

“NO SHORT CUTS” (on Swedish Novelist Henning Mankell)

By Professor Barbara Harlow

Secrets in the Fire (1995)

By Henning Mankell

Translated by Anne Connie Stuksrud.

Crows Nest NSW (Australia): Allen and Unwin, 2000.

Playing with Fire (2000)

by Henning Mankell

Translated by Anna Paterson.

Crows Nest NSW (Australia) : Allen and Unwin, 2001

“**N**ever leave the path. Not even by a metre. Never take short cuts.” Mama Lydia gives this advice to her daughter Sofia every single morning (*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” (*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 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” (*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 leave 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. 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 African. 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 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 he is a theater director in the capital city of Maputo, Mankell inquires through the investigations of his Swedish detective 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.

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 1989 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” (*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 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 mis-manage 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” (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 – “whodunits,” 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?

The fact of landmines poses crucial challenges for the storyteller, the producer of narrative plots, who must get his/her characters across settings, from one place to another. The very terrain, 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 20,000 people worldwide are killed by landmines every year. A ten-year-old amputee, a young girl like Sofia for example, if she survives another 40 to 50 years, will need 25 artificial limbs in the course of her lifetime. While the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (icbl.org) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, the United States – along with 64 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” (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) (Secrets 99). When the ground had exploded beneath her, Sofia, who had strayed 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” (*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 another older sister, Rosa, and is 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” (*Observer*, 1 February 2004). Indeed, as 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 is at once a classic coming-of-age tale 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 (Playing 92).

Rosa, however, preferred to frequent Hassan's shop, where she found magazines, music, 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" (Playing 56), the disease that "was lurking out there in the darkness [...] cunning and ready to attack anyone and everyone" (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" (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" (Playing 128), and even though she might consider that she is "too young" and she has "no legs" (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.

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" (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" (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, re dressing 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)

But 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. It is literature, that is, as written in the age of landmines and HIV/Aids.

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