. What educational activities might the book stimulate? Is it relevant to the school curriculum?

12. Did the book change anything about you/make you want to do something?

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