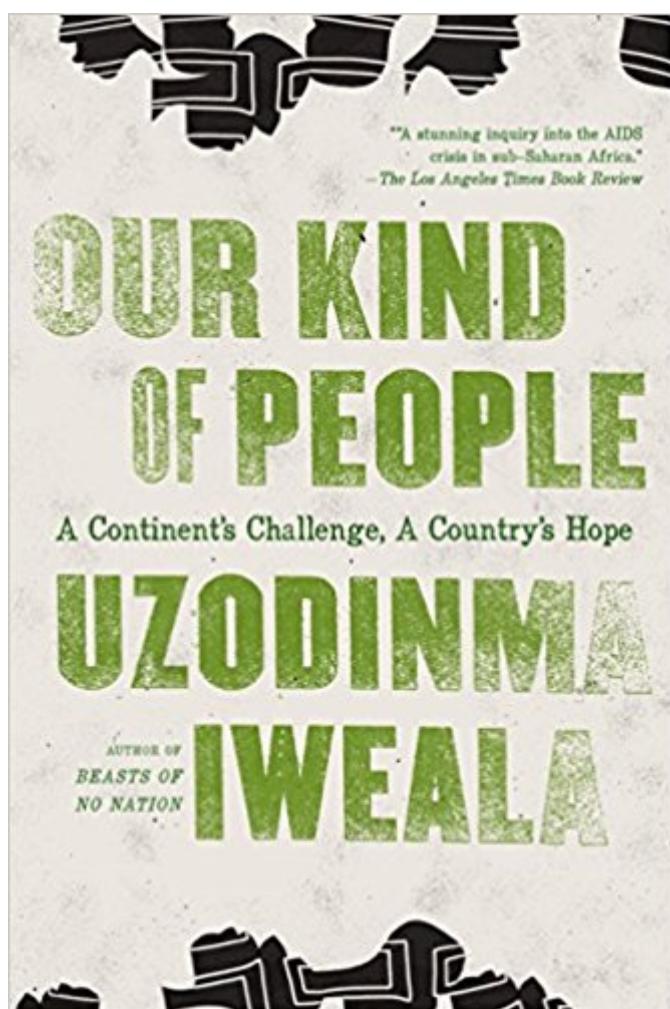


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Our Kind Of People: A Continent's Challenge, A Country's Hope



Synopsis

In 2005, Uzodinma Iweala stunned readers and critics alike with *Beasts of No Nation*, his debut novel about child soldiers in West Africa. Now his return to his native continent has produced *Our Kind of People*, a nonfiction account of the AIDS crisis that is every bit as startling and original. Iweala embarks on a remarkable journey in his native Nigeria, meeting individuals and communities that are struggling daily to understand both the impact and meaning of the disease. He speaks with people from all walks of life—the ill and the healthy, doctors, nurses, truck drivers, sex workers, shopkeepers, students, parents, and children. Their testimonies are by turns uplifting, alarming, humorous, and surprising, and always unflinchingly candid. Beautifully written and heartbreakingly honest, *Our Kind of People* goes behind the headlines of an unprecedented epidemic to show the real lives it affects, illuminating the scope of the crisis and a continent's valiant struggle.

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Customer Reviews

“At last, an account of the AIDS crisis from the point of view of the people most affected by it—men, women and children of Africa, who are not simply victims but are heroes and scientists as well.” (The Daily Beast) “A stunning inquiry into the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. . . . Iweala evokes the human cost of AIDS, and this is where *Our Kind of People* excels. . . . Iweala’s focus on narrative, on sharing voices and experiences, becomes an act of redemption.” (The Los Angeles Times Book Review) Iweala’s arguments are well reasoned. By making generous use of the

voices of many Africans, Iweala's writing possesses an immediacy that makes his message powerful and compelling. (The Boston Globe) "Iweala tells the stories of those whose lives - and deaths - make up the numbers in a measured, accessible tone. The end of the story of HIV/AIDS is not yet written, but in *Our Kind of People* we see the beginnings of normalcy. (Bono) "In this unassuming but important book, Uzodinma Iweala gives the AIDS pandemic not just a human face but a human voice. . . . Remarkable. (The Times Literary Supplement)

HIV/AIDS has been reported as one of the most destructive diseases in recent memory, tearing apart communities and ostracizing the afflicted. But the emphasis placed on death and despair hardly captures the many and varied effects of the epidemic, or the stories of the extraordinary people who live and die under its watch. On a remarkable journey through his native Nigeria, Uzodinma Iweala opens our minds to these stories, speaking with people from all walks of life: the ill and the healthy, doctors, nurses, sex workers, students, parents, and children. Their testimonies are by turns uplifting, alarming, humorous, and always unflinchingly candid. At once a deeply personal exploration of life in the face of disease and an incisive critique of our ideas of health and happiness, *Our Kind of People* goes behind the headlines to illuminate the scope of the crisis and the real lives it affects.

