

Landmines, HIV/Aids, and Africa's New Generation

Barbara Harlow  
*University of Texas Austin*

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**Barbara Harlow,**  
**"Landmines, HIV/Aids, and Africa's New Generation"**  
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**Abstract:** In her article, "Landmines, HIV/Aids, and Africa's New Generation," Barbara Harlow asks the question what do "humanitarianism" and "human rights" have to do with the humanities? In a globalizing culture, how do personal stories contribute to political histories? What might be the effect of literature on these pressing questions? Harlow focuses in her essay on the work of Swedish writer and Maputo theater director Henning Mankell through particular attention to *Secrets in the Fire* and *Playing with Fire: Two novels about a young Mozambican named Sofia*. Harlow shows how Mankell's linking of the experiences of Sofia to the legacy of landmines and the prognosis of HIV/Aids is suggestive of the new imperatives for plotting alternative relationships between character and setting. As she compares these narratives to the search for "sunshine clauses" in African policy, she further shows how *Secrets in the Fire* and *Playing with Fire* are exemplary of both setbacks and advances in rethinking Africa's historic struggle for national liberation and its renewed engagement with contemporary global politics.

**Barbara HARLOW****Landmines, HIV/Aids, and Africa's New Generation**

"Never leave the path. Not even by a metre. Never take short cuts." Mama Lydia gives this advice to her daughter Sofia every single morning (Mankell, *Secrets* 12). The admonition is reiterated again and again by Jose-Maria as well, who maintains the village school attended by Sofia and her sister Maria: "Use only the paths," he emphasizes. "Never take short cuts, even if you're in a hurry" (Mankell, *Secrets* 43). The rationale behind such strict instructions for making one's way, whether to school or to the fields, or home again, is explained by Jose-Maria: "There are landmines," he says and goes on to clarify for his young listeners: "Landmines are bombs buried in the ground. ... You can't see them. But if you put your foot on the ground above one, the mine will explode. You can have your leg blown off. You can be blinded. You can even die" (Mankell, *Secrets* 43). That, according to both Mama Lydia and Jose-Maria, is why one should "use only the paths." And so, when Sofia and her sister Maria stray from the path one morning on the way to school, Maria dies and Sofia has both of her legs blown off. But Sofia is not blinded. Rather she acquires two prostheses, artificial legs, and discovers a new perspective on her own past, the Mozambican present, and the options presented by the future: the narrative connections perhaps between well-worn paths and untold short cuts. Along the way, she must learn to walk all over again.

Sofia is the young heroine of two stories written by Swedish writer, Henning Mankell: *Secrets in the Fire* (1995; 2000) and *Playing with Fire* (2001; 2002). According to the frontispiece of both books, Sofia is a "real person, a friend of Henning Mankell." In the first of her narratives, Sofia loses both her sister Maria and her own legs to a landmine. In the second, she loses her sister Rosa to the scourge of HIV/Aids. Sofia now has a child, named Maria for her sister lost to the landmine, and is confronting the problems of a post-independence Mozambique. Mankell's two novels -- docu-fiction, young adult stories -- describe the contested world of post-independence Africa and its international topicality: the continued debate over the use of anti-personnel ordnance in the prosecution of war and the continuing consequences of the human toll taken by HIV/Aids across sub-Saharan Africa. Mankell himself, however, is perhaps best known for his thrillers, police procedurals, featuring detective Kurt Wallander, and set in southern Sweden. These best-sellers engage too the issues that riddle the global turn of the twentieth into the twenty-first century: serial killers, refugees, Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, drugs and smuggling. Dividing his time annually between his native Sweden and Mozambique, where for nearly twenty years he has been theater director of the Teatro Avenida in the capital city of Maputo, Mankell inquires through the investigations of his Swedish Inspector Wallander -- and eventually and eventfully through the experiences of his young Mozambican friend Sofia -- into the necessary if generic reconstructions of plot in an age of globalization. As Mankell described his longstanding, indeed decades-long, interest in Africa in a 2004 interview: "western apathy towards Africa keeps me awake at night" (*Der Spiegel* <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,332897,00.html>>), and in another exchange, the writer dates that interest to early reading as a young boy in Sweden, especially the works of Mungo Park and other African explorers. In recalling the child he was at the time, abandoned by his mother and living with his father, a Swedish judge, Mankell tells another interlocutor in a moment of Conradian retrospect, "Africa was the most exotic place I could conceive of -- the end of the world -- and I would go there one day" (qtd. in Thomson <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1074233,00.html>>). He did. Like Conrad too, Mankell served for several years as a seaman and first visited Africa -- Guinea Bissau to be explicit, still under Portuguese colonial control -- in 1972. Already working at the time in the theater in Stockholm, in 1987 he began his work as Teatro Avenida's director in Mozambique, more than a decade after that country's devastatingly hard-won independence from Portugal. For all that Inspector

