



## A Man of Good Hope

*Jonny Steinberg*

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**In January 1991, when civil war came to Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, two-thirds of the city's population fled. Among them was eight-year-old Asad Abdullahi. His mother murdered by a militia, his father somewhere in hiding, he was swept alone into the great wartime migration that scattered the Somali people throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the world.**

This extraordinary book tells Asad's story. Serially betrayed by the people who promised to care for him, Asad lived his childhood at a skeptical remove from the adult world, his relation to others wary and tactical. He lived in a bewildering number of places, from the cosmopolitan streets of inner-city Nairobi to the desert towns deep in the Ethiopian hinterland.

By the time he reached the cusp of adulthood, Asad had honed an array of wily talents. At the age of seventeen, in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, he made good as a street hustler, brokering relationships between hard-nosed businessmen and bewildered Somali refugees. He also courted the famously beautiful Foosiya, and, to the astonishment of his peers, seduced and married her.

Buoyed by success in work and in love, Asad put twelve hundred dollars in his pocket and made his way down the length of the African continent to Johannesburg, South Africa, whose streets he believed to be lined with gold. And so began a shocking adventure in a country richer and more violent than he could possibly have imagined.

*A Man of Good Hope* is the story of a person shorn of the things we have come to believe make us human—personal possessions, parents, siblings. And yet Asad's is an intensely human life, one suffused with dreams and desires and a need to leave something permanent on this earth.

## A Man of Good Hope Details

Date : Published January 6th 2015 by Knopf (first published August 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9780385352727

Author : Jonny Steinberg

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Cultural, Africa, Biography, Southern Africa, South Africa, Autobiography, Memoir, History

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### Kathe Coleman says

#### A Man of Good Hope by Jonny Steinberg

A Man of Good Hope is the story of a Somalian child who at the age of eight was left an orphan when his mother was murdered in front of him and his father was forced into hiding. I followed his migration from Ethiopia to Somalia, to Kenya, to South Africa and finally to the United States. In South Africa his dream for freedom and prosperity was short lived as he was met with more violence and xenophobia. He was placed in Blikkiesdorp, "described as cape Town's asshole through which the city shits." Steinberg made a thorough study of Asad's life through extensive interviews and goes as far to visit the places where Asad had lived and worked. Most of the interviews took place in Steinberg's car because in the car Asad could keep an eye open for potential threats around them. It is the story of Asad Abdullah and his tremendous courage and undistinguishable hope.

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### Trish says

When Steinberg first meets Asad, the Somali man whose life Steinberg has chosen to help explain the extreme black-on-black violence South Africa experienced in 2008, Asad is living in Blikkiesdorp. Blikkiesdorp in English is called Tin Can Town because of its sixteen hundred identical one-room tin living structures laid out in sixteen identical square blocks. It was erected to house families evicted from homes they occupied illegally. Blikkiesdorp is thirty kilometers from Cape Town, separated by an expensive taxi ride.

Asad and his wife and child were placed in Blikkiesdorp in 2010, after living two years in refugee camps to which they fled after the mob violence in 2008. In the process of uncovering Asad's personal history, Steinberg illuminates for us the roots of Africa's history of economic migration as well as the means, and its turbulent history of violence and pervasive corruption. We also get flashes of understanding about human nature, mob violence, and the psyche of a Somali man. Steinberg had the instincts to capture this story of one man, the skill to tease out the important strands of his history, and the perseverance to complete this riveting and important work.

At the start of this non-fiction narrative, we see the origins of Asad's story in Mogadishu, when his mother was shot in the chest as she clutched him, a victim to anti-Daarood violence by Hiwaye meant to unseat the Daarood president, President Mohamed Siad Barre. Asad was eight years old. An aunt and uncle whisked the five children across the city in preparation to fleeing to Kenya—the start of a lifelong journey of displacement. Steinberg thus begins with the history of lineages and clans and by the end of the narrative demonstrates the centrality of clan affiliation in a person's life.

