

# Lessons of health and history

VICKI ROBINSON surveys books about Aids, ordinary South Africans and an informal history of South Africa

**T**old in the first person, Elias Masilela's *Number 43 Trelawney Park KwaMagoga* (David Philip) puts a tragic, and in some ways nostalgic, human face to life in exile during the apartheid years. The book tells the story of 25 PAC and ANC members who passed through Number 43, Trelawney Park, "a modest house in a quiet suburb" in Manzini, Swaziland, which became a safe house and base of operations for the ANC during the struggle years.

The house was owned by the author's mother, Rebecca Makgomo Masilela, and became known as KwaMagogo (place of the grandmother). The book is a refreshing change from the dozens of books on the political and military strategies of those in exile and it contains wonderful personal details about people who became important power figures after 1994. Some of the names are less prominent but the commonality of Number 43 in their lives has enabled the author to record the history of John Kgoana Nkademeng, Sipiwe Nyanda and Elias Masilela alongside Candy Mhlahlo, Dokotela Maseko and Kopi Baartman.

From the importance of the mango tree in the southeast corner of Number 43 to the roles of "uTokyo Sexwale", "uThabo [Mbeki]", and "uJZ", the author captures and combines remarkable, and mostly

untold, nuances of life in exile. Jabu Shoke, former chief of the South African National Defence Force, is quoted in the book describing the importance of Number 43: "While Liliesleaf was the ANC HQ in the country, Number 43 was a base outside South Africa. It was a home away from home for most South African exiles, both underground and above the ground ... UMagogo was a living example of the expression of *Wathint'umfazi wathint'imbokodo* (You strike a woman you strike a rock.) She played a critical role in influencing and moulding the political views of the family and some of the cadres."

In *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of Aids in South Africa* (University of California Press), Didier Fassin has combined the personal experiences of HIV and Aids patients with racial theory and colonial history in an interesting read that describes the effects of disease from an intellectual and political, rather than a medical, point of view. He analyses the repercussions of HIV and Aids on both the cultural and economic fabric of society from the use of burial societies, domestic violence, religion and other sources.

He also provides an academic review of the South African government's approach to dealing with the HIV crisis that extends well beyond the distillation of the issue into, "on the one side, medicine and science, people of goodwill and good sense, efficacy and truth; on the other,

a president and a few dissidents, corrupt politicians and quack scientists, incompetence and error." The book is impeccably sourced: a combination of voices from across the HIV and Aids spectrum, from patients and their families to medical professionals, historians, theorists across various specialisations and scientists (both conventionalists and dissidents). It's not a leisurely read, at times heavy going, but an informative resource for anyone interested in HIV and Aids beyond medicine.

Unlike *When Bodies Remember*, Stephanie Nolen's *28 Stories on Aids in Africa* (Portobello) is purely narrative, a series of short stories each about someone living with HIV and Aids on the African continent. The author has captured the stories of, among 28 others, Pontiano Kaleebu from Uganda, Agnes Muniya from Kenya, Alica Kadzanja from Malawi, Ibrahim Umoru from Nigeria and Zackie Achmat from South Africa.

Cynthia Leshomo from Botswana "was born to be a beauty queen. Her default facial expression is a pout," writes Nolen. In 2003 Leshomo was crowned Miss HIV Stigma-Free. The chapter goes on to describe her day-to-day struggle with the virus, combined with her duties as a beauty-queen. The book is creatively written and draws the reader in with its simple sentences and the author's wonderful eye for detail.