Wallander is hailed by an international readership as a decidedly Swedish personality, Mankell's police procedurals engage the global pressures -- and colonial influences -- on the contemporary worlds of Europe and Africa.

In *The White Lioness* (1993), for example, in which a plot to assassinate Nelson Mandela is thwarted in the period between Mandela's release from prison in 1990 and South Africa's first ever democratic elections in 1994, one of Wallander's colleagues wonders aloud, recalling the international sanctions against the apartheid regime: "I don't know much about South Africa. ... Except that it's a racist country with lots of violence. Sweden has no diplomatic relations with South Africa. We don't even play tennis or do business with them. Not officially, at least. What I can't understand for the life of me is why something from South Africa should end up in Sweden. You'd think Sweden would be the last place to be involved" (Mankell, *Lioness* 100). But then Olof Palme, Sweden's social democratic prime minister and long-time supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, had been assassinated -- some would say by apartheid agents -- on 28 February 1986. Oliver Tambo, then president of the African National Congress (ANC) sent a message of condolence. The same global connections, a Sweden-southern Africa nexus, are again at the root of the plot of *Firewall* (1998), in which an Angola-based entrepreneur attempts with the help of his Europe-located associates to mismanage electronically the world of global banking and international finance. Still another of Wallander's colleagues notes cynically: "We now have a connection to a stockbroker in Seoul and to an English firm by the name of Lonrho. I contacted a person in Stockholm who was able to tell me that Lonrho was originally an African company that was involved in highly illegal operations in southern Rhodesia during the time of sanctions" (Mankell, *Firewall* 281).

Sofia's traversals, travels, and travails might, for their part, seem to be more localized than the international anti-apartheid movement or the nefarious financial practices of Tiny Rowland's multinational corporation Lonrho -- resident as Sofia is in rural Mozambique. But Sofia's life histories are none the less international and, as Conrad's Marlow remarked as he speculated on the "heart of darkness" of nineteenth-century imperialism, they are "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (Conrad 10). Landmines and HIV/Aids: in other words (and their acronyms), unexploded ordnance (UXO), the explosive remnants of war (ERW), and a pandemic. *Secrets in the Fire* and *Playing with Fire* both challenge the contributions -- and their constructions -- that character and setting make to the making of a plot. Like Mankell's other works, Sofia's stories are also -- in their own way -- "whodunnits," but the procedures are necessarily under review. Who planted the landmines? Who/what is spreading HIV/Aids? And how will -- if they can be at all -- these international crimes and their attendant crises be resolved? The culprits apprehended? The killing stopped?

Sofia, meanwhile, has a predecessor: young Nelio, the street child whose stories are told over nine nights as the young African boy lies dying on a rooftop in *Chronicler of the Winds*, the recently launched English translation of Mankell's 1995 *Comedia Infantil*. Hailed by several reviewers as a tour-de-force of "magical realism" (a term eschewed by Mankell himself), *Chronicler*, like Sofia's lives in the line of fire, is a tale told of the untold realities of contemporary Africa. If Inspector Wallander's crime investigations follow the class lines of detective work and police procedurals in order to discover who killed who -- and why, the stories of Nelio and Sofia are told along rather different narrative lines, lines that sometimes do not seem to connect at all. If, for example, Maria, who dies in the landmine explosion in *Secrets in the Fire*, was Sofia's only older sister, where does Rosa, her new older sister who succumbs to HIV/Aids in *Playing with Fire*, come from? Kurt Wallander lives in the same world that Nelio, Maria and Rosa die in -- and in which Sofia survives -- just not in the same part of that world. It's a long story. How, in other words, to write literature in an age of landmines and HIV/Aids? An age of crimes against humanity that leave plots dangling, story lines broken, genealogies interrupted, generations lost? From national liberation to international despoliation and depredation. The realities of death perhaps make magic of life.

