The Bundu Bunch orphans. A community headman.
A peer of the realm. A national leader.
Some are more dumb than others. Some are not dumb at all.

Book I: Aiyasha's Bottomless Briefcase

A group of five-to-seven-year-old orphans from the Bundami valley in southern Africa call themselves the Bundu Bunch.
They enjoy learning about their surroundings. They wish they could also attend classes to learn to read and do sums so they can stop being called 'Dumb Orphans'.
Can the Bundu Bunch find a way of overcoming unfair treatment by the headman of their community with the help of Aiyasha, the fifteen-year-old girl who is the head of their orphan household?

Book II: Aiyasha's Appeal

Aiyasha makes two new friends from England as she faces an attempt on her life, becomes an illegal immigrant and seeks asylum. These friends also help her cope with the consequences of overseas aid cuts on the futures of her orphan charges: the Bundu Bunch.

Book III: Aiyasha's Magical Legacy

As an exile, Aiyasha watches from afar as her compatriots suffer in a society divided between poverty of the many and privilege of the few. Aiyasha is determined to do something to turn around the fortunes of her beloved country. She has to rely on her special gift, her wits and the various talents of the members of the Bundu Bunch, which were fostered in their early years, when they came to live with Aiyasha in the orphan hut in the Bundami valley.

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"DUMB" ORPHANS
The Bundu Bunch Trilogy
ALLAN LOW
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"Dumb" Orphans

Orphans have been hidden victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa. Cabrini Ministries staff working in the region observed the following: 'After 20 years of sickness and dying and then 10 years of recovery with antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), families have disintegrated. Orphans, many thousands of them, are struggling to raise themselves with no sense of belonging to a family, a group, a Nation. They are learning that adults often take advantage of them, encroach on their homesteads, abuse them physically and sexually, or just don't have time for them because the adults themselves are overburdened with mouths to feed.' (www.cabriniministries.org/category/articles/).

This story is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of children who have lived through such experiences and survived and even prospered.

“Dumb” Orphans

The Bundu Bunch Trilogy

ALLAN LOW

Illustrated by Elizabeth Sparg

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To the memory of Anne, Mum, Gogo

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…...children collecting brushwood, tending herds, cutting grass for the cattle……but the child's biggest role is in the home: he is responsible for supplying water. While everyone else is still asleep, little boys are rising in the darkness and running to springs, ponds, rivers – for water.

Ryszard Kapuściński,
The Shadow of the Sun: My African Life

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BOOK I

Aiyasha's
Bottomless Briefcase

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Chapter 1

My orphan family

I sat on the upper slopes of our valley and watched the children pour out of the community school below me.

'What have they learnt in their classes today that I have missed?' I wondered wistfully. 'There was a time when I could have been in those classes, and my future could have been equally as bright as theirs.'

Then the sun came out from behind the clouds and washed away the shadows that had been on the land and in my mind. I looked up at the grassy slopes above me and the rocky mountain above them. I looked at the crop fields and the glinting river below me and my heavy mood began to lighten.

I shook my head and said to myself, 'There is so much to explore and discover in this valley with my fellow orphans. Maybe I can learn enough to do well, even without any classes.'

Then I heard the booming voice of the headman of our community telling the children not to linger, but to hurry back to their homes to help their mothers

gather water and firewood and cook the food, and my head hung heavy again.

* * *

I am Sipho. I'm an orphan, but I think of myself as a lucky orphan as I have a family of my own. I am seven years old. I live with my sister Jabu and our five cousins, who are also orphans. We look after ourselves. Well, almost. Aiyasha, who is fifteen, is in charge. We mostly do what she tells us to.

I like living with my sister and cousins. We are all about the same age. My sister Jabu is six. Our eldest cousin is Monica. She is seven, like me. Then there are the two boy twins, Langa and Jacob, who are five. Sakhile is also six and her brother Luke is five.

