



## A Man of Good Hope

By Jonny Steinberg

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This extraordinary book tells Asad's story. Tossed from one catastrophe to another, Asad's journey covers countries and continents, from the cosmopolitan streets of inner-city Nairobi to the Ethiopian hinterland; and the promises and pitfalls of Johannesburg, South Africa, whose streets he believed would be lined with gold. Thus begins a shocking adventure in a country richer and more violent than he could possibly have imagined, leading to the final coda of America. Throughout, *A Man of Good Hope* is a complex, affecting, ultimately hopeful portrait of Asad's search for salvation, suffused with dreams and desires and a need to leave something permanent on this earth.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“An extraordinary story. . . . A powerful testament to the resilience of humanity.” —*The Guardian* (London)

“Razor-sharp. . . . [Steinberg] works from the inside out. He places himself at the living, palpitating, always fragile heart of a story-in-the-making. . . . [A *Man of Good Hope*] trembles with the contingency of the lives Steinberg inhabits as a writer, as though the story itself, the telling of it, right now as you read, is implicated in his protagonist’s fate.” —*Los Angeles Review of Books*

“An engrossing book. . . . Compelling. . . . The humanity, suffering and bravery of Mr Abdullahi are palpable and make *A Man of Good Hope* a book well worth reading.” —*The Economist*

“[Steinberg writes] true, relevant, modern narratives conveyed with such eloquence and poignancy they acquire almost Shakespearean gravitas.” —*The Spectator* (London)

“Beautifully recounted. . . . personal without being intrusive, educational without being preachy, and absolutely worth reading.” —*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“A tale of luck, hustle, survival, and determination, *A Man of Good Hope* is an extraordinary examination of what it means to be human.” —*Buzzfeed*

“What a brave, important book. Steinberg’s writing is so human, so humane and so honest. . . . Steinberg stands shoulder to shoulder with other great writers who have also made sensible and visible so much that might otherwise remain insensible and invisible out of the political and human tragedies all too common in Africa—Michela Wong, Ryszard Kapuscinski and Ishmael Beah. Steinberg’s central question is one for all of us: what does it mean to live a ‘fully human life’ and whom among us has either the courage or the luck to live that life?” —Alexandra Fuller, author of *Scribbling the Cat*

“[*A Man of Good Hope*] tells one man’s extraordinary and moving story, revealing the reality of life at the bottom of the world’s worst pile.” —*The Times* (London)

“A masterpiece. Steinberg has illuminated a modern African odyssey to brilliant effect.” —Martin Meredith, author of *The State of Africa*

“Only through Steinberg’s adroit persistence—he knows when to probe and pry and when to retreat when Asad seems nettled by constant questioning—can the account of Asad’s remarkable, almost miraculous life journey emerge.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“South African journalist Steinberg vividly recounts one Somali man’s experience of diaspora, resulting in a book that is part biography and part contemporary history. . . . Steinberg’s thoughtful approach and Asad’s attitude of droll resilience make for a tale that any reader can appreciate.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Painstaking and humane.” —*Irish Examiner*

“Weaves together the many personas of a man whose story is at once unique and an archetypal example of

an all-too-large collective. For truly capturing the power of dreams and the resilience of human nature, this book deserves a wide audience.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“[I]ntuitively gentle writer, patiently and thoughtfully teases out the memories of a young Somali man, Asad Abdullahi, a ‘boy kicked through life like a stone’ . . . [Steinberg’s] caring, questioning prose illuminates how, after all Asad has endured and all he remembers, he can still be a man who carries hope with him. A remarkable story, skillfully etched.” —*Booklist*

#### About the Author

Jonny Steinberg was born and bred in South Africa. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *Sizwe’s Test*, published by Vintage (also published under the title *Three Letter Plague*), as well as *Midlands* and *The Number*, both of which won South Africa’s premier nonfiction literary award, the Sunday Times Alan Paton Prize. Steinberg was also a recipient of one of the inaugural Windham Campbell Prizes. He teaches African Studies at Oxford University.

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chapter 1

#### Mogadishu

In describing his childhood there is really only one place for Asad to begin. It was early one morning; he is not sure of the day, but the month was January 1991. This he understands from collective memory; nobody who knows Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, is unaware of what happened that month.

He believes that he was eight years old. Whether he knew before that he was Daarood and that others were not is irretrievable now, but he certainly came to know it on that day.

In January 1991, militias began to attack the northern parts of Mogadishu. The men in these militias were Hawiye, and they wanted to overthrow the government of President Mohamed Siad Barre, who was Daarood.

“The militias were based in the countryside outside the city,” Asad tells me. “They controlled the north of the country. They would come into Mogadishu to attack and regroup, attack and regroup, in waves.

“They came at night, and their target was all Daarood men. As far as they were concerned, Daarood men were government men. So, at night, the Daarood would leave their homes and gather together in government buildings for protection. They would leave women and children and the elderly at home. In Islam, one does not kill civilians—that means women, children, boys under fifteen, and the very old. Daytime, the men came back to see their wives.”