Timothy Thlou Rathokolo wrote

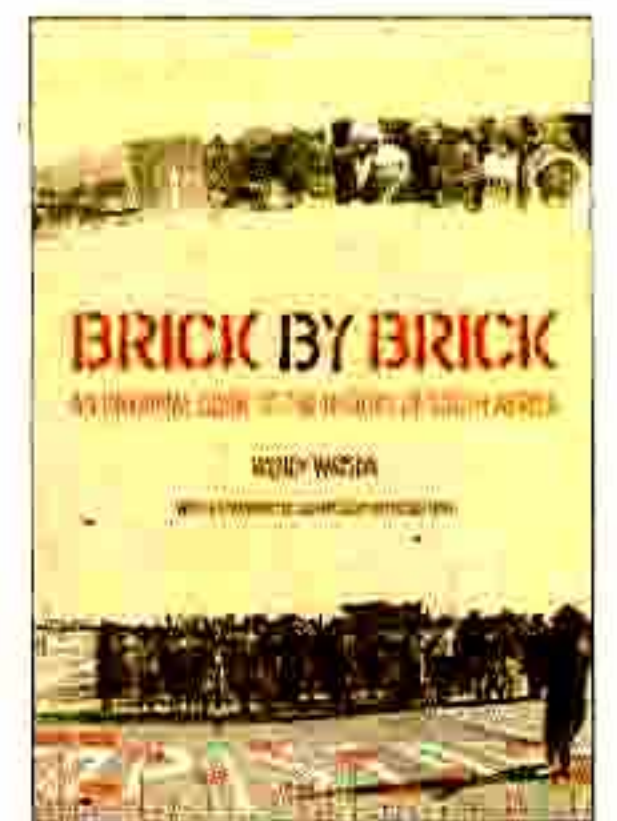
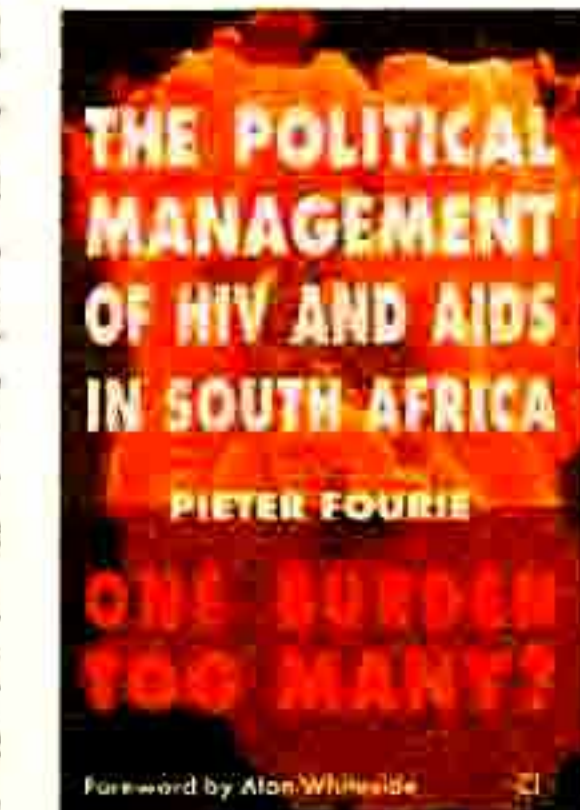
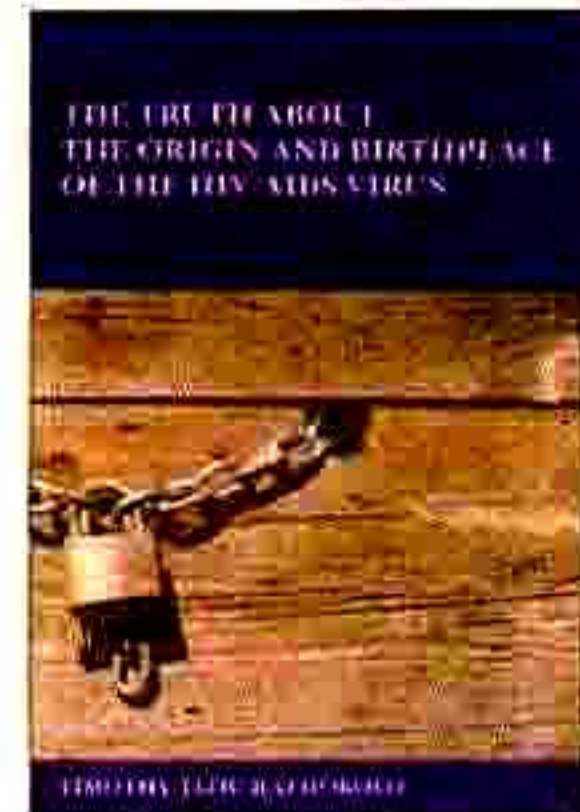
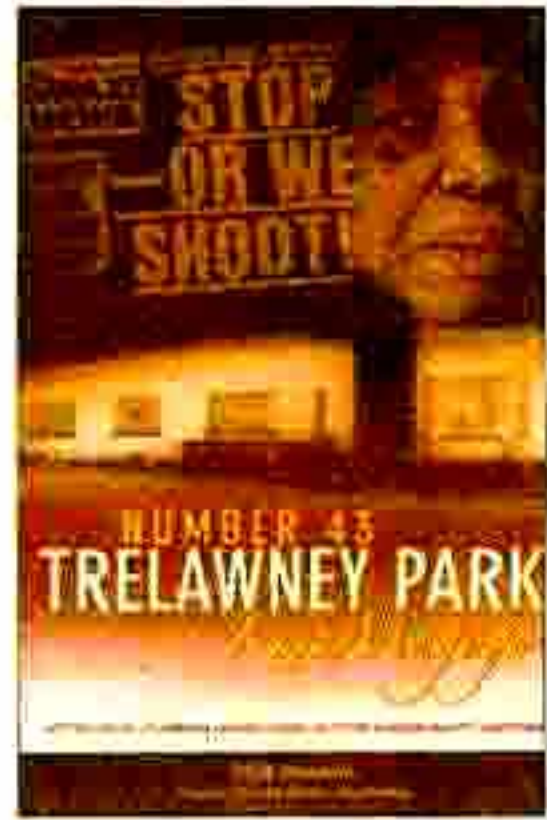
*The Truth About the Origin and the Birthplace of the HIV/Aids Virus* (TT Rathokolo) to record what he believes were truths revealed to him by the Lord about the origin of HIV and Aids. By its nature, it is heavily reliant on Bible scriptures and, depending on your spirituality, often unconvincing. The author often loses focus and at one point strays away from the topic to argue that there is a definite link between terrorism and the Israel-Palestine conflict. I found the book fanatical and prescriptive but, for Christian readers with a firmer understanding of the Bible, it could hold value.