"Sunset clauses" – the formula still identifies and made at the time for the breakthrough in the negotiations that led in the early 1990s from the "bad old days" to the "new South Africa." The clauses are said to have provided the crucial "window of opportunity" that made for transition, if not for transformation. It was a historic moment and these were historical processes. But "sunset clauses" -- what could they do? What might they accomplish? Hegel, after all, had left Africa in the dark, altogether outside of the rising/setting of the sun paradigm that in the early nineteenth century he had engaged in order to describe the "philosophy of history." According to Hegel, "Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained -- for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World – shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself -- the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (91). And the British Empire, meanwhile, was said to be a global expanse on which the "sun never set." But Joe Slovo, when push came to shove during the negotiations to end the dark days of apartheid, looked toward another horizon, and argued on behalf of a longer historical narrative, one that would see the scribes, scourges, and scions of apartheid through to their retirement, and thus, with the "sunset clauses," would break the negotiations deadlock, as his daughter Gillian recalls, and open "the way for South Africa's first democratic elections" (155). In another version of those negotiations, however, the South African writer -- and proofreader and copy editor -- Ivan Vladislavic described the onerous spatial rearrangements that the temporality of "sunset clauses" occasioned. It was a matter of furnishings, of chairs and tables and windows, of interior decoration, in other words, and just who, after all, would sit where -- the "scheme of things," so to speak. "If one more person opens a window of opportunity," the narrator and protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket* opines, "I'll heave a brick through it" (178). Open windows and heaved bricks -- what Wessels, the longtime and soon to be displaced habitué of the Hillbrow's Café Europa in Johannesburg, is identifying are the still disputed means that have paved the way for the various transitions to independence of Africa's nations: negotiations and/or armed struggle. Slovo of the South African Communist Party was also a member of the ANC national executive and Minister of Housing under Nelson Mandela. His wife, Ruth First, equally involved in the struggle for African liberation, was assassinated by the South African apartheid regime: she died in Maputo in 1982 in the explosion caused by a letter bomb sent to her from Pretoria. The several options available to the makers of African independence in the second half of the 20th century, that is, have left various legacies and closed other options, to their successors in the African "postcolony."

From resistance to recollection, from anti-colonial national liberation to post-independence nation formation, the travails of a twentieth century African historical narrative have found literary expression in both novels and historiographies. Historian of Africa, Stephen Ellis, for example, has argued, just at the time that Sofia's stories were being published in English translation, that it is time now for a "new generation of works on Africa's contemporary history" (2), adding further that the "great themes of the independence generation," such as nation-building, liberation, economic development, pan-Africanism, and the struggle against dependence (6), must ultimately give way to an understanding of the "past not just as the embryo of the present, but also as a period in its own right" (3) -- in other words, as just that: past. According to Ellis, "It is no longer an age of development or national liberation in Africa. ... The main task at hand is to inquire into the nature of recent times diligently and, above all, without the burden of past expectations" (26). Remember only, in treading that historiographical narrative route, as Jose-Maria had so presciently reminded Sofia and her sister Maria, "Never take short cuts, even if you're in a hurry." After all, "there are landmines. ... You can't see them. But if you put your foot on the ground above one, the mine will explode."

The very fact of landmines poses crucial challenges -- local and global -- for the storyteller, the producer of narrative plots, who must keep the storyline moving and get his/her characters across settings, from one place to another. The terrain itself, the setting, is already littered with those "explosive remnants of war," the "unexploded ordnance" that mutilates the physical integrity of the character and dismembers the psycho-social relationships that connect characters to their setting. Nearly