Asad’s father was sleeping away at nights, coming home during the day. Then one morning he did not come back. Or the next, or the next. It had been five days.

“When I look back now, I see that if I had been more focused on my mother, I would have been aware. There were three women staying in the house. I see now that my mother was hiding them. She must have discovered that some neighbors who were not friends had seen these three women. She must have known that she was going to get finger-pointed. I can see that now. Back then, I could not grasp that a person as

solid as a parent could feel fear.

“I woke in the morning and found my mother pressed up against the front door, staring through the cracks. I came up next to her and looked too. There were five militiamen on our property. They were moving around the yard. I had no fear. I wanted to look at them closer, not through cracks. I tried to open the door. My mother grabbed me and pulled me to her. I was right up against her leg. I still did not share her fear. I find myself thinking now: Where were my brothers and sisters? I don’t remember. In my mind it is just me and my mother. We were watching the militiamen. Three of them came up to the door and knocked very hard. My mother did not want to let them in.

“They pushed against the door and she pushed back. Then they started kicking, thumping the door. My mother pushed herself heavily against it. The door started breaking. I saw a pair of hands come through. They tore a hole out of the door, big enough for a person to climb through. My mother just stood there, as if there was still a door to push against. Still, she held me to her leg. The first militiaman just stared at her. She stared back. Then the second militiaman pushed the first one out of the way and shot my mother in the chest.”

I wonder what the militiamen did when they entered the house. Did they slaughter the women hiding there? For how long did they remain? How much time elapsed between their departure and the arrival of the first friendly adults, for between those two moments the children were, I presume, alone with their mother’s corpse. What did they make of it? What happened to their world during those minutes or hours?

Each time these questions find their way to the tip of my tongue, they stop and turn around, and I swallow them back down. I do not have the courage. I simply record what comes from his mouth.

And so I know only that he spent one further night at his parents’ home and that the following day his aunt—the wife of his father’s brother—whisked the five children across the city to her house. Later that evening, Asad’s uncle appeared, the first adult male Daarood he had seen in days. He does not recall for how long he and his siblings stayed there. “When I say ‘a few days,’?” he advises me, “that could mean anything from two nights to two weeks. In any case, after some time, we split up. Rahma and I went with my uncle. The other children went with my aunt. We walked out of Mogadishu and kept walking. I think that that was the last day it was possible for Daarood people to sleep in Mogadishu.”

As I picture Asad heading farther from home, I think, more than anything else, not of what he left behind but of what he took with him. He would never again be firmly moored to any particular adult, to any family. He would become a child whose connections to others would dissolve and re-form and disappear again. And yet he says with certainty that on his great journey through childhood and across the African continent he took his mother.

He has no memory of her face, or of the sound of her voice: her place inside him is more ambient than that, more powerful. It is indistinguishable from his sense of himself, of why he is a man who works hard and is kind and finds things funny; indeed, why he is the sort of man who can share such memories and keep his composure.

“If there is such a thing as a best mother, mine was it,” he says. “My father was working all the time. It was she who was with us twenty-four hours a day. She was very, very kind. I do not remember her raising her voice or beating us. I remember calmness and gentleness. I remember that she enjoyed being with us. If we were naughty, she would tell us that our punishment would come when our father got home. But then, in the evenings, she would protect us from our father.

“I last saw her at such a young age. The way she taught me, although I grew up an orphan, I still feel that what she was I am today. I did not lose her despite her death. I am not sure that words can describe what I am trying to tell you. I mean that by the time I was seven, she had already made me.”

I press him to attach these feelings to particular memories of her. He thinks silently for a long time.

“Her hair was very beautiful,” he finally offers. “Some women had many plaits. My mother did not. She parted her hair in the middle into two long plaits that went halfway down her back. We children played with her hair, sometimes all of us at the same time. I remember my hand touching my sister Khadra’s hand while we both played with our mother’s hair. Khadra’s skin was so sticky, my mother’s hair so smooth. I remember taking Khadra’s hand away and running my cheek across the smoothness of my mother’s hair.”

When I ask him to describe his home in Mogadishu, he smiles and says he remembers each detail. But as soon as he begins talking, he stumbles and, in frustration, grabs my notebook and begins to draw.

He mumbles softly as he works, his cadences patient and singsongy, as if he is taking a small child through an exercise. Then he puts the notebook back in my lap. “Aha,” he says.

As I examine the geography of his first eight years, he points a finger to the very center of his drawing, the colored-in dot representing the hindi tree.

“It reminds me of my brothers and sisters,” he tells me. “When the hindi tree is big, it grows tall and wide, and everyone sits under it. But ours was still small, so the only people interested in it were the ones who did not mind the sun—the children.”

He closes his eyes and tells me that he is picturing his siblings one by one, each under the hindi tree, each wrapped up in his own game. I ask him to describe them to me. “My older sister is Khadra,” he says. “She was much whiter than us. She was almost like you. And her eyes were not like my black eyes. She had the eyes of a goat. The color was quruurax, like glass: not black or brown, not red, but like glass.”

