

HENNING MANKELL **KENNEDY'S BRAIN** 2005 (KENNEDYS HJÄRNA)

When archaeologist Louise Cantor's son Henrik is found dead in his flat, she refuses to believe it was suicide. Clues that only a mother could detect lead her to believe something more sinister took place.

In her grief she begins to investigate Henrik's death and when Louise finds a photograph of an unknown girlfriend in Mozambique she decides to travel there. She sees fear in every face, even unexpectedly in the patients at the AIDS clinic set up by an American businessman. Slowly Louise realizes she has immersed herself in something far bigger than her son's death...

Driven by the memory of seeing an African man die of AIDS, Mankell sets aside his Kurt Wallander series to deliver a scathing indictment of how drug companies exploit, and Western nations ignore, that continent's mounting medical horrors. There's nothing metaphorical about the core subject, but Mankell tempers his stridency by wrapping it inside a moving tale of loss.

Swedish archaeologist Louise Cantor returns from the Greek dig site she oversees to find her son, Henrik, an apparent suicide. As unreasonable in her grief as any parent who loses a child, Cantor at first refuses to accept even the fact of his death and then sets out to prove he was murdered.

The clues are scant—he's found in pajamas when he always slept nude; his computer is missing—but a mother sometimes intuits more than the best police investigator can. As she puzzles over Henrik's seeming obsession with the post autopsy disappearance of JFK's brain—a harbinger of high-level conspiracies and cover-ups—(The book's title refers to one of the mysteries surrounding the JFK assassination, which had become a bizarre metaphor for the secretive Henrik.) and retraces her son's work with African AIDS patients, Cantor thinks in terms of reassembling pottery shards. But there may be vase breakers afoot willing to do anything to keep her from unearthing the truth

Meanwhile, a question keeps arising: Why is it that "we know all about how Africans die, but hardly anything about how they live?"

Long concerned about AIDS in Africa, Mr. Mankell has written eloquently on the subject previously in the nonfiction book, I DIE, BUT MY MEMORY LINGERS ON, his heartbreaking reflection on what AIDS has done to Africa. He tells the reader in the "Epilogue" to KENNEDY'S BRAIN-- which actually did mysteriously disappear after the President's assassination-- that his anger drove him. That is not to say, however, that this novel is reduced to a polemic about the fact that Western countries are not doing enough about AIDS in Africa. Rather Mr. Mankell has written as good a mystery as you would hope for about things that matter. Can we ever know our children? Ms. Cantor discovers that she hardly knew her son at all. Can a love that is dead ever be rekindled? Although she and Henrik's father Aron have been divorced for many years, she still measures each new man she meets by him-- for all his failures as a husband and a father-- and the others always come up

short. Mankell writes with passion about the part that racism plays in AIDS in Africa. Other truths: In his world, all important meetings in life are by chance. As a teenager, Ms. Cantor is faced with the death of a classmate who is run over and killed by a snowplow and realizes at that early age-- that death strikes at random

Finally Mr. Mankell writes beautifully, and with as much poetic insight as any writer I can think of, about the ultimate universal loneliness of all of us

. Being surrounded by total silence, for instance, deep in a forest, "where both distance and sound can cease to exist," is to experience "severe loneliness." Visiting the deserted excavation site, Ms. Cantor again experiences what she describes as "one of the loneliest moments in her life. Nothing could compare with the shock of finding Henrik dead in his bed, of course. This was a different kind of loneliness, like finding oneself abandoned in a landscape that went on forever."