In *The Political Management of HIV and Aids in South Africa: One Burden Too Many?* (Palgrave Macmillan), Pieter Fourie takes the reader through the South Africa government's policy response to HIV and Aids from the former National Party government through to the incumbent ANC-led state. Policy analysis can be dry but he has written the book in a racy style that keeps the reader tuned in. He achieves this by striking a balance between providing just enough detail with persuasive analy-

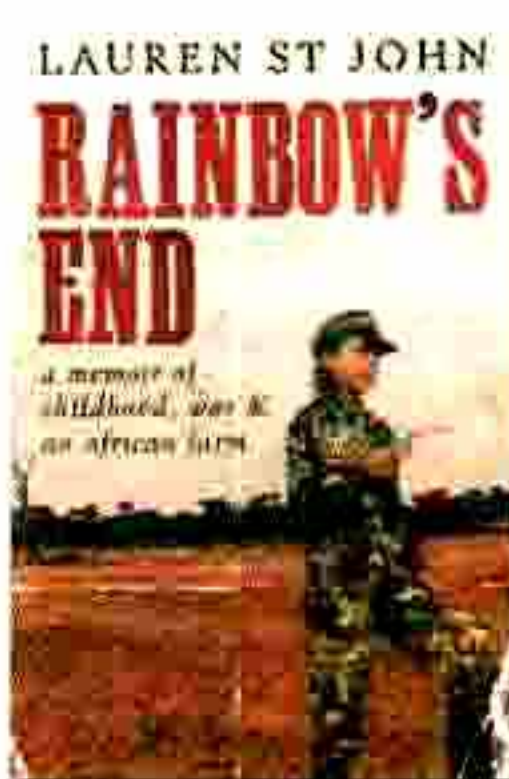
sis. Fourie's research is impeccable and he has avoided lacing his book with the emotion that has infused other analyses of the government's failure to address the epidemic. This book can just as easily be read over an evening glass of wine as it can hold a place on your work desk as a reference.

If you want to spice up a piece of research, or to make a piece of journalism more interesting, *Brick by Brick: An Informal Guide to the History of South Africa* (New Africa Educational) by Wendy Watson is worth its space on your bookshelf. It's not the type of book you'll read in bed at night, but if you want to know when Cetshwayo petitioned Queen Victoria for his return to Zululand, or the exact date when Ongkopotse Abraham Tiro was killed, or quick facts behind the death of Victoria Mxenge, this is the book.