twenty thousand people worldwide are killed by landmines every year. A ten-year-old amputee, a young girl like Sofia for example, if she survives another forty to fifty years, will need twenty-five artificial limbs in the course of her lifetime -- or fifty prostheses in fact in Sofia's case, for she had lost both of her legs. While the International Campaign to Ban Landmines <<http://www.icbl.org>> was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, the United States -- along with sixty-four other countries -- has refused to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. And so, when Sofia and Maria left the path, Maria lost her life, and Sofia lost both her sister and her legs. The resounding blast brought the villagers rushing to the site. Maria was not to be saved, but Sofia was placed on a stretcher: "As they lifted her up, her left foot came loose and remained lying on the path" (Mankell, *Secrets* 60). In the end, the limb would be buried alongside Maria, while Sofia acquires two artificial legs -- her new "best friends," who she names Kukula (short) and Xitsongo (long) (Mankell, *Secrets* 99). When the ground had exploded beneath her, Sofia, who had wandered from the path that she had been told to keep to, must determine new coordinates that will re-orient her in her fraught world. Having earlier fled her native village with her mother and siblings, including Maria, when "bandits" had attacked the households and murdered her father, she must now relocate herself once again in changed surroundings. En route to their new lease on life, the family had met an old woman, who explained to Mama Lydia that the "city is far away, so that people like you and me and your children can't get there. My legs are old and aching, your children's legs are too short and young. None of us have legs made to walk to the city" (Mankell, *Secrets* 21). With her new legs, however, the prostheses that she receives from Doctor Raul at the hospital in the city, Sofia learns to negotiate the distance between the rural and the urban. Sofia's story, that is, as introduced in *Secrets in the Fire*, is a tale of both devastation and development.

By the time of *Playing with Fire*, Sofia has acquired, as if by some sleight of magical realism, another older sister, Rosa, and is now aspiring to complete her schooling with the ambition of becoming a medical doctor. Her path seems clear now, but if the landmines that still litter Mozambique no longer hold the same threat for her, the HIV/Aids pandemic raises still another challenge. As Jo Revill writes in her review of *Apocalypse: The Truth About Aids*, "If Aids is about anything, it is about growing up too soon" (<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/politicsphilosophyandsociety/0,,113603,00.html>>). Indeed, as human rights advocate and critic Alex de Waal has pointed out, "the curtailment of life expectancy [due to HIV/Aids] that we are witnessing in southern Africa may cause a reversal of historic processes of development" (De Waal 2). Sofia's story, then, is at once a classic coming-of-age tale (or *Bildungsroman*) and a disaster-ridden, thwarted narrative of progress: "Sofia often despaired. At times it seemed impossible that anyone should actually care for her like that. She, who had no legs and would never run or dance. It was true that she might have other things to offer. She was going to school and knew how to read and write. Maybe she would become a teacher. That is, if she failed to train in medicine, for what she wanted most of all was to be a doctor. Being a woman who was interesting to men was not just a matter of your face and body. With a good job, a house and a salary of her own, she would not lack boys and men pursuing her. Rosa and Lydia both kept telling her this, and even her teacher agreed that it was so. She had to follow up so many lines of thought. Here on Lion's Hill, she would start with the most important ones, which had to do with becoming a woman -- neither a child nor an almost-adult, but truly grown up" (Mankell, *Playing* 92). Sofia's new older sister Rosa, however, preferred to frequent Hassan's shop, where she found glossy magazines, global pop music, local boys, and the pleasures of their company. In the end, Rosa would die, much as her mother Lydia feared, from "this disease they're talking about" (Mankell, *Playing* 56), the disease that "was lurking out there in the darkness ... cunning and ready to attack anyone and everyone" (Mankell, *Playing* 58). "So what's supposed to be so dangerous about going to look at magazines in a shop?" Rosa asks her sister Sofia. Sofia at that point "was taken aback. She didn't know how to answer. Actually, she did, but couldn't think of a way to start speaking about the difficult things. Like the dangerous disease. Or how important it was to be careful when you were in love. It might be too late already" (Mankell, *Playing* 67). Too late, as it had already been once before when Maria and Sofia had strayed

from the path, costing one sister her life and leaving the other bereft of two of her limbs. Sofia recalls that she "had been losing people all her life" (Mankell, *Playing* 128), and even though she might consider that she is "too young" and she has "no legs" (Mankell, *Playing* 167), others tell her, "Well, you are an adult" (179), that she must stand up to Mr. Bastardo, the corrupt landholder who is bent on removing her mother and the other village women from their daily tended garden plots in order to build a golf course in their stead.

