

Folk Tales to Fund Essential Healthcare

Author: [IWPR Srdan](#)

Alexander McCall Smith donates royalties from his latest book to the Murambinda hospital.

People living with AIDS in one of Zimbabwe's poorest regions are about to benefit from the worldwide success of best-selling Scottish author Alexander McCall Smith.

The Edinburgh-based writer, whose "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" series of novels about Botswana has sold more than six million copies worldwide, is donating all the royalties from his latest book to Murambinda hospital, in the Buhera district, which is in the grip of famine and a runaway HIV/AIDS epidemic.

While precise estimates are not yet available, McCall Smith's new title, "The Girl Who Married a Lion", is expected to raise more than 100,000 pounds (around 193,000 US dollars) to help the three doctors and 30 nurses who serve the 300,000 poverty-stricken people of Buhera.

The missionary-founded hospital, some 250 kilometres southeast of Harare, the Zimbabwe capital, is one of the few in the country administering free anti-retroviral drugs to HIV-positive pregnant women as a way of preventing mother-to-child transmission of the virus, and also to other categories of people who are HIV-positive.

McCall Smith has employed Miss Precious Ramotswe, the fictional heroine of the detective series he set in Botswana, to write the introduction to the new book, a collection of 40 African folk tales that he gathered mainly among the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe.

McCall Smith said he got involved with Murambinda in February 2004 after he met one of the hospital's fundraisers at a charity event in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital.

That evening he was playing the bassoon in the amateur orchestra of which he is a member. Called "The Really Terrible Orchestra", it is in great demand for charity events.

"I had agreed to do the charity event that evening with the Scottish Zimbabwean Association, and part of the money was going to the Friends of Murambinda charity," he told IWPR. "They [the charity] were present, and I decided then to make them the beneficiaries of 'The Girl Who Married a Lion'."

He said the hospital desperately needs every kind of resource – drugs, above all; supplementary nutrition for the chronically ill; basics such as bandages and dressings, theatre gloves and surgical equipment; salaries for local outreach officers working with the orphans of people who have died from AIDS; and top-ups to the salaries of low paid doctors and nurses.

"The Girl Who Married a Lion" draws on the rich oral traditions of the Ndebele and other southern African peoples. But although he was born in Zimbabwe, McCall Smith's interest in African folk tradition did not develop until long afterwards.

He recalled, "I was working at the University of Swaziland [as a law lecturer] when I became interested in the African traditional stories. It must have been sparked by something I read or heard at the time – so it

doesn't come from boyhood, but from much later on.

"So I went out into the bush and spoke to the grandmothers and people like that who pass the stories on. I also went to schools and got stories from the children, which was wonderful. I then re-told them in a way I hoped would be more accessible to outside readers."

The stories abound with examples of the Ndebele people's traditional respect for their environment and the other living creatures they share it with, with particular care for sustainable farming and the communal sharing of food and resources during times of drought.

While McCall Smith will not be drawn on Africa's fraught politics, he describes the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a disaster that is draining the resources of already poor nations at a pivotal stage in their development.

More than one in four of Zimbabwe's people aged 15 to 49 are HIV-positive and therefore susceptible to early death in the absence of anti-retroviral drugs.

According to conservative estimates by UNAIDS, the Geneva-based Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, an estimated 170,000 Zimbabweans died from AIDS-related illnesses in 2003 alone, the most recent period for which figures are available. That works out at 3,270 deaths a week.

It is now commonplace in Zimbabwe for grandmothers, from the same generation as those who told McCall Smith their folk tales, to care for ten or more orphaned grandchildren after sons and daughters have died from AIDS-related illnesses.

McCall Smith's decision to ensure that his literary work steers clear of Africa's grimmer problems, such as AIDS, is a deliberate choice. "The impression that people normally get of Africa is one of total bleakness, and I feel that possibly encourages people in the West to just disengage and choose not to help," he said.

"Here, I am writing about African people in a fictitious way and the picture I present lets people see that ordinary life and people in Africa have many great and very attractive qualities."

He said his book presents one particular slice of African life in a positive way that he hopes will persuade people to care more about the continent and its people.

McCall Smith was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, in 1948. He went to school there before moving to Scotland to study law. Later, he returned to Africa and eventually settled in Botswana, where he helped found the law school at the University of Botswana.

Returning again to Scotland, he became Professor of Medical Ethics at the University of Edinburgh, which has one of the most prestigious medical schools in the world. He also served as vice-chair of Britain's Human Genetics Commission and chair of the British Medical Ethics Committee.

He recently stepped down to take a three-year sabbatical to concentrate on writing, film and book promotion, and charity work, mostly with HIV/AIDS organisations.

Alexander McCall Smith's "The Girl Who Married A Lion" is published by Canongate, Edinburgh.

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