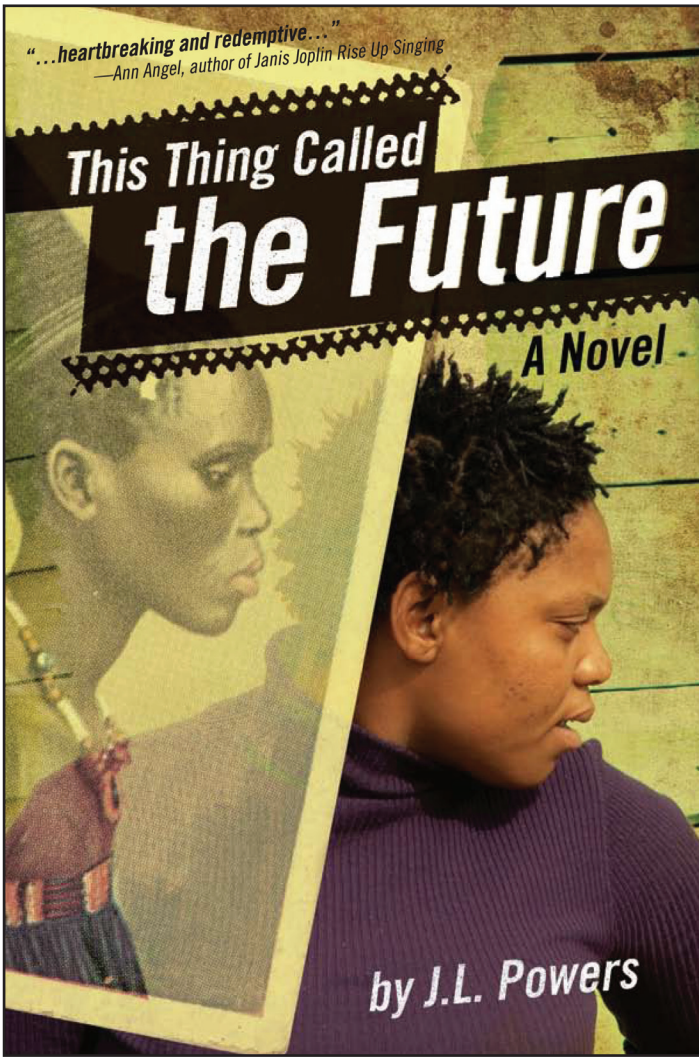


# *This Thing Called the Future*

by J.L. Powers  
A Teaching Guide



## The Novel

Nomkhosi (“Khosi”) Zulu is a gifted young woman seeking healing for her ill mother and protection for her family from the curse a neighbor has placed on them. Like any fourteen-year-old, she also wants love and romance, but her budding sexuality is complicated by her experiences with family members and neighbors dying of AIDS. Using the backdrop of modern South Africa, *This Thing Called the Future* explores the clash of western values and traditional Zulu culture during a time of enormous fear and vulnerability, as HIV-AIDS sweeps across the region.

## Background

### THE ZULUS

The Zulus are one of the largest—and certainly most well-known—ethnic groups of South Africa. By the 18th century, the Zulus were a small, relatively unimportant clan of several thousand people in the region of southeastern South Africa. These clans worked as farmers, growing sorghum, millet, and, eventually, corn. Early in the 19th century, a chief named Shaka began a military conquest, consolidating linguistically and culturally related clans together into an imposing empire known as the Zulu Kingdom.

The upheaval and violence of Shaka’s bloody wars, beginning in the 1810s and lasting long after Shaka’s murder in 1828, caused a series of mass migrations across Southern Africa and up into central Africa as far as Malawi and Tanzania. Though Shaka’s creation of an African state certainly destabilized the region, other things contributed to the region’s turmoil: population pressure, famine, massive Portuguese slave-trading activities to the east, labor-raiding by European missionaries and settlers, and the intrusion of white settlers who came looking for land.

During the latter half of the 19th century, the British and the Zulu engaged in a series of battles that ended in the Zulus’ defeat. The Zulus started the 20th century poverty-stricken and powerless. They were ready for the messages of revival and cultural pride that soon swept through the region. Many Zulus had been Christianized through missionary activities in the late 19th century, but the religion became wildly popular only after Zulu Christians started their own churches early in the 20th century. These African Independent Churches combined Christian beliefs with a message of pride in African culture and customs and a strong belief in the power of physical and spiritual healing.

Healing was an important concept in Zulu culture. Traditional healers—herbalists (known as *inyangas*) and spirit mediums (known as *sangomas*)—had long held both political and spiritual power, not only because they could provide healing for physical and psychological diseases but because they had the capability to break the power of witches and to make rain. For farmers, rain was a crucial component for sustaining life. Zulu kings thus had to control the power of rainmaking.

