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Fiction as a Tool to Fight the HIV/ AIDS Battle

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ABSTRACT

HIV / AIDS is cutting a destructive path through the world: UNAIDS statistics paint an alarming picture. Especially hard hit and in grave danger is the youth of Sub Sahara Africa who do not seem to be getting the warning messages to change attitudes and behaviour. The paper suggests an additional approach using fiction in a dual pronged manner: to teach, warn about dangers of HIV and also teach language skills. It surveys fictional material from different parts of the world, but mostly Southern Africa published anywhere in the world but available to young people in Africa. Fiction material that like the sugar coated pill will do the work in a relatively more user friendly fashion. Several titles published or set in Africa and elsewhere are surveyed and recommendations made

INTRODUCTION

Apart from historical, fantasy or science fiction writers, creative writers tend to be commentators on the societies they live in. To a very large extent literature tends to be a commentary on the society that breeds it. But the commentaries are not purely objective. That is why authors through their books can be indirect educators of values and norms of a society. Authors' social values get reflected as their heroes' and protagonists' stance on issues emerge. This has been researched and proven. Sandra Olen (98) cites researchers who have tried to find out whether literature for children can contribute to social change. Dr Olen was discussing apartheid and literature. Ganz (98) looking at literature and social values concludes that good writing, while creative, stimulating, etc, must also be educational, informative... And that once its read every "word is constantly filing and shaping the mind and heart of the reader (especially the young reader and by extension the world around him." (Ganz 98 pp20).

One of the most current issues of this era is the HIV AIDS pandemic. It should therefore be as much a theme for writers of the era to chew on as colonialism, slavery, the World Wars, the Holocaust,

apartheid, have been at different times in literary history. A lot of literature- mostly academic – has emerged around HIV / AIDS. Bibliographies documenting such work have emerged Gboku (2003)

But perhaps (and only time and history will tell), the impact of HIV / AIDS will be bigger than all of these issues combined since according to UNAIDS Statistics every continent is hit. In world wars, some countries opt to remain neutral; in this war there is no such option. It is estimated that the decimation of lives resulting from HIV / AIDS is worse than that of the last two world wars! At many HIV / AIDS conferences around the world the cry is echoed: *lets save our world, not just a country, or even a continent: our world!*

During the 2003 IFLA Conference in Berlin, the President of IFLA (from Sub Sahara Africa, worst hit by the pandemic) is reported to have urged action about specific challenges to African librarians, among other things she cited HIV-AIDS. The International Association of School librarianship (IASL) has addressed the issue of HIV AIDS to some measure in its last two conferences (Malaysia, 2002, Durban 2003), and has a web page devoted to it, with links to other resources.

OVERVIEW

HIV / AIDS has hit sub – Sahara Africa hard. That the world is seriously concerned is evidenced by the numerous bodies / organisations that have erupted around the world-over to address the issue. The UNAIDS is perhaps the highest of them at the international level. The President of Botswana at the launch of the Macmillan Art Against HIV / AIDS Competition in 2002 referred to the HV / AIDS situation in military terms. He spoke of Botswana's being at war.... When nations are at war, nationals and their allies rally together. I this particular war nations have rallied; help has come to the worst hit African countries from the US, UK, Sweden, Canada, etc. As librarians of concerned nations and their allies we can do no less. As information workers we must be at the forefront. We are dually charged to take action. But with what tools?

Information workers, especially librarians, respond to any situation by finding the relevant information and arming themselves with it. They also serve as conduits guiding users (the immediate community, the general public, etc.) to other resources, sometimes via the electronic media. Across Botswana HIV / AIDS is being integrated into the school curriculum, special radio programmes address the issue, the national strategic plan embodied in its vision an HIV / AIDS free generation by 2016, when the country turns 50 years old. Most public and school libraries have created HIV / AIDS corners; these capture mostly pamphlets and ephemeral material which generally tend to be lost in large collections. The corners give focus and emphasis to HIV / AIDS as an on going issue which needs daily confrontation.