We don't have much. No Lego, no puzzles, no board games, no toys, no books, no football. But we have ourselves and our surroundings. We love to explore together and discover things about the valley in which we live. The valley is called Bundami and is in the southern part of Africa. The river, the rocks, the animals and plants in the Bundami valley constantly give us new things to wonder at, to test and to admire. Because we spend so much time exploring the wild, we call ourselves the Bundu Bunch.

There is also a toddler in the household. She is not a member of the Bundu Bunch because she is too

young to join our explorations. She is just two years old and we call her Elah. This is short for Elahlekile, which means lost. My sister Jabu found Elah down by the river a year ago when we went to fetch water.

'Hey, Sipho,' called Jabu. 'There is a small child here in the long grass. She is wrapped in a blanket and seems to be asleep.' We looked for the owner of the child and called out. But there was nobody around.

'Poor little thing,' I said, 'not being wanted by anyone in her family.'

'Poor family,' responded Jabu, 'to feel they have no alternative but to abandon their child.'

Then Jabu said, 'I am going to take this little child to the community leader. You must finish filling the water containers and take them back up the hill by yourself.'

This was typical of my bossy sister Jabu. She liked to be the playmaker, deciding on what action we should take and who was to do what and how.

My sister has fixed ideas about how things should be and gets upset when others don't agree with her. But what I like about my sister is that she never stays upset for long and is soon laying down the law again on another matter.

I didn't argue with Jabu on this occasion. Using the blanket to secure the now-stirring child onto her back, she gave me one of her knowing smiles and set off towards the leader's compound.

One of the water containers was already full and it didn't take me long to fill the other one. Getting the two ten-litre containers back up the hill on my own was another matter. You should try carrying ten litres of water uphill. I had to take one container up the slope a few yards, put it down and then come back for the other one.

I made good progress on the flat valley bottom but, when I got to the steeper slopes of the valley sides, I had to go through maize fields. There was a path, but it was narrow and the maize was much taller than me and there was no breeze in the maize tunnels. There were ten terraces of maize fields before our hut. I was getting hotter and slower. By the time I reached the end of the third terrace, I started to wish I had argued about this plan with my sister. It was unfair to expect me to do this alone. I thought of emptying half the water to lighten the load, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. To us, every drop of water is precious and I didn't want to face what the others would say and think if I came back with half-full containers.

Jacob I didn't worry about. He was happy-go-lucky and wouldn't say anything. Jacob's twin brother, Langa, and Luke would whine for a bit, but soon focus back on their latest project. The girls would be less forgiving. Monica would worry that the maize porridge would not be properly cooked. Jabu would

criticise me for not making an alternative plan, and Sakhile would ask how much I proposed allocating between washing versus cooking versus drinking.

Aiyasha, I knew, would sort it all out and be sympathetic. But I thought it best to avoid the flack.

* * *

When I got to our hut, I was exhausted and sat in the open shelter beside it. This, like the hut, had a tin roof which gave shelter from the sun; but, unlike the hut itself, it did not heat up like an oven from the moment the sun rose above the mountain. We called this the stoep. This is where the cooking pot was kept, where we ate our meals, met together and talked and laughed together.

Jabu had been back a little while. She poured water from one of the containers into the cooking pot, which she then put on the fire that Jacob had lit with the wood he had brought down from the forest.

I saw the dust cloud first. Then came the sound of the old engine and then the gruff voice of our leader as he got out of the truck.

'Urgh, you, Aiyasha. You will take care of this baby. The father has left the community and the mother has been taken to the clinic. You will keep it here in the orphan hut.'

I looked at Jabu. She looked surprised and angry.

She whispered to Aiyasha. ‘We can’t manage the child here. That is why I took her to the headman’s house, so he could find someone in the community who would be willing to take care of her.’

‘It’s OK, Jabu,’ said Aiyasha. ‘We will look after her.’

Aiyasha knew it was no use trying to confront our community headman. We had to do what he decided, always.

The headman lifted the whimpering child roughly out of the back of the truck and thrust her into Aiyasha’s arms.

‘Keep this until its mother comes back,’ he instructed, then he returned to his truck and drove off.

Elah’s mother never did come back, so Elah became the youngest member of our orphan family.