Sofia takes to keeping a diary, and one day when she could think of nothing in particular to record, she decides to draw up a list of the "ten best days in her life and put them in order" (Mankell, *Playing* 147-8). Is there a plot to be found in the sequence? The worst days list, meanwhile, she puts off for another time: "there were too many bad days to choose from ... the list could become ever so long" (Mankell, *Playing* 148). But those days were gone, and at the end of the second volume of her story, Sofia confides in her diary a list of wishes -- addressing the present, redressing the past, anticipating the future: "1. Maria alive; 2. Rosa well; 3. Legs (my old, real ones); 4. Legs (my old, real ones) -- better wish for that twice; 5. The boy on the bicycle -- Armando Saia; 6. Children; 7. Become a doctor; 8. Soon be able to go to school again; 9. Lydia to live for a thousand years; 10. A good ink-pen" (*Playing* 228): 1-4: Maria alive, Rosa well, and her "old, real" legs -- twice told: Sofia begins her historical narrative with a wished-for rewriting of the past, whose grounds have been mined with the unexploded ordinance of erstwhile conflicts and whose body politic is critically infected in pandemic proportions. Number 5 on Sofia's wish list takes on the present -- the "boy on the bicycle" -- and its opportunities for transition to the future. That future is sketched out in items 6 through 9, not necessarily in chronological order nor even quite within the realm of possibility. What first? Children? Becoming a doctor? Returning to school? Or will the transformation of history listed and enlisted in Sofia's diary perhaps allow -- somehow -- for Lydia to "live for a thousand years." Could a "good ink pen" just help to make it all happen?

"Traps and Legacies" is one of the scenarios presented in the UNAIDS 2005 report, *AIDS in Africa: Three Scenarios to 2025*. That report, the result of the work of more than one hundred and fifty contributors on the ground, proposes to consider how the "decisions we make about the future are guided by our view of how the world works and what we think is possible." According to the introduction, a "scenario," not unlike Sofia's own wish list perhaps, "is a story that describes a possible future" (np). The "story form," the report suggests, "provides a structure within which to think about decisions and their possible results" (24). Three scenarios tell the tales. Whereas "Tough Choices," the script for a documentary film, "tells that time is intergenerational," "Times of Transition," an exercise in oral history, "tells us something about the depth of time, rather than just its length" (23). "Traps and Legacies," presented for its part as a series of lectures, argues instead that "time is short, returns need to be immediate, targets are time-bound, and action is measured out in political terms of office" (23). As the reported scenarios conclude, "Although the AIDS epidemic is an emergency, it is essential to develop both short-term pragmatic solutions and long-term strategic solutions" (181). "No short cuts," in other words. And no "magic bullets."

*I Die, But the Memory Lives On* is Henning Mankell's account of his visit to Uganda in 2003 to research the "world Aids crisis and the memory book project." Mankell had, as he writes, "traveled to Uganda to meet people who were preparing for death by writing little books for their children" (29). What, Mankell worries, "is to become of the story when so many links in the human chain disappear?" (30). Like Maria. Like Rosa. Even Lydia perhaps. The memory will live on. But not the genre, if Sofia's wish list can come true. Literary genres -- memory books no less than sonnets and tragedies -- have their specific time and place -- and formal conditionalities. According to Mankell, that is, the "ultimate objective of the Memory Books programme has to be a contribution towards the task that one day they will be no longer necessary. Nobody should have to die early from Aids. ... Nobody should need to write memory books in [the] future" (32).

Even in pencil, Sofia is on the way to drawing new lines, writing new directions, creating new paths, devising new plots. There is no going back, and there are still no shortcuts, and landmines still litter the setting, while the characters continue to succumb to the ravages of HIV/Aids on that same setting. It is literature, that is -- for now at least -- as written large and bold in the age of landmines and HIV/Aids, by and for Africa's new generation.

Note: The above paper is a revised and expanded version of Barbara Harlow, "'No Short Cuts': Landmines, HIV/Aids, and Africa's New Generation," *Health Knowledge and Belief Systems in Africa*. Ed. Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007. Forthcoming.

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Author's profile: Barbara Harlow teaches English literatures at the University of Texas at Austin and has also taught at the American University in Cairo, University College Galway, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, and the University of Natal in Durban. Harlow's publications include *Resistance Literature* (1986), *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (1992), *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* (1996), and she is co-editor with Mia Carter of *Imperialism and Orientalism: A Documentary Sourcebook* (1999) and *From the East India Company to the Suez Canal and The Scramble for Africa* (co-edited with Mia Carter and published by Duke University Press, 2003). Currently, she is working on an intellectual biography of the South African activist Ruth First. E-mail: <[bharlow@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:bharlow@mail.utexas.edu)>