INITIATIVES / POSSIBILITIES

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) were by words in the initial stages of the battle. The approach may have shifted but the message is the same: prevention seems to be the best cure. Educate people to equip them to avoid being infected in the first place. People must be educated to change their behaviour. The aim should be to ensure that young people are informed enough to avoid infections. These young people are the windows of *hope generation*. NEMPAD (aimed at African economic empowerment), the AU aimed at a forging a united Africa), all African initiatives, seen as vehicles for economic development recognise that the issue of AIDS must be addressed on all fronts, in all manner of ways. Unfortunately, the younger generation, in the areas most affected by HIV / AIDS are on the wrong side of the digital divide: for most of them information is easier accessed in the print media. Web sites dealing with HIV / AIDS (UNAIDS, AVERT, IASL, etc) will be of little use if there is little funding and no electrical power. Wireless can be explored but the question of little funding being vied for by numerous interests cannot be answered. This has created the so-called digital divide.

In recognition of this divide and in answer to the pandemic, attention seems to have shifted to traditional values and indigenous knowledge, story telling, puberty rites that address the cultural norms, etc. Story telling has traditionally been a tool for African societies dealing with issues, stories have been used to emphasise taboos, stress good behaviour; condemn unacceptable relationships, etc. Most of Africa's Ananse stories carry a moral. But is just listening / reading enough? Should there be no dual functionality to the reading? Could the reading of a good HIV / AIDS book not have a multi-pronged impact? It is suggested that it could do the following and more:

- Expose pupils to new vocabulary
- Teach biological facts e.g. transmission modes, male / female anatomy...
- Teach text structure (title pages, tables of content, indexes, etc)
- Build assertiveness skills (learning to say no to wrong touching, etc)
- Teach moral education, etc

TOUCHING A RESPONSIVE CORD

A study into what material addressed HIV / AIDS in some Botswana libraries in 2002 revealed a very bleak picture (Baffour-Awuah 2002). Comparatively little was in the libraries amidst the deluge of posters, pamphlets, project reports, conference papers, on HIV / AIDS available within the country. A comment was made by a colleague who heard the paper to the extent that maybe school children and young people are not interested in these sort of publications. Might they not perhaps prefer to read stories that addressed the issue? The answer is of course being addressed in this paper is that they probably will.

Another point is many pupils (in a Dewey Library setting) might not go to the Religion section (200s), Social Sciences, (300s), the Sciences (500s) or the Applied Sciences (600s) section of the library to find books about HIV / AIDS. But they are very likely to go and read a good story from the fiction section. Fiction offers relaxation, builds up vocabulary and idiom. Fiction can be the voice for goodness, purity and justice, in a society where exploitation of the innocent worsens the already raging pandemic. In a highly oral culture, non- – fiction tends to be associated with schoolwork. So a good story intricately woven into HIV / AIDS instruction might be as effective as taking sugar coated medication. But the question is what fiction material that addresses HIV / AIDS is there? This question birthed the study.

Further more, other benefits than merely enjoying a good story could come out of such a reading programme targeting HIV AIDS material. If class readers could also be HIV AIDS fiction stories, it means English language programmes could also address the HIV / AIDS issues raised, (infection, condoms, pneumonia, family dynamics, stigma, etc), as well as imparting literacy skills. Librarians (such as Ken Haycock, Ross Todd, Dianne Oberg,) have preached integration for decades. Here is a good chance to really use it - to – perhaps - save lives! There is even the possibility of bibliotherapy: some stories could just be the support material needed by hurting young people who may have lost parents or other carers. And the icing on the cake: politicians are preaching mainstreaming HIV / AIDS into every activity, every gathering. In effect this means every occasion, every gathering should be seen as a platform to preach the HIV / AIDS awareness/ need for behaviour change message. Why not every class reading session?

It could be argued that this could work within school libraries, but how about public libraries? Well within the public library setting parents / siblings could discuss the issues within the novels / novelettes / short stories with their children / younger brothers and sisters who borrow and take the books home. Book clubs could read these titles and discuss the issues they raise, be it discrimination, or infection modes. There is potential here for serious education, through HIV / AIDS fictional writing.

