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Corruption, hope and charity

By James Urquhart

LAST ORDERS AT HARRODS

by Michael Holman

Polygon £9.99, 279 pages

Michael Holman's excellent and witty debut novel is set in Kuwisha, a collapsing East African nation that occupies a space in the imagination somewhere between Kenya and Tanzania. *Last Orders at Harrods*, written by the FT's former Africa editor, is thronged with characters whose vitality demands attention. Charity Mupanga, the feisty owner of Harrods International Bar (and Nightspot), and her gentle fiance, Edward Furniver, who runs a community bank, are unswervingly honest. Most of the other players are slithering down the greasy pole from the slightly devious to the magnificently corrupt.

Kuwisha's brazenly nepotistic President Nduka is rigging his final election before retirement. His crony Mayor Guchu effortlessly sidesteps persistent allegations of diverting UN funds and the disappearance of a vast amount of maize. Both deftly outmanoeuvre the ineffectual British High Commission mandarins while stage-managing a visit from Hardwick Hardwicke, the inept World Bank president.

Charity Mupanga runs Harrods with the assistance of the Mboya Boys United Football Club. This gang of mostly pre-teen thugs is led by 14-year-old Titus Ntoto. He runs errands for Charity, who mothers him with kitchen scraps, stern hygiene rules and the odd spelling lesson. In return, Harrods enjoys the Mboya Boys' vigilant protection. A minor threat to Harrods International Bar is the president's plan to raze Kireba, a massive slum surrounding Harrods. More worrying are the crisp letters from Fanshawe and Fanshawe, a firm of London solicitors that is suing her for breaching the trademark of their famous client's name.

Pompous lawyers, backsliding politicians, a cholera outbreak, an accidental riot - Holman binds together his disparate stories in the figure of Cecil Pearson, a venal hack finishing his tour of duty. Pearson's careless copy had inadvertently betrayed the bar's name and address in the first place, by quoting Charity in an article for London's Financial News "or FN, as it was known".

Michael Holman clearly cannot resist the occasional puff for the paper he served for two decades, but Pearson (which happens to be the name of the FT's parent company),

gradually emerges as the vainglorious accidental villain of the piece. Pearson had a smattering of noble intentions when posted to Kuwisha. Three years later, his exit strategy is timeless in its imperative: he wants to impress a girl. Lucy Gomball, the earnest representative of WorldFeed and a Harrods regular, had scoffed at his notion that his articles helped Kuwisha. Piqued, the optimistic Pearson settles on a hare-brained scheme to acquire proof of the president's election-fixing - which would give him a valedictory scoop, strike a blow for multiparty electoral freedom and wow Lucy.

Holman's debut has all the verve of Patrick Neate's youthful mid-African romps while maintaining a degree of gravity not often found in such exuberant satires. The book is elevated by Holman's skill at pitching entertaining characters into his tightly constructed, plausible plot, without belittling the East African reality that underpins the comedy. His close detail impresses, from the local knowledge of how Edward Furniver's micro-credit scheme works to the reason why all of the city's traffic lights have been vandalised. Harrods International Bar, with its ex-pats, locals, Tusker beers and pungent fried chicken necks, resonates strongly.

Last Orders at Harrods is full of incongruous truths about the nature of corruption and the conditions imposed by foreign donors, as well as jibes about the laziness of foreign correspondents (Pearson "failed to overcome the disadvantage of being on the spot" when his accurate report of a riot was trumped by his absent colleagues filing stories about a rumoured coup).

Holman's plot embraces a self-mocking, anticolonial slant that subtly queries the purported benefits of donor-imposed structural adjustment. The World Bank passes joyously into popular parlance as a phrase for "broken"; fridges that did not chill beer were "World Bank", as were cars with flat batteries. Holman's levity is refreshing but never tries to mask the sobering reality that, for most East Africans, "life was fragile, cheap, dangerous and unpredictable". Charity's stark nightmare, that the orphans one day will eat us all, lingers longer than Pearson's ludic plots.

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