## APARTHEID (1948-1994) & INDEPENDENCE/ DEMOCRACY (1994 & BEYOND)

During the 19th and 20th centuries, South African politics were dominated by power struggles. British settlers, Afrikaners (the descendants of Dutch settlers), and Africans clashed, sometimes militarily. The British and the Afrikaners fought a brutal war from 1899 to 1902. The British gained political power, which they kept until 1948, when the Nationalists (a conservative, largely Afrikaner party) gained power and institutionalized the system of apartheid.

Apartheid was a system that gridlocked power and wealth in the hands of whites. Though black South Africans had already been divested of the right to vote, and though there were systems in place to prevent black and mixed-race individuals from gaining wealth, education, or power, every aspect of life was tightly controlled under apartheid. All citizens were issued identity cards—known as “passes”—that defined them by their race. Race was a three-tier system, with whites on top, mixed race and Indians (“coloreds”) in the middle, and blacks on the bottom. Neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and businesses were designated as “white,” “colored,” or “black.” This identity “pass” that the government issued controlled where individuals could live, work, worship, and play. Families could be torn apart when one member—even, sometimes, a child—was designated as a different race than other members of the same family and could no longer legally live in that household. Black citizens were denied voting rights, a decent education, and sufficient income to keep themselves and their families out of poverty.

Some Africans—Nelson Mandela among them—rose up and fought against apartheid, no matter what it cost them personally. They boycotted businesses, burned passes, refused to pay rent on government-owned houses, created an armed unit to fight the government militarily, went to jail, organized unions, and articulated a belief in black power and pride in black culture. In the 1980s, as the townships grew increasingly ungovernable, blacks turned against other blacks. “Sell-outs” were tortured and murdered, most famously by being “necklaced”—that is, a tire was slung around a person’s neck, doused in gasoline, and lit on fire.

Many Zulus belonged to a cultural and political organization called Inkatha. The organization believed that it was better for Africans to return to traditional ways of life, rather than to seek power in the government. The apartheid government backed and supported Inkatha, secretly giving members of the organization weapons and a mandate to kill members of the African National Congress, a banned organization fighting for democratic power for all South Africans. Townships turned into bloody battlefields as blacks fought blacks.

It wasn’t until 1994 that the South African government gave blacks the right to vote and overturned the racist system that had impoverished millions of blacks and mixed-race citizens. Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for his anti-apartheid activities, was released and elected the country’s first black president.



*A Zulu sangoma in the outfit she wears when seeing customers and to contact the ancestors*

## Traditional Healing

The importance of belief in healing powers and traditional medicine can’t be emphasized enough when considering African history. For literally tens of thousands of years, Africans have battled diseases such as malaria. In South Africa, Africans were dominated, oppressed, and enslaved by white settlers for several centuries. Their pride and power was broken; they faced emotional and spiritual demons as well as all the old diseases and new diseases brought by Europeans.

Though specifics varied from place to place, over the centuries most Africans had developed a system of spiritual healing that attempted to stabilize human relationships and prevent conflict within their communities. They also used herbs and spiritual forces to deal with physical ailments like malaria or infertility. The healing that developed was holistic, and involved all aspects of a human being, not just their physical bodies—placing it in direct contrast to modern western medicine.

Though black South Africans do seek treatment from medical doctors, they often endure long waits and other indignities at clinics and hospitals. Black nurses in South African hospitals are notoriously cruel in their treatment of patients. Traditional healers are the first line of defense for

many. There are only 32,000 medical doctors in South Africa, compared to approximately 300,000 traditional healers. The accessibility of traditional healers, their relative affordability, and their cultural familiarity make them highly popular.

## HIV, AIDS, & South Africa

HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that leads to AIDS (Acquired immune deficiency syndrome). A person doesn't die of HIV, but when their immune system is compromised because of HIV, it leads to a condition known as AIDS. When a person has AIDS, their immune system lacks the power to fight off infection and disease. This is why individuals with AIDS die of diseases like tuberculosis that can otherwise be cured.

In 1994, at the time South Africa achieved independence, HIV and AIDS were still relatively unknown in the region. But by 2009, an estimated 5.9 million South Africans suffered from HIV or AIDS, making it the country with the highest number of HIV-positive people worldwide. In some regions, such as KwaZulu-Natal, the official infection rate among young childbearing women was 30% and some medical doctors believed the actual rate to be much higher.