THE URGENCY: DATA ON THE GROUND

The world infection statistics are alarming. They create a sense of urgency. A sort of get up and do something nudging feeling. Here are the figures:

- 40 million infected (60% in Sub Sahara Africa)
- 2.7million of infected under 15years old
- 3.2million infected in Sub Sahara in 2003
- 10 million aged between 15 – 24 orphaned
- 11m AIDS Orphans (children) in Sub Sahara Africa
- Five worse affected countries: Swaziland (38.7 %), Botswana (37.5 %), Zimbabwe (33,7 %), Lesotho (31.5 %), and South Africa (20 %). (<http://www.avert.org/aafrica.htm>)

In real terms this means that in just one-year people more than the entire population of Botswana and Swaziland combined were wiped out! Every possible approach that could yield fruit must be tried. No possible avenue should be left unexplored. The possibility of teaching through fiction must be explored.

THE SURVEY

The study is essentially an investigation into what fiction in English addressing the pandemic is available to the young people. Material surveyed deal with aspects of HIV /AIDS for younger library users from just pre-teen to about mid teens. The survey is by no means exhaustive. It looked for material within the perimeters set for the study.

SURVEY PERIMETERS

The survey is limited to short novels and novelettes, published from the mid to late eighties to the current times. Aspects of HIV / AIDS addressed include safer sex, symptoms, multiple partners, risky behaviour and generally material that would educate in the broader sense of the term etc. The paper looks at the different messages inherent in each story i.e.: stigma, myths, basic awareness or tackling the issue of gender exploitation. The material targeted had to be suitable for young African children and youth and accessible to the African librarian, regardless of sources of publication.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY

The impact of the IEC approach adopted by some countries could be said to be slow. A study carried out by Andersson & Utter (2002) tried to find out what HIV / AIDS information sources were generally available to young people in urban centres in Botswana. They indicate that the young people did not seem to be taking in the messages that were available in different formats: posters, charts, videos etc. They cite a study by Jalbro in 1999 which argues that to combat HIV AIDS, transmitters of messages have to home in on medium most appropriate to the target group. One of the findings of Andersson & Utter (2002) was that young people preferred to get the HIV / AIDS messages from grown ups they could trust, especially teachers. They pointed out the importance of discussion. While their study does not mention fiction, their suggestions that discussions will go down well gives us a platform for fiction use indirectly in carrying the HIV / AIDS message.

Despite various interventions by governments and NGOs, escalation of infections continues, especially in the Sub Sahara Africa region. Other possible avenues for carrying the dangers of HIV / AIDS message must be explored. Fiction that addresses the HIV / AIDS issue, or any aspect of it, is seen here as a possible additional tool, a supplement to the attempted solutions currently on board.

A small-scale survey tried to find out what young people fiction material was available to the younger users of our public libraries in English. It checked in Botswana's main public library and the National Library, which acquires for its network of twenty-three public libraries, three mobiles 286 Book box

service points (a service to remote rural primary schools) and 67 rural libraries, generally referred to as Village Reading Rooms (VRRS). It also checked in the Maruapula Senior Secondary school library, and the National AIDS Co-ordinating Council (NACA) Library. It managed to get access to titles through the e- books discussion group's reaction to a research question submitted by a South African doctoral fellow at MEDUNSA. It used the Internet: Amazon. Com was searched for fictional material with HIV / AIDS theme.

The topic sets its own time frame: from 1986 when the virus was discovered to the present. Material in English available in the Sahara Sub region is the focus, translations into English are included, but other material found in languages other than English are only mentioned in passing.

FINDINGS

One interesting finding which recurred at the public library in Gaborone, the school and the NACA Libraries was a set of novelettes dealing with HIV / AIDS. They belong to the Macmillan Boleswa AIDS Awareness Series. Published in the early nineties in Botswana Swaziland and South Africa, there were twenty titles in three categories as follows:

Fig 1. Easy Readers (Macmillan HIV / AIDS Awareness Series)

Senior Primary	Junior Secondary	Senior Secondary
The bread winner	A Wasted Future	The Fruit of Betrayal
Silver Rose	To be Like Sizwe	The Final Whistle
The Wise Dreamer	The Truck Driver's Love	Tough Training
Ten Rand and A yellow Dress	Falling Star	A bitter lesson
Lost And Found	Too Late	
Bad News	The Food of Love	
	Lover boy	
	A taste of melting Chocolate	