"That he was an Abdullahi and an AliYusef would disappear from his life for years on end; there are, he would discover, many ways of being Somali other than through one's clan. And then, without warning, his lineage would burst back into his life and shape his fate. When it did so, he would feel that he had been asleep for years, reeling further and further from himself."

It is distressing, to say the least, to read of Asad's early years once he is separated from his aunt and uncle in a continuation of the violence. He manages to eke out a living in a parade of cities, gradually becoming a young man on the basis of grit and cunning. He marries, and decides to improve his lot by trying to work in South Africa, where he will discover the hatreds against Somalis is resurgent in the anti-apartheid south. The inequities of life in South Africa among blacks in the new regime led some to strike out at those less numerous and therefore less powerful than themselves. The phenomenon of assigning blame for one's inability to escape one's condition is something from which we can all learn.

The mere process of recounting the thought processes of a young, unschooled but hardworking boy in duress tells us something of the conditions in which he operated, as well as how someone makes decisions in an environment of extremely circumscribed horizons: he held a very "now" worldview that held little past and an unknowable future. When he married, at nineteen, Asad's developed his grasp of concept of 'future':

"Something happened when I knew that I was going to have children with Foosiya...For the first time, I saw that my life was a series of decisions. I saw that each decision decided who I was going to be from now on. That is a big realization, brother. I felt dizzy and had to sit down. It is the sort of realization that can make you fall over."

Asad had a strong sense of right and wrong, of decency and fairness, of *propriety* and one wonders where it came from:

"My first feeling about [South African] blacks was that they have too much sex," he recalls. "I have now adjusted a little. But back then, what I saw on the streets, to me was illegal, uncultural, a shame to one's reputation. A man holding a woman who is not his wife, squeezing her bum, putting his hand up her skirt. I could not even look at them, I would look to the side...Even if you consider many different beliefs about the world," he says, "nobody allows that. Christianity, whatever it is nobody's culture. It is a democracy here. You say nothing. It is how they are. But I tell you, they do not get this from their religion. It is not in their culture either. But they do it. They have lost what their ancestors once knew. Christian, Jewish, doesn't allow it. Nobody allows it."

One cannot help but wonder if most people, even those who persecuted Asad, would also exhibit such constraints on behaviors if questioned closely enough. Asad and his fellow entrepreneurial Somalis had contempt for South African blacks:

"We think of [South African] black people as teenagers," Asad tells me bluntly. "Their democracy is so new and precious to them, but it confuses them. When it does not bring them what they want, they get violent."

The blacks had reasons for their anger which eventually manifest in violence: much of the profit earned from small business initiatives owned by Somalis and other economic immigrants was thought to be repatriated and thus exported, sucking their communities dry. The reasons for the poverty of their communities undoubtedly had other larger and more pertinent causes, but the economic immigrants were easier targets than a political system or institutionalized societal inequalities. It is startling to discover, in this winding story set on a distant continent, ourselves. Such is Steinberg's narrative skill: allowing us to see the general in the personal.

Writing a book about the remembered bits of a man's life is fraught with difficulty, which Steinberg frankly acknowledges at several stages. His struggle alone is enlightening: the questions he puts to Asad are an

attempt to help Asad remember how he felt at different stages of his life. Asad kept a Red Book, a kind of occasional diary in his teen years, which he eventually lost in his border-crossings:

"It was a record of the very best and the very worst. Like the day Foosiya agreed to marry me. I wrote down the date, the time. And on days when I had nothing and saw no future, I would write down the date on which I had that thought."

But often Asad simply did not want to divulge the depth of his feeling on a topic. It was too closely held and perhaps too easily misunderstood, but it formed his character. We have to make do with the man himself.

This narrative nonfiction is being released in paperback today by Vintage, a division of Penguin Random House. PRH currently has a 20% off pre-holiday sale (with free shipping!) until the end of the year, so don't hold back on the opportunity to have a look at a fascinating, detailed, and unusual portrait of a man living on the second-most populous continent on earth.

