

Ross I. Donaldson, M.D., M.P.H.

The **LASSA WARD**


One Man's Fight Against One of
the World's Deadliest Diseases



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Ross Donaldson is one of just a few who have ventured into dark territory of a country ravaged by war to study one of the world's most deadly diseases. As an untried medical student studying the intersection of global health and communicable disease, Donaldson soon found himself in dangerous Sierra Leone, on the border of war-struck Liberia, where he struggled to control the spread of Lassa Fever. The words, "you know Lassa can kill you, don't you?" haunted him each day. With the country in complete upheaval and working conditions suffering, he is forced to make life-and-death decisions alone as a never-ending onslaught of contagious patients flood the hospital. Soon however, he is not only fighting for others but himself when he becomes afflicted with a life threatening disease. *The Lassa Ward* is more than just an adventure story about the making of a physician; it is a portrait of the Sierra Leone people and the human struggle of those risking their daily comforts and lives to aid them.

The Lassa Ward: One Man's Fight Against One of the World's Deadliest Diseases Details

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From Reader Review The Lassa Ward: One Man's Fight Against One of the World's Deadliest Diseases for online ebook

Lara Garbero Tais says

La historia real autobiográfica de un estudiante avanzado de medicina que va a Sierra Leona a colaborar en una pabellón muy precario que trata casos de fiebre de Lassa, una fiebre hemorrágica muy mortal, contagiosa y siniestra.

Un poco pomposo el estilo al principio y al final y le sobran la mitad de los adjetivos, pero es tan gracioso y adorable el autor, tan sincero con respecto a lo poco preparado que se siente y tan interesante el tema que me encantó igual.

Super recomendado.

Rachel says

I grabbed this book from the public library on impulse, and overall it was an easy and interesting read. However, that comes with a caveat I'm beginning to apply to more and more books - it could have been much better with some careful editorial attention. As a small, specific example, the author refers to obstetric fistula as something that happens when delivery is "unsupervised." People with knowledge of this topic know that fistula is an injury that occurs when labor is complicated/obstructed and skilled assistance is not available. In other words, it's a problem of infrastructure and availability of care, not something that happens simply because any given laboring woman was "unsupervised" - being "unsupervised" does not by itself cause fistula. It's a small distinction in language that makes a difference as to whether the text is medically accurate. I find it difficult to believe that an MD, MPH author with personal experience working in Africa (where fistula is much more common due to lack of available maternity care), so I can't help wondering if someone on the publishing end either made the statement incorrect while trying to make it "simple," or if it's just an item a good editor with some medical knowledge should have clarified before proceeding.

More broadly, despite the nature of this book as a memoir (and so rather self-centered by design), some editorial attention could have transformed this book from merely an account of one med student's adventure into a more meaningful work on the conditions and structures which contribute to the need for such "aid" work. The end of the book is basically, "Hey, my adventure was over, and I went home a changed man" - something not nearly so interesting as further discussion of the limitations of sending partially trained students to put small bandages on deep wounds, or the medical and structural situations in the country and system in which the author operated.

I've read a number of books lately to which my response has been, "A good editor could have made this much better," and unfortunately, this one was among them. I wouldn't discourage anyone with an interest in medical narratives from reading this book, but it could have been much better with the kind of attention from the publisher/editor that seems to be slowly going away.

Lynette says

I think this book is excellent because of the questions it raises. In that regard, in providing provocative food for thought, I believe the author did a fantastic job. The writing is not top notch, and yet Donaldson certainly gets his points across and manages to convey the meaning beyond the actual events of his two months in Sierra Leone, as well as what befalls him when he reaches home. The book was very easy to read, without getting overly clinical, and the human component of his experiences speak with more emphasis than the medical aspects. All in all a beautiful and meaningful reading experience!

Kelley says

I thought this was a well written account of the insight into the naive nature of people who go to third world countries to study infectious disease. I think anyone in science or medicine should read this memoir and think about the state of medicine in the USA vs the rest of the world. I thought the "lead in" of the book where the author is known to be sick and hospitalized was cheesie given that we know he is going to work with Lassa, but find out at the end of the book that his illness is far less dramatic and interesting. Over all, the book was an interesting and easy story to read that was very thought provoking.

Kari says

This was quite an enjoyable, smooth, and moving read. I found the narrator relatable, both in his compassion and fear. The Lassa virus was not the only thing he had to fear; Ross struggled with many of his own insecurities as well. In America, he was nothing more than a physician-in-training; incomplete and without proper licensure. But in the starving, war-torn, hopeless Sierra Leone landscape, he holds the key to life and death. He who was the least has now become the greatest; the tables have turned and Ross must now take upon himself the responsibility of human lives. He may not be able to successfully treat every case of Lassa, but for those who recovered in his care, Ross's presence made all the difference. Definitely worth the read, even if the reader doesn't much care for disease novels.