In this awareness series individual stories have different foci. *A Bitter Lesson*, (Evans, 92) graphically chronicles the result of unfaithfulness, while *A Wasted Future* (Matanda 92) decries prostitution and unprotected sex. A Teacher's Guide to the use of these twenty novelettes indicated what each title addressed. For example *The Bread winner* (Barnard 92) categorised as senior primary, is listed by the chart as addressing infection of children, condom use, family dynamics, drug use, HIV, infected blood, multiple partners, peer pressure, role models, safer sex, sharing with the infected partner, etc, while **A Taste of Melting Chocolate** deals with gay relationship, child prostitution / exploitation, the life of the street child, and of course infections. On the average each of the twenty titles in the series covered ten or more aspects of the disease. At the end of each story a set of questions and answers attempted to address questions that the average young person might want to ask about HIV / AIDS. Acknowledgements at the beginning of each book, indicated that two medical officers had reviewed and corrected the medical information in these novelettes.

These titles were specifically developed to educate young people through stories. The publications developed out of a joint project between the Red Cross and the publishers: Macmillan Boleswa. Boleswa indicating the three countries: They involved mostly local Southern Africa writers. Their characters are mostly young people and they dealt with a hero / heroine who was usually the voice of reason and a protagonist, who either took a wrong stance or was a victim of circumstance. Most protagonists ended up infected and dying or dead. Pupils using the text could easily identify with the

characters, and mend their ways or other wise. They could also be empowered to prevent their being lured into compromises

Other novels - one off attempts at focusing on the epidemic, addressing social issues including the epidemic, are less focused in terms of target, in the sense of not being aimed at particular age groups in any specific community. As early as 1988, Alice Hoffman had explored the issues of ignorance and fear of AIDS in her novel **At Risk**, where eleven-year-old gymnast, Amanda, gets infected through a blood transfusion. The issues of social exclusion in a school setting, the issue of HIV / AIDS impact on the family and the strengths needed to overcome these challenges are explored. Along similar lines, discrimination and stigma are explored within a school situation in Gloria Miklowitz's **Goodbye Tomorrow** (1987). Set in Los Angeles it explores the story of a handsome seventeen-year-old Alex Weiss, who gets infected through a blood transfusion and is badly discriminated against by some schoolmates and parents, even his family is afraid of him. When his friends take a stand he is allowed back in school. Its appeal transcends its setting. Also looking at the pandemic from the viewpoint of a South Africa young heroine, is the work of award winning author: Lutz van Dijk. His **Stronger than the Storm** (van Dijk2000) (translated from German) explores the myth of virgin sex cure for HIV /AIDS infected male. It is the story of Thina who is gang raped. Her boyfriend Thabang, whose mother dies of AIDS, swears vengeance on the culprits. Eventually when a culprit is exposed as being confused by the myths flying around about magic cures for HIV /AIDS victims who have sex with virgins, they find strength in forgiving him. Coping comes through in this story, as does the need for supportive friends. Also exploring the impact of the disease on families, is **The Plague at my Door (1996)**, by Zambian author Kekelwa Nyaywa. It looks at the story of fifteen year old Ngosa whose father, in a moment of loneliness and away from his wife gets lured into an irresponsible sex encounter and catches the disease from a prostitute. The shattering impact on the family until it reaches acceptance is deftly dealt with. Pupils can identify with Ngosi, as many have to deal with ailing parents. In a similar vein is Gaelle Mogwe's **Mare's Aunt (1995)**, where Mare a student comes face to face with HIV / AIDS when an ill aunt Toni comes to stay with them. The family fearing discrimination and stigma, tries to keep her illness a secret, but the secret spills out and the ensuing discrimination is only countered by a level headed school principal. Violet Kala's **Waste Not your Tears (1994)** set in Zimbabwe, though dealing with betrayal among young adults will also appeal to teenagers. It is the story of Loveness who is deliberately infected by a lazy self – centred Roderick, on the quest for a nursemaid because he knew he was infected, and would need somebody to nurse him through the illness.

A departure from most of the issues raised is **Deadly Profit**, in which Patrice Matchaba explores the race for a vaccine and those who would rather the race discontinued. Another departure is a futuristic look at the pandemic, where Garth Kitching in **the Bracelet**, set in 2005, in a school situation, with a mutated HIV on the run, every pupil is given a monthly clearance blood test and infected pupils have to wear an identifying bracelet. Frikkie Breedekamp, the main character is found to be infected much to his parents' shock, his thoughts and fears are explored, and teenage boys battling with their sexuality will identify with Frikkie. The issue of viral mutation would not be a familiar one with many young people. But it should enhance pupils' vocabulary. The story should also instigate sober reflection in pupils as they chew on possibility of mutation. It should generate debate.