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### **Tuck says**

how to make sense of the insensible that is war refugees 'illegal' immigration racism outsiders extreme poverty hope, that is what author steinberg does chronicling the epic life of somalian asad as he loses his family when very young and eventually makes it to south africa and tries to live in hope  
i think maybe a unique bio in its breadth of emotion detail and sheer epic humanness

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### **Ellen says**

Brilliant in every way. A poignant telling of an immigrant's story. I felt equally hopeful and hopeless about Africa. So well-written.

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### **Fay says**

This is not an easy book to read. Man's inhumanity to man is very hard to stomach. However, the mere fact that this man of good hope will receive royalties from this book is reason enough to buy and to read it. A must read!

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### **Rachel Wexelbaum says**

If St. Cloud, Minnesota ever does a "One City, One Book" program, it should be with this book. This book, which preserves the voice and experience of a young Somali refugee, will do a lot to shatter stereotypes and ignorance about our Somali neighbors.

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## **Wangui says**

The story of Asad, a Somali immigrant in South Africa as told to a journalist and writer.

It was amazing to travel with him from the moment he has to leave Mogadishu, hope and fear along with him and get angry at the unfair turns his life sometimes took... I appreciated instances of his insight and morality- such as when he comments on the position of women in Somali society, when he is ashamed of his community's ostracisation of people from an 'unclean/rootless' clan.

Also revealing was to see places I knew (Eastleigh, Langata) or had been in (Cape Town) through his eyes- to see them in a different way.

A relative's comment regarding what he and other Somalis go through in South Africa, was shock at how foreigners are treated. That no-one, not one single person stood up for the foreigners. Not One. That is rough. And it causes you like Asad to posit possible reasons of how a people can come to the point where bad things are committed by their own and they don't react to help, simply because the one affected is a foreigner.

I wonder how well Asad will manage in the US though. There is less room for informal innovation there at least of the kind that got him through, and helped him flourish in, all those other places he was in.

A wonderful book though.

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## **Sonja Arlow says**

The first word that comes to mind when I think of Somalia is pirates. I was completely unaware of the huge amount of Somalis in SA and just how much they were the targets of the xenophobic attacks of 2008.

My feelings about illegal immigrants are in complete juxtaposition.

Yes they are non-tax paying and illegal which puts a strain on a country's infrastructure, public services, job opportunities and is a headache for even the most bountiful first world country's political and socio economic balance. But after following Asad's journey and his life that has always been full of hate, prejudice and a fight to survive I cannot help but also feel some empathy for these people who run to South Africa at the hope of a safe haven.

The author makes sure not to paint a picture of pure victimization of Asad and his fellow Somalis and he also allowed for stories that showed their own faults in thought and action during the xenophobic attacks.

Asad's story starts when he is 8 years old just after his father disappeared and he witnessed the killing of his mother. After being separated from his uncle he ends up living on the streets, moving from place to place to survive. His nomadic upbringing takes him to Ethiopia where, by chance, he meets Rooda who took him under his wing and tried to train him as a truck driver assistant. I don't want to get into too much detail about this however these sections gave me a much better understanding of the political unrest and culture of both Somalia and Ethiopia at that time.

It never occurred to me just how much blind trust illegal immigrants have to give to the smugglers and Asad's journey from the Horn of Africa (Somali) to SA made for fascinating and nerve wrecking reading.

For the first time I understand why Somalis are such successful Spaza shopkeepers, working 18-hour days, knowing their customers better than they know themselves and only leave the shop to go to the bathroom.

The story also touches on the Saab, a sub culture within the Somali tribal system, a people utterly rejected by their countrymen for generation upon generation and no way to redeem themselves.

The story is not just filled with horrors and loss (although there is plenty of that) it also has unexpected sections of humor and hope. Foosiyay's story was intriguing giving insight into the lives of female Somalis and a lot of stories that involved her made me laugh. She is truly a firecracker.

Highly recommended for all South Africans as well as anyone wanting to understand the problem child Africa sometimes seems to be.