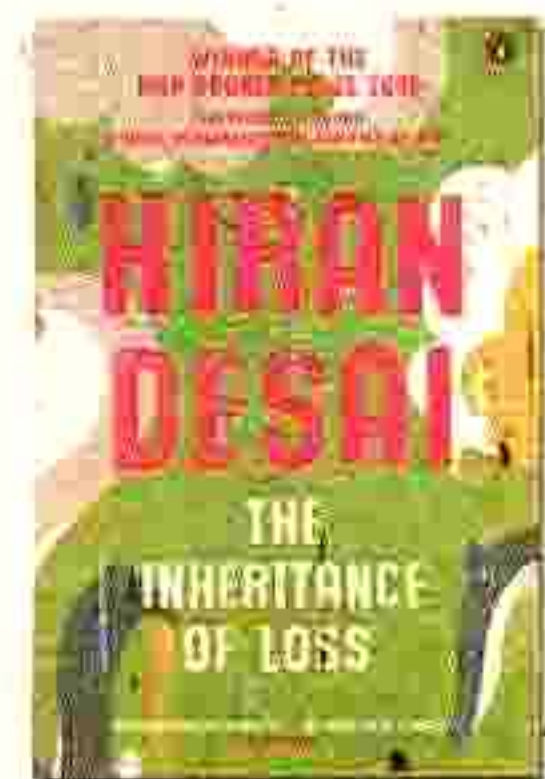
The author, Wendy Watson, worked for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and ran an organisation that investigated state violence and ensured that victims received medical or forensic assessments. She brings this depth of history to her book. It is divided into 11 chapters marking different eras in South Africa's history beginning with the Iron Age and ending with the decade 1994 to 2004. Each chapter is then divided according to year. Some of the facts are well known, while others are included for their quirkiness. In all, the book is very navigable but not facile.



## Snuggle up with a Penguin this winter...



If you enjoyed Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* then *RAINBOW'S END* is a MUST read.



*The Inheritance of Loss* is the winner of the 2006 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and is now available in paperback.



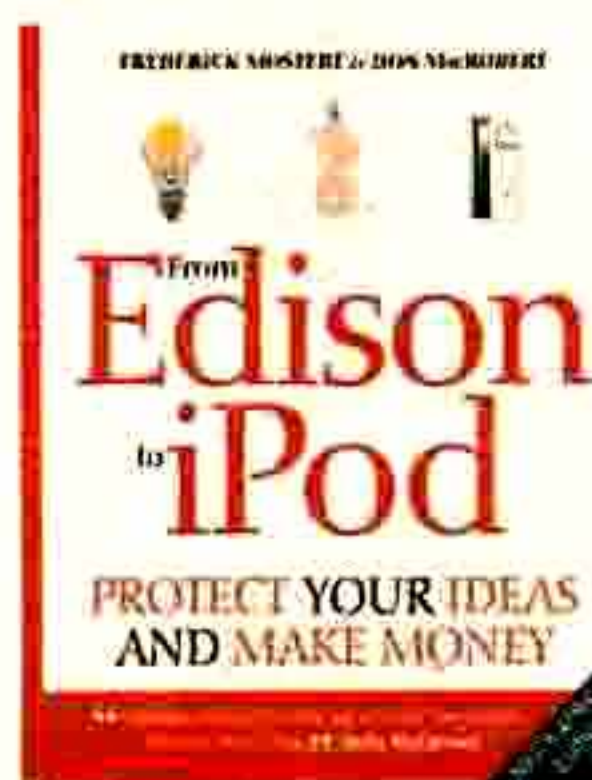
From the author of *What Poets Need*, comes the story of Violet Birkin, a recent divorcee who rises out of drudgery and despair to start a bookshop called Flyleaf.



This vividly textured tale of risk and betrayal juxtaposes an unlikely trio of two women and the child who both connects and divides them.



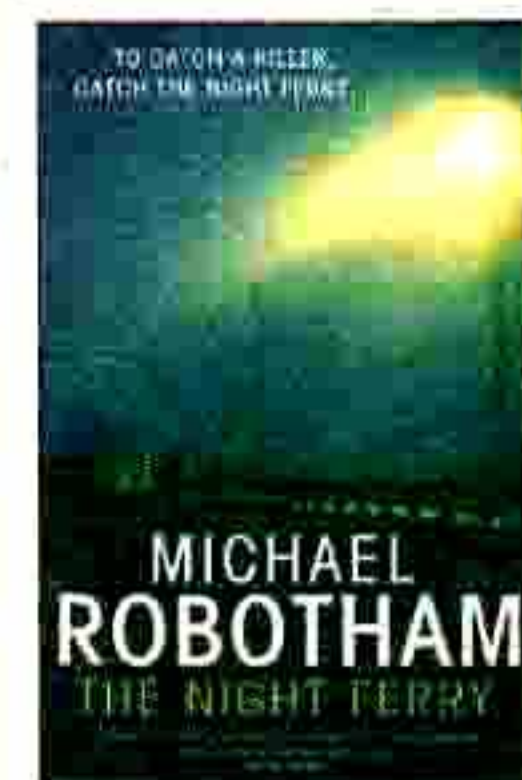
There are 28 million people infected with the HIV virus in Africa. Why should we care? The 28 stories in this book will give you 28 reasons to.



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