They are an odd couple of co-authors. Max Essex, Chair of the Harvard AIDS Initiative and a world-renowned research scientist, teamed up with Unity Dow, author of four novels and the first woman to sit on Botswana’s High Court, to write Saturday Is for Funerals. The book, a hybrid of the science of HIV/AIDS and the personal stories of African families affected by the epidemic, plays to the strengths of both authors.

The two met when Essex was working in Botswana to establish what would become the Botswana–Harvard AIDS Institute Partnership. At the time Botswana had the highest rate of HIV infection in the world. About 35% of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics were infected.

Essex remembers his first impression of Dow. “She seemed poised and intelligent. I recall asking her to respond to a particular ethical dilemma we faced in our research. We were planning to conduct a trial on how HIV-positive pregnant women could avoid infecting their infants. Some girls under 21 wanted to participate to protect their babies, but would only do so if they didn’t have to tell their own parents that they were HIV positive. Unity helped us understand the law and address the problem.”

The initial admiration was mutual. “Quiet dignity,” is how Dow describes her first impression of Essex, “a man with purpose, a listening man.”

The idea for Saturday Is for Funerals came from Essex’s frustration when he couldn’t find a book that dealt with both the science of AIDS and the epidemic’s profound consequences for individuals and entire societies. “I had been teaching an undergraduate course called “AIDS in Africa.” I thought the material could be made more compelling for both students and the general public if they came to the material by sharing in the emotional episodes of real-life stories about how AIDS affected families in Africa.”

Not finding the book he needed, Essex decided to write it himself. Explaining science comes easily to him, but he realized he couldn’t write the book alone. “I needed someone who understood the culture and would ‘tell it like it is.’ I had read a couple of Unity’s earlier books. It seemed obvious that she was the one.”

Dow agreed to collaborate. “At first I assumed she’d use fictional families,” said Essex. “I was amazed and delighted when she told me she had more than enough to work with using real-life situations.” Only the names have been changed.

Much of the work of the Botswana–Harvard Partnership involves conducting clinical trials for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. Regulations are in place to protect the privacy rights of patients enrolled in clinical trials.
DOW: “Saturday is for funerals” is a phrase I’ve used, stating a fact in my life. Max heard it as a statement worthy of remembering. The expression stayed with him for months. When he proposed that we write the book, it was one of his suggestions for the title.

Saturday is for funerals because most people can attend on that day. On Saturdays at the height of the epidemic, whole villages were clusters of hymn-singing groups. When one planned any event or was invited to an event, there was always the rider, “if there is no funeral.” It became common to expect last-minute excuses for any event taking place on a Saturday.

At the height of the epidemic, what was a typical Saturday like in Botswana?

DOW: As families faced one death after another, burial practices started to change. Before the epidemic, when a funeral procession passed, pedestrians sat down by the roadside and drivers not forming part of the funeral procession stopped their cars until the procession passed, as a mark of respect. The epidemic changed that.

With the number of funeral processions crisscrossing the village to various burial grounds and/or following each other, this basic mark of respect could not survive. Now, pedestrians hardly pause in their strides and motorists not only do not stop by the side of the road, they might even drive within the procession. There have been so many funerals that death has ceased to be strange.

I attended a funeral once where the unthinkable happened—when it was time to call together young men, ‘hyenas’, to dig the grave, only a couple were available for the task. My cousin decided to go to a drinking place not far from where we were to hire some men for few pints of chibuku beer to dig the grave. The fact that these men were drinking while a wake was in progress in the neighborhood was a comment on their character. They would not have been the sort one wished to have at the funeral of a loved one. But the fact that there were not enough ‘hyenas’ at the wake was a comment on how fatigued everyone was. So many people were dying that young men were slipping away to rest, to avoid having to dig one more grave.

I also attended a funeral where I stayed right through the interment at the grave side, singing alongside people I knew and nodding to old school friends as our eyes met over hymn books, only to find as I walked back to my car that I was at the wrong grave. At least twelve funerals were going on at the same time and I had been separated from my group without even noticing. I have heard similar stories from many other people.

During those years, death became so commonplace that when you did not see someone for a while, you were cautious to ask after them when you met their family members. To this day, I catch myself often hesitating before I ask after a school friend. “Ao, she died in 2005, how come you haven’t heard?” is an accusatory retort I might hear.

A cousin jokes that cattle must get nervous whenever they see serious-looking women wearing megagolwane shawls and gathering at a homestead because it can only mean a wedding or a funeral. In either case, a cow will lose its life. If he is correct, then 2004 must have been a terrifying year for cattle.

How and why are things different today?

DOW: Things have calmed down. The last HIV/AIDS funeral I attended was in… I can hardly remember. Someone commented only this past weekend, “It is irresponsible to die of AIDS these days.”