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### **Leah says**

Incredible story of survival amongst terrible odds. The title is a good one--it is hard to believe that any human could stay hopeful with all that the author had to deal with--it could also be called "A Good Man of Hope."

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### **Pam Mooney says**

An excellent book! Well researched with unbelievable insight and sensitivity for all the cultures involved in this story. The story is told through the eyes of the people involved while walking in their shoes. Some parts of the story do make your jaw drop and pull at your heart strings. After I read this book I felt like I had been on a journey of epic proportions and crossed the barriers of culture, language, war, and geography. I would rate this book a 10 out of five. I cannot say enough good about it - just don't have the words.

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### **Walter Stevens says**

I'm not up for a review, but this is an astonishingly good book about the travails of a Somali youngster, "kicked like a stone in a road", all the way down the African continent. No feel good story, this has loss, I'll-feeling and foul play in at least equal measure to resilience, tenacity and will. It left me with no great impression of my countrymen, by with vast respect for the ties of kinship that support any diaspora. I heartily recommend it.

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### **Tania says**

...xenophobia is a product of citizenship, the claiming of a new birthright. Finally, we belong here, and that means you do not.

The first thing I want to say is that I loved the writing style of this memoir. The author is very clear about what was said by Asad, and what was interpreted by him, the writer. In this way I think we get more from the

telling than if it was written by Asad himself, there is enough distance between the feeling and the writing to try and make sense of what is being told. The author's writing is clear and understated. *A Man of Good Hope* is about so much more than Xenophobia, it looks at a whole continent and its issues. It also gave some insight into post-apartheid South Africa, and I find it very worrying that there's still so much fear and anger caused by any "otherness". I think that we should probably all read more memoirs like this to remind us that we should not judge until we know more about people's history and experiences. I will be reading *The Number*, a biography of a prison gangster, by same author soon.

The Story: Asad's odyssey, the story of one refugee among too many, is chronicled in this superb book by South African writer Jonny Steinberg. On the surface, it is simply the biography of a lonely young migrant who dreams of a decent life, hardening his shell and hustling to survive in hostile human environments. Yet it is really an epic African saga that chronicles some fundamental modern issues such as crime, human trafficking, migration, poverty and xenophobia, while giving glimpses into the Somali clan system, repression in Ethiopia and lethal racism in townships.

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## **Ray Hartley says**

Jonny Steinberg is doing what he does best: Describing the South African condition with precise insight and a writer's flair.

I can't remember the question I asked him as we sat down to talk, but my notes contain his pithy answer: "There's this in-between state of knowing and not knowing at the same time and so much of South African life is lived in that state."

I was talking to him in the lounge of Rosebank's Park Hyatt hotel, home of deal-makers, socially-networking functionaries, day-tripping financiers and high-end tourists - a million miles from the rough streets of the horn of Africa and the townships where Steinberg's new book *A Man of Good Hope* plays itself out.

The cover of the book's local edition depicts a neat buttoned up shirt over the familiar silhouette of Cape Town's mountains, the final South African destination of the book's Somali protagonist, Asad.

His journey which encompasses Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and a string of countries on a long trek southwards is the subject of this quiet, precise narrative.

Steinberg takes us inside Asad's world, beginning with his uprooting in the wake of the Somalian civil war and following his restless attempts to build a new life in refugee camps, in the urban ghettos of Kenya and in rural Ethiopia.

His decision to give it all up and bet everything on a long trek to South Africa, which he sees as a land of glittering opportunity, ultimately leads him to Cape Town where he was introduced to Steinberg who was looking to interview a Somali immigrant.

What followed were many hours of interviews – mostly conducted inside a parked car near Asad's shop – during which Steinberg put together the story of his life.

Steinberg shows us South Africa through the eyes of an arriving African immigrant. His sparse but descriptive words give us an eerie out-of-body sensation as we see ourselves on display in these two passages:

"The highway widened and was double-laned on both sides and was full of traffic. The surface of the road itself was as smooth as a varnished table, as if it had been laid yesterday. And the cars on the road were also new, like they had just come off the factory floor. Beyond the roadside were straight rows of houses with deep terracotta tiles on their roofs, thick beige paint on their walls and manicured gardens. They too looked as if they had just been built."