Caleb Nondo in two novels set in Botswana: virtually tackles all aspects of the disease: (**Lethal Virus 1997** and **A Deadly Twist of Fate, 1999**). Different from Lethal Virus but equally compelling is the story of A Deadly Twist of Fate, where innocent Lorato, is infected from blood transfusion. The message is equally relevant: one of innocent victims of the plague. And there are many innocent victims, not necessary from transfusion. In a different vein is Nondo's earlier work: The Lethal Virus, which surveys the almost jet setter life style of the hero: Khumo. Khumo lives, as a school pupil, as an undergraduate, as a young bachelor about town, as a married man and father, very fast and irresponsibly with devastating consequences for his entire nucleus family. Need for behaviour change, responsible living, condom use, fear, stigmatisation are tackled in these two very human stories. The protagonist, his younger brother who becomes a priest, is the voice crying in the wilderness, from their

youth up to his brother's burial. That his warnings feel on deaf ears with catastrophic consequences should make the average young reader sit up and take notice.

A collage approach is found in the Longman Kenya HIV / AIDS Awareness fiction work: **Take Care** (2001). In *Take Care* five People Living with HIV / AIDS (PLHAs) share their stories at the School Assembly at heroine's (Mwachai) school. Reaction is seen through her eyes, sometimes she cries, at the story shared. Through the experiences all five characters the different modes of transmission are examined. Jack got infected through use of the same blade for all participants at an initiation ceremony: here lack of basic hygiene is explored. In the second story Nyambuau, an orphan recounts getting lured into prostitution and catching the virus, exploitation, dangers of the lure of quick money are examined. Kerubo the third narrator got infected through female circumcision, an issue very much preached against by many women's organisations. That it could also open doors to HIV infection is an added weapon for all decrying the practise. The fourth: Okoth got infected through needle use, and Wario's through was through being in an accident and being exposed to infected blood from other passengers. It's a collage, a virtual kaleidoscope of infection modes and should generate expansive debates. *Take Care* has a glossary and five questions with their answers at the end. The title and the PLHAs' messages speak volumes. In **Far and Beyond** (2000) Unity Dow explores adolescent sexuality, discusses social issues and traditional practices and pays a lot of attention to HIV AIDS. Its main character

Mosa's two brothers die of AIDS. Exploitation of female pupils by their teachers runs through the story as a terrible scourge with its attendant dangers. The author tells of a courageous nineteen year old Mosa, whose uncle's prophecy that she will go *far and beyond* gives the book its title. It's a story that will encourage especially girls to spread their wings and aspire to great heights and not be afraid to say no. The incredible strength of character of the heroine, persevering in the face of adversity should be an encouragement to young peoples every where.

The icing on the cake, of all the material found is not fiction and strictly speaking should not be included here, but it is so special it must be celebrated. Entitled **In My Life, Youth Stories and Poems about HIV and AIDS (2003)**, it is the work of fifteen young people in South Africa, published by the Centre for the Book, supported by McGill University in Canada. It is a collection of youth writing on AIDS in both narrative and poetry. Starting with a write up about herself, Ann Thembeke Dipa, aged eighteen stresses: "... *AIDS is real and it is there to stay, a person with AIDS is still a person, (p. 2)*. Matthew Johannes (aged 17) dreams "*of a world without AIDS*"(p. 13); while Barbara Matasane (aged 19) cautions: "*Do not forget: No condoms, No sex. we the children must have safe sex or no sex at all*" (page 19). She continues further down: "*my life is now complicated because I live with HIV* (p. 20). (This after having her father killed in her presence after he'd given three men a lift). Nosbusiso M��unukeli, seventeen writes: "*there is no cure. It is time for unmarried couples or teens to discover the importance of fidelity...the time to act is now, not to morrow... Now...*" (p. 27). While dealing with HIV AIDS, it also touches on many issues hurting South African young people today. Many will recognise themselves in the stories.