Cherlyn says

Don't read this expecting a medical thriller, because it isn't. It's the story of a student doctor who took time off residency to do humanitarian work in Africa. It reads more like a memoir. It was a slow beginning but once he got us into the Lassa ward in Sierra Leone it was very interesting. It's hard to believe that there were success stories within the circles of poverty he was working. I liked that he uses a very humanistic voice in his narrative, not some pedantic, scholarly doctor tone. He adds a lot of the civil war in Liberia into the story and I am not very familiar with political events in Africa so that part of the story wasn't as clear. (FYI, this was hard to find in any library near my house, so I ended up purchasing it, but glad I did.)

Paula says

This is a true story. A 3rd year medical student (with an MPH) spends a summer in a small village in Sierra

Leone, Africa, to help an aging physician that has spent his life educating and caring for populations stricken with the deadly viral hemorrhagic Lassa fever. In the west, it is classified as a bio-safety level 4 disease. When the doctor has to leave town for a few weeks, the student is left on his own to care for the patients. He is overwhelmed due to his lack of knowledge/experience in this area. However, with the help of minimally educated staff that have worked with the elderly physician for years, the student uses his critical thinking medical skills to make life and death decisions about treatment for the patients. Do they have Lassa fever, malaria, or something else? They have no equipment except to do blood typing or administer IV fluids and blood, so diagnosis is a best guess related to symptoms and their progression. They have few antibiotics/antimalarials. Some of the medicines they use are purchased from a local store. This store obtains these meds from someone who steals the clinic's shipment on a regular basis. The student returns home, is stricken with illness, and hangs in the life/death balance himself. This shows another side of how war affects health literacy, medical supply availability, and the selfless commitment of a few to make a difference.

Andrea Carb says

This is a touching memoir of a young medical student who decides to volunteer in the Lassa Fever ward in Sierra Leone; all against the back drop of a civil war in neighboring Liberia. He is a babe in the woods, managing to save some lives under the sparse conditions with very limited resources; My strongest praise is for his writing. Dr. Ross is able to capture the character trait of the nurses and personnel in their local dialect and mannerisms with a warm humor and affection . Extraordinary.

Marcia says

Ross Donaldson is a medical student, writing a paper about Lassa fever, who decides to travel to Sierra Leone and research the deadly disease first hand. Working alongside Dr. Conteh, a physician who has made Lassa fever his specialty, Donaldson sees the devastation caused not only by Lassa, but hunger, war, and other diseases in the African nation. The familiar (if you read any amount of medical memoirs) story of a student being thrust into healing head first, feeling unprepared, is accompanied by culture clashes and the difference between Western, first world medicine and the medicine practiced and available in Sierra Leone. While Donaldson starts off naive and a little annoying, making some observations that had me shaking my head, by the end I had grown to like him. The real stars of the novel are the physicians, nurses, and patients of the Lassa Ward. Written in an easy-going, simple style, this is an informative and heartwarming story. Recommended.

Terri says

Ross is a medical student from California who decides to go to Africa, to learn about the deadly Lassa Fever in a ward in Sierre Leone and write a paper about his experiences. Nothing there is as he expected. This book is more about his experience of the chasm between cultures and the completely different mind set of the people there. Of the polarity of medical care where there are no supplies for things he takes for granted. Such as the fact there is not even a breathing bag/mask and there is no way to even test for what they are treating. How even though health care is supposed to be free, health care workers refuse to treat those who cannot pay. How care workers do not understand the differences between viruses and bacteria or that different antibiotics treat different infections. He is unsure and frightened of making a mistake that costs someone

their life.

The book is less about Lassa Fever and more about his own personal education of a system doing its best with no resources or support amidst political chaos.

After reading this book and against the aftermath of the recent Ebola epidemic, I have to wonder how little things have changed in over ten years.

Lora says

My rating may be a little bit skewed, since I devoured this book in just a few sittings. What I found so particularly interesting was the author's perspective in the hospitals. I definitely identified with his point of view, and really appreciated his ability to put it into words. The fact that he mentioned the issue of medical equipment and staff training (my line of work) was an added bonus.

I was on the edge of my seat for much of the book, 1) because of the danger of the Lassa virus, and 2) because of the way the author, a 3rd year medical student, was thrust into a position of authority despite his uncertainty.

The images were vivid, the context very relevant (this was written somewhere around 2005), and the story compelling. I would suggest this for anyone who wants to work in the developing world, except for the fact that it might instill fear instead of a desire to help... so if you're already unsure, wait until you've come home to pick up this one.

Liralen says

This could be three stars, I suppose, but the writing drove me up the wall and back down, and...the rest of it didn't really help matters.

The back-cover copy says:

Ross Donaldson was an idealistic young medical student when he gave up his comfortable life in the States to venture into Sierra Leone, a country ravaged by fighting...

Nope. He spent a summer between years of higher education doing research and humanitarian work. He gave up those creature comforts for *two months*. Not the same as '[giving] up his comfortable life in the States'.