Ten days later, Asad sees through the façade of limitless wealth. "Every town the bus passed, he noticed, was divided into two distinct sections. There was always a settlement on the outskirts: it consisted of straight, narrow identical houses, each as modest as the next. And it was always in darkness, save for the occasional

blinding light mounted on a towering pylon.”

Asad soon discovers – too his disappointment – that his place is in the settlements on the outskirts.

Steinberg tells me: “It takes looking at it through somebody like Asad’s eyes to see it in all its spectacular strangeness.

“Coming from afar we must look bizarre. We have the crazy racially-heirarchised society. We’ve formally moved on from it, but the structure has remained the same. We don’t really like to talk about the fact that everything but nothing has changed at the same time.”

Asad joins other Somalis who have occupied the spaza shop niche in the townships, selling cheap goods through small windows in shacks to customers who view him with no affection.

Steinberg observes that, unlike South African traders, who are symbols of hope, of making it, the Somali’s are not liked or admired by their customers.

“What they do is they settle themselves among very, very poor people and all they do is they make money. The result is that they’re stripped bare, they are simply loathed.

Asad, he says, is “so utterly disinvested”.

“His relation to the world around him is utterly instrumental. Seeing South Africa through those eyes – through eyes that really did not care – was tough.”

The loathing soon translates itself into violence, at first sporadic and ultimately organized as local communities turn on the traders.

When Steinberg encounters Asad in Cape Town, he has been a victim of this violence.

“I don’t think xenophobia like this would have been conceivable under apartheid. Black people from across the borders streamed into South Africa for generations and were generally integrated into black South Africa.

“Xenophobia is a dark by-product of citizenship – ‘this place is ours now and its not yours’. It’s only since democracy that those lines between urban insiders and outsiders are about those who hold citizenship and those who don’t.”

A Man of Good Hope is Steinberg at his best: Holding the narrative tight while gently but precisely illuminating the social issues that drive it forward.

Steinberg says he has been inspired by reading the work of anthropologist Michael Jackson.

“He’s managed to weld together standard anthropology – he did ethnographies in Sierra Leone for many years - and married it to existential philosophy which asks these questions about the burden of how to live a human life and make it meaningful.”

“It just dawned on me reading this man’s work that what I’ve been trying to do, book after book after book is to write about somebody whose very different from me. Try and get under their skin. Try to see what it means to be a human being for them.

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### Kristen Abell says

I won this book in a first reads giveaway and initially I could not get into it. I forced myself to focus and to read just a little more and I became hooked. This story is so tragic and almost unbelievable to someone living outside of the world in which Asad lived. To imagine the loss and fear that he must have endured on a daily basis for the majority of his adolescence, it put my own life and my blessings into perspective while making me mourn for him and his lack of stability. I could not imagine making the choices that he made, and to see the resilience that he had after each obstacle he faced was inspiring. At times I wanted to know what he was thinking during these situations and I wanted to know what he really felt for the people he encountered on his journey. It was not an easy book to read because I would have to stop and think about his experiences and to wonder how a person finds the strength to go on with his life after each horrific thing would occur. This book will make you appreciate what you have been given.

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## **Stan Vlieg says**

My first goodreads review. I choose this one because i hope this book will get some more attention as i think it deserves it!

The story is about a resilient young man named Asad. He spend most of his live finding a place where he can settle down and be safe from harm. From Somalia to South Africa everywhere he goes he needs to find a way to survive. I felt inspired from his actions and his way of getting over things.

My trip to South Africa made me feel a bit like Asad must have felt. A lot of hatred around you. People that can treat you different from day to day. A lot of beauty and a whole lot of sorrow.

This book is well written with a lot of nice insights and it finds a way to create a good picture of his travels. If you want to read a book about a persistant human being then please read this!

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