

Laughing at the hyenas

Last Orders at Harrods: An African Tale.

By Michael Holman. *Polygon*; 288 pages; £9.99

“BUY this book or we shit in your car.” Two African slum boys use a version of this threat—to great effect—as a way of fending off the police in Michael Holman’s beautifully realised comic first novel, which may be one reason why he is planning to repeat it next month at the launch in Kenya of “Last Orders at Harrods”. But there is more to Mr Holman’s words than mere coprophilia.

The two rats in question, Titus Ntoto and Cyrus Rutere, live in Kireba, a shantytown that abuts the capital of Kuwisha, a fictional African country. The boys have been taken under the wing of Charity Mupanga, the widowed owner of Harrods International Bar (and Night-spot), Kireba’s most popular watering hole. Charity is a true African heroine in the mould of Alexander McCall Smith’s Precious Ramotswe. She copes with erratic supplies of Worcestershire sauce (the secret ingredient in her recipe for fried chicken necks), takes floods and cholera in her stride, and marshals Ntoto, Rutere and the other local boys who have been orphaned by AIDS into peeling vegetables, washing dishes, running errands and learning to read.

They, in turn, pledge their support (and some ingenious assistance) when she begins receiving threatening letters from a firm of London lawyers claiming exclusive rights to the use of the first name of her late father, Harrods Tangwenya, gardener to successive British high commissioners for nearly 20 years. The lawyers try their hardest to bring Harrods to the brink of disaster, until the two slum boys help save the day.

“Last Orders”, the first of a trilogy

that will explore the rise and rise of Titus Ntoto, has given Mr Holman, who retired three years ago as Africa editor of the *Financial Times*, the chance to cast a more sardonic eye over the inspiring and ever-infuriating continent in which he was born—and the chance to do some good as well.

In Kenya, books are often too costly for African readers. So Mr Holman has persuaded his publishers to bring out a special edition of 1,000 copies of “Last Orders at Harrods”, which will be printed locally and sold by Nairobi’s street children for 200 Kenyan shillings (\$2.65), about a tenth of the usual price. The kids will keep the proceeds. Be warned, though: they are tough little salesmen. So look out for your car.