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Divorces in Botswana are heard by the High Court; that is how seriously the country views marriage. By the time a marriage occurs, there will have been, at very minimum, six family meetings, starting with those involving close family and progressing to those involving easily sixty or more extended family members. During the weeks, sometimes months, of family meetings and negotiations, small and big feasts are enjoyed during which presents of bogadi cattle, firewood, and clothes are handed over to the bride’s family by the husband’s. By the time the couple says their Western-influenced “I do’s” before the marriage officer or Catholic priest or minister of religion, and an equally Western-style wedding party is held under white tents, all the customary aspects of the marriage process have been concluded. Parents, uncles, and aunts have given their advice, and the recurring message is simple: “Not two people, but two families have just been joined in marriage, and nothing, not even death, is expected to end the relationship.” In fact, according to custom a deceased woman can remain married to a living man. So death does not, per se, end marriage under traditional law.

Ten years on, though, they were in the High Court—in my courtroom—standing across from each other and without the presence of family and friends, having come to end the marriage. It had all started with joyous singing and extravagant feasting. Now it was ending, and in Kopano’s voice as he gave evidence in support of his case, there was not the usual acrimony that attends most divorces, but rather a sadness, perhaps even embarrassment.

“My wife has behaved in such a manner that it would be unreasonable to expect me to continue to live with her. My marriage has broken down irretrievably.”

The courtroom was quiet.

“She does not love me.”

“There is nothing I can say,” she started. The court fell silent. She looked up at me, the judge, and her husband from where she was standing, without any trace of fear or embarrassment. When she started to speak, her voice was clear and confident, unlike that of her husband.

“I did not want a divorce. I was hoping that parents could meet.”

“He is leaving me because I am HIV positive. He is afraid of me. He even locks his door at night as if he is afraid I will come in and give him HIV in his sleep. Our first child fell ill and died. It was a long a painful illness. But we stayed together during all that. The child died of AIDS. It was found out that I too had AIDS. After the child died, my husband was very sad. He wanted another child. He was negative, but he wanted another child. I did not want another child. I was afraid. But he wanted another child. He was very sad.”

Daisy paused and her voice faltered slightly before regaining its earlier clarity.

“I gave him the child. I gave him a second child. I was afraid to become pregnant again, but I did. Now I am afraid for this child. I want the child tested. He does not want the child tested.”

Daisy and Kopano are a discordant couple with respect to HIV status. She is HIV infected and he is uninfected. This might seem highly unusual, but it is not. In Botswana, about 20 percent of all stable couples fit this situation, where one spouse or partner is HIV positive and the other is negative. In another 20 percent of couples, both partners are infected, leaving about 60 percent with both uninfected. It may appear that, among discordant couples, it is the woman who is more often infected. But this may be misleading and due to the process by which they are identified. Women are more likely to volunteer for testing and for research trials, and discordant couples are more likely to be identified when an HIV-positive woman is detected and asked if she would like to bring her spouse or male partner for testing as well. Recognizing that numerous people in stable relationships may be HIV positive, the government has now established procedures in many of the testing centers for couples to get tested together.

To read the entire chapter, visit our website, www.aids.harvard.edu.

From Saturday Is for Funerals by Unity Dow and Max Essex, published in May 2010 by Harvard University Press. Copyright © 2010 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
Their identities and personal stories remain anonymous. It is important to protect the confidentiality of patients, especially because stigma about AIDS is still widespread. Yet privacy restrictions mean that the benefits of clinical trials are reported in statistics and percentages, rather than personal stories.

In *Saturday Is for Funerals* the stories behind the science are told by a world-class novelist. “The greatest challenge in writing the book,” said Dow, “was the constant knowledge that these are stories of real people. The lives of those people did not stop when I stopped writing.”

*Publishers Weekly* says of the book, “The authors offer an empathetic account of everyday life in a country where the disease infects one of every four adults—the constant funerals, the heroism of community workers and activists—and miniature narratives from the lives of the suffering and surviving: a teenager raising his siblings after being orphaned, a newlywed’s discovering that her new husband is HIV-positive.”

In the final analysis, understanding how people live and love is the key to developing scientific solutions that will truly work.

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*Saturday Is for Funerals*

*It has been said that many more are affected by AIDS than just those who are infected with HIV: orphans who lost parents, parents who lost children, spouses who lost partners, schools who lost teachers, farms who lost farmers. So behind every HIV infection is some form of personal tragedy for others — not just the deceased, the sick person, or the stigmatized individual who is infected. Saturday Is for Funerals is designed to reveal these real-life tragedies, and to build on them to help explain this unprecedented epidemic of death and destruction.*

-From the preface to the book