The United States has sent billions of dollars in aid to the continent of Africa under a government program called PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), initiated by President George W. Bush and continued under Obama's leadership. This money has been used for research, prevention, and, most notably, to pay for anti-retroviral medications, which allow HIV-infected people to live relatively normal lives. South Africa has been the recipient of millions of PEPFAR dollars, allowing it to offer the life-sustaining medications at no cost to AIDS sufferers and qualifying HIV-positive individuals.

## Themes

### TRADITION VS. MODERNITY, THE PAST VS. THE FUTURE

Khosi is torn between love of her grandmother, who believes firmly in Zulu cultural traditions such as honoring the ancestors, and love of her mother, who believes those traditions are superstitious and instead puts her faith in science and modern technology. Alternatively, Khosi also recognizes that the past is gone and the future is what is ahead of her. She wonders if there is a way to make tradition and science compatible as she forges on her path towards the future.

### SEXUALITY

Like most young women, Khosi is attracted to the opposite sex. Her crush on her classmate Little Man is innocent, but in the context of HIV-AIDS, romance and sex suggest potentially deadly consequences. Though Khosi avoids the

older men ("sugar daddies") who seek sexual favors from young women in return for gifts, her friend Thandi is not as successful, and she falls pregnant. Khosi promises her mother that she will avoid romance—a promise we already know she will fail to keep—yet she commits herself to abstinence in order to avoid contracting HIV.

### RELIGION

Khosi's personal religion is a mixture of Christianity and indigenous Zulu beliefs. The most important aspect to her personal understanding of the world is the reality of evil, manifested by witches who have the power to control and harm others. Protection from these curses comes from God and the spirits of ancestors.

### HEALTH & HEALING

Healing is a major focus of the book, as Khosi deals with her mother's physical illness and her family's spiritual crisis. Western medical practices clash with traditional medicine as Khosi seeks cures for both problems.

### DEATH

Death surrounds Khosi and her family, most notably in the form of AIDS. Khosi comes to grips with death's hold on her



*A sangoma, or a sangoma-apprentice, stands beside her truck. The white clothing symbolizes her purity and separateness from society.*

community but also, as she accepts her call to be a traditional healer, comes to see death as a continuation of life rather than the end of it. Part of her calling to be a *sangoma* comes through a type of death—experiencing an illness, known as *ukuthwasa*, in which she has visions of swimming through the river that separates this world from the world after life. She sees her ancestors on the other side and recognizes that though they have passed onto the next life, they still speak to her, and she is the manifestation of their voices in this world. This is a Zulu cultural belief and one that Khosi embraces as she recognizes her calling.

## COMING-OF-AGE

Khosi is faced with all sorts of issues that make her grow up—a secret romance with her friend Little Man, the realization that her mother is going to die, the ubiquity of a sexually transmitted disease in the world around her, death, and, most important, her calling to be a *sangoma*, a traditional healer. In the course of the novel, Khosi overcomes major challenges to embrace her destiny as a healer.

## Discussion Questions

### SETTING/SOUTH AFRICA

1. In a sentence or two, briefly describe the world Khosi lives in. In what ways is it different from the world you live in? In what ways is it similar?

2. What are the challenges facing Khosi at home and in her community?

3. What do you learn about apartheid from this book? What do you learn about the post-apartheid world that Khosi lives in? How do the policies of apartheid still affect Khosi's life?

4. Describe Imbali township as you learn about it in this book. Why were townships created? How does Khosi describe township life?

5. In what ways does Khosi's identity as a young black woman in South Africa affect her life and the choices she has for the future?

6. Describe the economic situation facing Khosi and her family. What challenges face them on a daily basis? How does Mama's illness affect Khosi's economic and educational prospects? How does poverty influence the outcome of Mama's illness?

7. What is the role of witches in Khosi's world? Why do you think there is such widespread belief in and fear of witches? What can you learn about South African society by studying the problem of witches in the townships?

### HIV/AIDS

1. HIV/AIDS is widespread in Imbali and South Africa. How does Khosi describe the disease? How do the people in her life respond to its threat?

2. Khosi's mother is afraid to find out about her HIV status. So is Thandi. Why? What are they afraid of and why? How do you think you would feel in a similar situation?

3. Describe the differences and similarities between finding out you are HIV-positive in South Africa and finding out you are HIV-positive in the United States.

4. Consider Khosi's decision to be sexually abstinent until she gets married. How much of her decision is based on fear of disease and how much of it is based on emotional factors?

## TRADITIONAL HEALING/WESTERN MEDICINE

1. What do you learn about traditional healing from reading this book? What are the different attitudes towards traditional healing portrayed in this book? Why does Khosi's family end up going to a traditional healer so often?