A survey such as this cannot, should not fail to mention **The Nosi Story**, though not fiction. It the story of one of the heroes of the HIV / AIDS battle, It is a story of encouragement, a lesson in coping and will appeal to young adults. It is biographical young Nkosi Johnson who touched the heart of a nation, indeed the world, living for the world the physical pain of HIV. Similarly biographical is Bryce Courtney's **April Fool's Day** (1993) where he writes the story of his son's illness. And refers to HIV / AIDS as creating a universal victim, and in a sense calling for universal empathy.

The Siyagruva series, New African Books has touched on HIV / AIDS in it's *In The Fast Lane* (2003).

Other Languages Setswana

There are Afrikaans titles e.g.: *Vlerkdans*, which was heard of but not surveyed as there were also Setswana titles which were also not surveyed, but especially worth mentioning is Botswana National Library Services' *Ipalele Series*, that covers a whole lot of issues, amongst them six HIV /AIDS titles.

Recommendations

There is need for a multi pronged approach to the HIV AIDS crisis. That prevention is better than cure cannot be gain said. It is here suggested that teaching about HIV /AIDS and its consequence through fiction is a pleasurable way of educating young people to face the HIV AIDS situation. There is nothing to loose. These stories offer relaxation, build vocabulary and in many ways offer free realistic education of HIV / AIDS. It is recommended:

1. That all school, public and community libraries deliberately acquire HIV / AIDS fiction titles.
2. That class reading be shifted to such titles which can make dual impact.
3. That pupils' experiences be written and shared (in house school magazines?)
4. That such writing be encouraged through international awards
5. That Book Fairs dedicate space to HIV / AIDS material
6. That international organisations dedicate spaces on their web sites where member countries can post notices of new creative HIV / AIDS materials, so that others could try to acquire them
7. That international organisations in their different fora dedicate spaces for displays of HIV /AIDS material available.

Conclusion

Social battles (medical, political and economic) cannot be countered in a unitary manner. Counter measures must necessarily be multi pronged. History abounds with examples: the battle against apartheid was as much fought through the pen by Alan Paton, Peter Abrahams, (and Mandela though not through the pen) as by the freedom fighters, who toted guns. That Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin contributed as much to the civil rights movement as did Martin Luther King. The pen, the saying goes, is mightier than the sword. The creative product of the pen must be allowed to take a prominent place on this battlefield. We cannot afford so great a potential weapon. There has been recently launched AIDS out of Africa programme which is attacking the pandemic through providing a forum where Africans and their allies can express their experiences on HIV/AIDS through poetry. The hope is that through poetry there will be enlightenment and hurts will be soothed and encouragement generated Called AIDS Poetry Awards (APOA) it encourages creative writing as weapon, using poems. That the battle must be fought on all fronts seem to be recognised by many.

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Williams, Paul (1992) *Loverboy*, Manzini : Macmillan Boleswa.

Zimba, Sylvester (2001) *Catherine's Sugar Daddy*. Nairobi: Longman Kenya

Zimba Sylvester (2001) *Take Care*, Nairobi: Longman Kenya (HIV / AIDS Awareness fiction)

Web sites:

<http://www.aids.org.za/>

<http://www.aidsandafrika.com/>

<http://www.time.com/time/2001/aidsinafrica/>

<http://www.lovelife.org.za/>

<http://www.unaids.org/>

<http://asc.leidenuniv.nl/> (New Dossier on HIV/AIDS)

<http://www.avert.org/aafrica.htm>

Further titles for Reading

Written in the Skin

Rob McLennan (Editor)

Insomniac Press, 1998

Moses Unchained

~Marilyn F. Moriarty

University of Georgia Press, 1998

Women in the Grove

Paula W. Peterson

Beacon Press 2004

Sometimes My Heart Goes Numb

Charles Garfield

Harcourt Publishers Ltd College Publishers 1997

Please Remain Seated Until the Ride Has Come to a Complete Stop: Dave Collins Memoir

Dave Collins

Writer's Showcase, 2001

Winick Judd

Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss and What I Learned

Henry Holt & Company , 2000

Sometimes My Heart Goes Numb

~Charles Garfield

Harcourt Publishers Ltd College Publishers, 1997

My Dad Has HIV

~Earl Alexander

Fairview Press (formerly Deaconess Press), 1998