Not giving this short look at AIDS in Africa (and specifically, the experience in Nigeria, the author's home country) more than three stars feels a bit churlish. But however moving the individual stories it contains may be, the book itself is far from flawless. My principal problem with the narrative surfaced early on, when Iweala makes the case that the West has a difficulty in understanding Africa's AIDS crisis because we are blinkered by ages-old prejudices. Certainly, those prejudices exist, especially among those who have never spent any time in sub-Saharan Africa. But Iweala then proceeds to undermine his own case by showing that many of these preconceptions may have some basis in reality. For instance, he discusses the nature of sexual relationships as being more likely to be concurrent than consecutive (he talks to a man who defines fidelity to a girlfriend as cutting the number of his other girlfriends from eight down to four, and then only to one other woman, for instance.) Forget labels and judgments: as Iweala and the physicians he talks to for this book comment, that kind of approach is more likely to result in the kind of dramatic spread of AIDS that the world has witnessed in Africa. He doesn't want traditional African beliefs criticized -- and yet some of those, too, have negatively affected the lives of Nigerians with AIDS, as they are excluded

from the community and shunned our of a kind of fear that AIDS is spread via some kind of miasma. Where does the line lie between the West patronizing Africans by offering assistance and offending them by not doing enough? Iweala refers to African HIV/AIDS activists and their belief that Westerners don't see African AIDS patients "as similar to ourselves and thus deserving of proper medical care." What popped into my mind at that point was the number of Americans I've encountered who view their fellow Americans (of any color) in a similar way: anyone imprudent enough not to provide for health emergencies isn't their responsibility, I've heard it argued. This is a human issue, not simply a West/Africa issue, sadly, although in the case of Africa it may be complicated by history. Still, it isn't specific to Africa; similar perceptions have taken root in Asia at times. I didn't expect Iweala to provide answers to any of these very difficult questions that lie at the heart of the relationship between Africa and the West -- but given that he raised them, I was disappointed he adopted what struck me as a narrower view. Had the core narrative been stronger, these issues wouldn't have niggled at the back of my mind as they did. Are the portraits of the Nigerians who are battling the disease moving and compelling? Absolutely. Are the tales inspiring. Certainly. Is Iweala's core message -- that we should see each other, positive or negative, African or Western, as humans first and foremost -- important? Without question. Of course we must work to cross these boundaries. But I wonder whether the people who will read this book and respond to that message have already accepted this? How many North Americans and Europeans -- those who are willing to listen -- are going to find that at all revelatory or fresh? Perhaps it's true, however, that some of those observations that I found to be self-evident -- that we all should help those struggling with HIV to simply lead their lives -- are those that bear the most repetition. What this book does do well is to provide readers with a compelling oral history of AIDS in Nigeria. The portraits of the individuals Iweala encounters are vivid and he does a great job of blending their stories with the necessary facts and figures. Nonetheless, Still, this book didn't accomplish nearly what it could have. By brushing away the difficult questions -- dismissing a CNN story of a town of AIDS orphaned children in Kenya as melodramatic (fair comment) and as being about Kenya and thus irrelevant because Africa is more than just Kenya (well, Kenya is a part of Africa... and the village did exist...) -- Iweala undermined some of what he otherwise accomplished in my eyes. This probably won't be a majority view, and that's probably just as well, as this is certainly a powerfully human book that deserves readers. Nonetheless, I remain underwhelmed.

Iweala tells stories of people who have been affected by the disease and how they have been stigmatized. One of the problems with HIV is that it is not simply a disease, it is also a disease that

is biological and social. The beginning of this is haunting. It is about loss and fear. It is about losing one's family and the fear of losing one's name. It is a story we have all heard. It is about the things that happened before we understood the problem, how quickly it spread and where it already was. In the early years, mostly we learned fear. We did everything we could to educate young people in the years when we first started to understand the scope of HIV, even while we tried to understand what it was and even what to call it. I taught at a University in the Midwest those years, and we spent about 8 weeks teaching incoming freshmen about the danger of AIDS; including teaching them a numbers game that Dr. Koop made up at the time about how if you have sexual intercourse with one person you are also having a relationship with all of the people that person ever slept with and then those people and then more -- a scare tactic because that was the first weapon available. Information was all we had but it wasn't necessarily good information. But then it became associated as a gay disease and it turned into an us and them thing. But then it became associated as an African disease and it turned into an us and them thing. I found that this seemed to be a Universal activity--to disassociate oneself from the moral ambiguities attached to HIV-AIDS. Iweala interviewed one college graduate who said, " Everybody wants to believe that they're very good and they're too clean for all of that; that people that die of AIDS or have HIV are dirty people, people that sleep around or do rubbish and stuff, not our kind of people" (91). Off topic, there was one paragraph that I went around reading to everyone in my house and everyone I talked to on the telephone: "Nigerians have a talent for inventing alternative meanings for acronyms. NEPA, the old Nigerian Electric Power Association, quickly became Never Expect Power Again, and when renamed the Power Holding Corporation of Nigeria (PHCN), was popularly called Problem Has Changed Name" (179). Interesting that AIDS became AM I Doing Something.

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