Now, in a hospital ward with meager supplies, Ross is in a race against time to find a way to care for patients afflicted with Lassa fever...

Again: nope. The only significant 'race against time' involved the fact that he was only there for two months. He wasn't working to find a cure (there was already a drug on the market, though not an ideal one) -- he was a med student doing research and helping out. (Getting patients started on medication for Lassa was time-sensitive -- but not nearly as dramatic as it sounds here.)

Forced to confront his own fears, he stands alone to make life-and-death decisions in the face of a never-ending onslaught of the sick.

Whoa there, cowboy. Briefly, yes -- when the more experienced doctor leaves town for a week. But even then there are others he can consult with, and most of the time he's not alone and not making the tough decisions. Much of the time the big problem is that supplies are so limited.

Ultimately, he finds himself not only fighting for the lives of others but also for his own.

Well...sort of. But not in the way the copy implies. (view spoiler)

Now, Donaldson most likely didn't write the cover copy, so I can't/don't blame him for it. He is up front about being a medical student; although he had an academic interest in Lassa fever, he'd never seen a case before he went to Sierra Leone. And don't get me wrong -- credit where credit is due, he was doing important (and difficult, and frightening) work. But that copy did set me up for a very different read -- perhaps something along the lines of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (or even *The Hospital by the River*, which, by the way, did a *much* better job of explaining fistula).

But back to the writing: As far as I can tell, the author was going for descriptive, 'deep' writing. But 'descriptive', here, tends to mean three times as many adverbs and adjectives as are warranted; 'deep' translates into prose that is overwrought. Florid. *Purple*.

We watched the child's heavy breathing, both lost in our own thoughts. Eve's mother, perhaps, remembered her daughter's first steps or a special bedtime kiss. Limited merely to memories of Eve's earthly suffering, I saw only darkness grow around her while hoping in the depths of my heart that I had made the right decision. (207)

I shook his hand with a bittersweet smile, deepened by the events of the last few months -- a period for me seeped in death, but also rich in life. For a moment, I gazed out in the distance, where a setting sun outlined jungle-covered mountains. There was not a cloud in the sky. (217)

A young woman, known for her charm and beauty, opened the front door. She wore an angelic smile, radiant above soft robes.

...

"I missed you," I said.

"Yes," she told me hours later. "You really did." (237)

Again, I may not be being entirely fair here, but I expected something (look at that great cover! Read the promising subtitle and cover copy!) that the book didn't deliver. I wanted to know more about Lassa fever and about Donaldson's research. I wanted the mention of blood diamonds not to be glossed over. If he was going to employ a dramatic 'will he live' prologue, I wanted a higher sense of urgency at the end.

Alas, siiigh, and on to the next thing, I guess.

Catherine says

Donald's memoir recounts his two months working as an aid worker in the Lassa ward in a remote area of Sierra Leone. Lassa fever is highly contagious, similar to Ebola, and requires quarantining the patients and

extreme caution by the caregivers in order to prevent spreading the disease.

Donaldson was still a med student during the time he spent in Africa, but due to short staffing and fear of transmission, the Lassa ward served as an excellent training ground for him. I thought his explanations of what could be complicated medical jargon were easy to understand. I also liked the day by day accounting of his experience.

I might have given this book four stars were it not for several jarring proofreading errors. I've kind of become accustomed to spelling errors and disjointed sentence structure, (although it's still a pet peeve) but this book had me stymied as to how it slipped past. There were several paragraphs that were repeated word-for-word in the last portion of the book that had been in the first couple of chapters. I can't imagine that it was deliberate?! It was as if the proofreader used "copy" and "paste" rather than "cut" and "paste" when moving text around. Maybe I'm being petty but I thought it was a careless mistake and it devalued the book for me. I hope they correct the errors if it's reprinted in the future.

Lauren says

Working at a Lassa Ward in Sierra Leon, Dr. Donaldson recounts his months spent treating one of the world's deadliest viruses in one of the world's poorest countries. Ravaged by war, genocide, and poverty, Sierra Leon is a country rich in natural resources such as beautiful forests and diamonds, but poor to point of disfunction. Donaldson's work in a hospital treating Lassa patients is honest and haunting. He describes the tortuous thought process he went through while treating his patients. While trying to "do no harm" he had no diagnostic equipment, few drugs, and little medical resources that would have been readily available in the U.S.. A fascinating and highly readable book, Donaldson's compassion and awareness of the best and worst of humanity makes for a compelling read.

Michala Geraty says

Overall I really liked this book. I thought it was an inspiring story that demonstrated the stark contrast between life here in the U.S. versus elsewhere, and showing just how good most Americans have it. It is the story of a young med student which depicts his journey from California to Sierra Leone to work on the Lassa disease. It was hard to read about kids and innocent people going through such struggle. I think this book was definitely eye opening for me and I would recommend it!