And then he describes his other siblings—his younger sister, Rahma, and his brothers, AbdiFaseeh and HasanAbshir—and I am startled as I listen, for he remembers them all, it seems, by their teeth.

“Hasan Abshir’s were red,” he says. “Khadra’s were red with white dots. Mine are long and straight and very white. And yet we had the same mother and father. It is strange.”

He curls his upper lip right up to the base of his nostrils and taps the nail of his index finger against his front teeth. Like his hands, they are long and well shaped.

I store this oddity in my notebook, not quite sure what to make of it. It is only later, after several weeks of conversation, that I come to understand what he invests in his teeth—they are his most vital connection to his father.

Asad refers to him as Aabbo, “Dad” in Somali. His memories of Aabbo take two forms.

The first is a medley of recollections, some of them images, others just disembodied ideas. Aabbo left early in the morning and returned very late, after the children had eaten dinner. In the first sequence in the medley, the children are summoned to the living room in the evening where their father receives them in the manner of a patriarch, quizzing each child about his or her day “top to bottom,” Asad says, like a stern inquisitor.

Aabbo was often away. “He traded somewhere in the Arab world,” Asad recalls, somewhere on the other side of the Gulf of Aden. On some days Asad says he does not remember what his father traded; on others he talks about animal skins bought from the nomads who came into Mogadishu, and sold on to Arabs in Yemen or Saudi Arabia or Dubai. He remembers that his father was once arrested and jailed in connection with his work—something to do with taxes or duties.

“My memories of this are not concrete,” he says. “It is just a piece of knowledge that floats in my head. I don’t remember the adults talking about it. I don’t remember whether they were worried. Maybe they were worried; the regime could keep you locked up a long time.”

Asad’s other memory of his father takes the form of a single, vivid image. It was early evening. Asad heard footfalls in the yard. He stepped outside to find his father standing there, a bag over his shoulder. He had been away, somewhere, on business; Asad had not been expecting him. “Aabbo,” he said.

In reply, his father put down his bag, flashed the broadest smile, and opened his arms. Asad ran to him and found himself lifted up to his father’s face. They were so close that their noses almost touched. He inhaled Aabbo’s breath; it was fresh, it smelled of a sweet herb. He observed the pores in the skin of his father’s cheeks above his thin beard: they glistened; the skin was a little oily. But what remains with him most vividly is the smiling mouth into which he stared: the wide, pink tongue; the teeth so long and so perfectly shaped they seemed like narrow ivory tombstones.

“I have his teeth,” Asad tells me. “When I look in the mirror and examine them, I think of the evening I looked into his mouth.”

I think of Asad examining the smiles of the many Somalis he has met on his journey; he is judging his distance from them by what he sees in their mouths.

And then there is the madrassa. It was quite literally across the road from his home, as he remembers it. The journey from his front gate to his classroom took less than a minute.

That the making of ink is his most cherished memory of school is no surprise, for the rest, it seems, was not very nice. He remembers his teacher Dahir by his ceaseless voice and by his thrashing stick. Dahir had been reciting both books of the Koran for so long that he could shout passages of the Holy Book in rotation to twenty students at a time, each student at a different place in the text.

That is what Asad remembers. He clutched the handle of his loox in one hand, his pen in the other, and waited his turn. His cup of ink lay ready at his feet. The sound of Dahir’s voice, hurling holy passages at one student after the next, would grow closer. Then it was Asad’s turn. Dahir would shout; Asad would write on his loox. He kept his writing small, for if both sides of the loox were full before his passage was complete, he would have to try to remember the remainder of the passage by the sound of Dahir’s voice.

As soon as Dahir moved on, Asad would begin to memorize what he had just written, for the clock was ticking; in the late afternoon, he would have to wash the ink off his loox with a damp clod of grass. The following morning, he recited what he had learned to Dahir. How much Asad failed to recall determined how heavily Dahir beat him.

Asad was six when he started at the madrassa. Learning both books of the Koran was meant to take another six years. He should have begun learning other subjects when he was twelve, like the Latin alphabet so that he could write Somali, then geography, history, and mathematics.

On the morning he describes the madrassa, I drive away from Blikkiesdorp thinking of what he has said, and I see his mother and the learning of the Koran as opposite poles of his childhood. His time with her was what he lived for, it seems, while his time at school was so cold and drab. Then I blink and think again, and now I see that mother and madrassa share something important. They were the two pieces of Mogadishu Asad took with him into exile. His mother he felt inside him all the time. As for the learning of the Koran: wherever he went, no matter how far or how strange, somebody was always starting a madrassa. Wherever he found himself, the Holy Book would open in front of him until he knew the whole thing by heart, as he does now, and as do the one hundred sixty or so Somali souls who bed down each night in Blikkiesdorp, each of them many years from home.

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