



Source: Scotsman, The {Books}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 10, July 2010
Page: 7
Area: 254 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 46300 Daily
BRAD info: page rate £5,573.00, scc rate £26.52
Phone: 0131 620 8620
Keyword: Alexander McCall Smith

> durrants

Nairobi's own sweet Charity



DIZZY WORMS

BY MICHAEL HOLMAN
Polygon, 240pp, £9.99

Review by
JIM FERGUSON

MICHAEL Holman, like Alexander McCall Smith, is one of those writers born in Africa whose work is affectionately infused with a sense of the spirit – and the potential – of the continent. Indeed, Charity Mupanga, the protagonist of Holman's *Last orders at Harrod's* trilogy, bears more than a passing resemblance to McCall Smith's redoubtable Mma Ramotswe. As Richard E Grant points out on the cover: "If Precious Ramotswe is the heartbeat of Gaborone, her kindred spirit in Nairobi is Charity Mupanga".

Yet to assume that Holman is merely attempting to replicate his friend's success would be to do a great disservice to his work. Indeed, were this to be the case, McCall Smith would hardly be writing the screenplay for a film based on Holman's trilogy. The structure of *Dizzy Worms* is neatly bookended with the funeral of one of the secondary characters, a cantankerous Old Colonial – the "Oldest Member of the Thumaiga Club" – whose caustic observations on the past, present and future of the East African state of Kuwashi, punctuate the plot.

The narrative follows the fate of Charity Mupanga – the astute

and domineering maternal proprietor of Harrod's International Bar (and Nightspot), which provides a central location around which the story unfolds.

When the city's favourite watering hole is served with a closure order under the Kireba City Council Health and Safety regulations, Charity has just seven days to appeal.

Her chances of success seem small. Elections are imminent and the district of Kireba, located on the edge of the city, is due to become a showcase of President Josiah Nduka's internationally funded "slum rehabilitation programme". President Nduka promises his foreign donors that his cronies will not be the beneficiaries of the project; the existing residents of Kireba, who will be provided with the new homes, are the ones who stand to gain. Charity has good reason to suspect ulterior motives.

Enlisting the help of her friend Edward Furniver, an enlightened ex-pat who manages a social fund grandly titled the Kireba People's Co-operative Bank, she sets out to thwart the machinations of Mayor Guchu, who is a man with an agenda. As readers of the previous books in the series will be aware, Guchu is heavily implicated in the death of Charity's husband David, a bishop who spoke out courageously against the corruption he saw ruining the new state.

The ensuing light-hearted adventure involves at various points a missing goat, an intriguing card game and ambitious proposals for state-of-the-art

toilets. The story is interwoven with humour, romantic interest and an ambitious revenge plot by the street boys of the slum to sabotage Mayor Guchu's beloved status symbol – his Rolls-Royce. There are delicate touches too,

not least in his handling of the spread of the Aids virus: although this might take its toll among his characters, Holman doesn't allow it to dominate his portrait of African life.

Holman is not blind, however, to some of the continent's habitual political failings. This is made clear in the title itself, explained in the introductory extract from *In Search of Africa: A Foreign Correspondent Looks Back*, by Ekim Namloh.

"What do you get when you shake up a can of worms?" the American ambassador asks Namloh when questioned over the 35th reshuffle of the country's cabinet in ten years. "Dizzy worms, Ekim, dizzy worms."

Holman himself grew up in Zimbabwe and, after graduating, lived and worked as a foreign correspondent in Zambia, before returning to the UK to take the role of Africa editor for the *Financial Times*.

His experience, knowledge of and affection for the country of his birth provide the expertise and the insight for a searing indictment of the aid culture that has become a major industry on this continent.

The book is not without its flaws. The denouement over the identity of Dolly is unnecessarily laboured and the love interest, involving journalist Cecil Pearson and aid worker Lucy Gomball, is curiously passionless.

No doubt such flaws will be addressed in the forthcoming film. But it will be interesting to see if the more important message in Holman's book survives in the adaptation.

The light-hearted adventure involves a missing goat, a card game and plans for state-of-the-art toilets