2. How do Khosi and her family feel about western medicine? Is western medicine the solution to their problems? Why or why not?

3. What is the conflict between western medicine and traditional healing? Is this conflict inevitable? Why or why not?

4. What are your attitudes towards traditional healing? Do you think it has some merit? Why or why not?

## OTHER THEMES

1. What is the place of "tradition" in this book? How does it conflict with modern life and modern values? Why do you think Khosi decides both have a place in her life?

2. Do you think Khosi will be successful incorporating traditional values with a modern lifestyle and modern beliefs? Will she be able to hold onto the past while going towards the future? Why or why not?

3. What is the role of religion in Khosi's life? In what ways does her religious background conflict with traditional healing? In what ways are they complementary?

## Literary Elements & Devices

*Characterization*—Which character do you identify with the most? Why? How would you describe these characters to somebody else?

*Point of View*—Consider Khosi's point of view and how she tells the story. What is her perspective on her experience? Do we ever get other people's point of view? How do their points of view differ from her perspective?

*Turning Points*—What are the novel's turning points? Where does it shift plot-wise? Emotionally?

*Foreshadowing*—Foreshadowing hints at events that occur later in the story, especially in the climax. Give an example of foreshadowing in *This Thing Called the Future*.

*Symbolism*—Symbols are objects that represent larger events, relationships, or ideas. What symbols can you find in *This Thing Called the Future*? What do they represent in the story?

*Magical realism*—Magical realism blends magical or spiritual elements into a realistic setting, suggesting a deeper reality than what we see on the surface. Find examples of magical realism in *This Thing Called the Future*. Why did the author use this technique?

## Activities

### ENGLISH

1. Examine the conflict between tradition and modernity in *This Thing Called the Future*. In what ways do Zulu traditional beliefs and values help and in what ways do they hinder the characters from solving the problems they encounter in the novel? In what ways do modern beliefs and values help and hinder the characters from solving their problems? Is Khosi's desire to combine traditional healing and the practice of western medicine realistic? Why or why not?
2. Consider the use of magical realism in *This Thing Called the Future*. Compare and contrast it to the use of magical realism in another work of literature, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" or Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis."
3. Analyze *This Thing Called the Future* as a coming-of-age novel. What makes it a coming-of-age novel? What classic coming-of-age elements does it exhibit and what does it lack?

### CREATIVE WRITING

1. Consider the kinds of research that went into writing a book like this. Do some research about somebody who is very different from you. Conduct interviews, read history books, etc. and write a story.

### HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES/CIVICS/POLITICAL SCIENCE

1. Assign roles for students to research and portray in a debate set in the year 2005. One student could pretend to be Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa, an infamous denier of the link between HIV and AIDS. Another student could pretend to be Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president. Another student could research and portray a *sangoma*, a traditional healer, while another could research and portray a medical doctor's position. Yet another student could research and portray former U.S. President George W. Bush's role in establishing and funding PEPFAR. Debate could center on the South African government's HIV-AIDS policy, American response to the African HIV-AIDS crisis, the problems posed for medical doctors in combating the epidemic, and other issues that arise through the student's research.
2. Write a letter to the American president. Should traditional healers receive PEPFAR funding? Why or why not? (Or write a letter to the South African president, supporting or rejecting the need to involve traditional healers in government initiatives to deal with the HIV-AIDS crisis).

### HEALTH/BIOLOGY/ETHICS

1. Write a brief paper about the HIV-AIDS crisis in southern Africa. How does *This Thing Called the Future* put a human face on the epidemic?
2. Consider Khosi's decision for abstinence so that she can remain HIV-negative until she gets married. Is her decision realistic and desirable? Why or why not? Would you make the same choice in the same situation? Why or why not?

## For Further Information

### BOOKS

- Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through Africa's AIDS Epidemic* by Jonny Steinberg
- The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa* by Helen Epstein
- Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* by Mark Mathabane
- Journey to Jo'Burg: A South African Story* by Beverley Naidoo and Eric Velasquez
- Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton

### DVDs

- Yesterday* (2004). Dir. Darrell Roodt.
- Tsotsi* (2005). Dir. Gavin Hood.
- Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995). Dir. Darrell Roodt.
- Cry Freedom* (1987). Dir. Richard Attenborough.

### WEBSITES

HIV-AIDS and South Africa:  
<http://www.avert.org/aidssouthafrica.htm>

South African History Online:  
<http://www.sahistory.org.za/>

South Africa Tourism:  
<http://www.southafrica.net/sat/content/en/us/home>

South Africa, the World Factbook:  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html>