Cecily van Gend

In a country where we are confronted on a daily basis with frightening Aids statistics, such as the fact that one in five South Africans under the age of fifty is HIV positive, it is appropriate that this year's Alan Paton Prize for non-fiction should have been shared by two accounts of what it means to live with Aids: **Aidsafari**, by journalist Adam Levine, and **Witness to Aids** by Edwin Cameron. According to the judges, the prize was awarded to these two men for 'their courage and searing honesty, reflected in highly personal, albeit different accounts of facing and coming to terms with Aids.'

In the 1990s, Alan Levin 'wangled his way' through Africa, seeking out extraordinary people, visiting remote places and documenting ancient traditions in a changing world. These experiences were collected together into a book, **Wonder safaris**. **Aidsafari** details a different journey - the inward journey of his coming to terms with his condition, and his slow progress back to life from a near-death-bed. He gives an account of his wildly promiscuous gay life, which led to the contracting of the condition, his initial denialism, until, close to death, he was forced to face the reality. His story is told, in the words of the blurb, 'with searing honesty, tender prose and outrageous humour'. As the blurb describes it, 'it is not only a guide for coping with life-threatening illnesses', but offers 'remarkable insights about love, lostness and life, and how rarely it fails to surprise us'.

Edwin Cameron, Rhodes scholar, Aids activist and supreme court judge, was one of the first public figures to come out about his gayness and his HIV-positive status. In **Witness to Aids** he describes his experiences of living with Aids, his decision to go public, and his confrontation with his own mortality. As an Aids activist, he turns his powerful intellect to the harsh realities of the disease, to such topics as the denialism which is crippling all attempts to bring it under control, and the stigma attached to those who are open about their condition. 'It is an epidemic that affects so many tens of millions of Africans', he has said, 'but it is an epidemic of silence.' His coming out was an attempt to break this silence. 'It is only by creating conditions in which people can speak out without fear that we can begin to end the silence surrounding South Africans living with Aids and HIV.'

Both books offer a message of hope: Aids is not a death sentence. Both men are living proof of the fact that, with the proper management, it is possible to live full and productive lives. But both Levine and Cameron freely admit that they are of the fortunate few: the ones who have medical insurance which makes the ARV drugs possible. For this reason, they have felt obliged to speak for the masses who are denied their privilege.

Also on the shortlist for the Alan Paton Prize was a third book dealing with Aids: **Khabzela: the life and times of a South African**. Written by journalist Liz McGregor, it is an exploration of contempory black youth culture, and the causes leading to the tragic death of the young radio DJ, of Aids. While this does offer further insight into the disease, it still does not explore the lives of the countless masses living in the rural areas, the experiences of those living in abject poverty and without hope. Their suffering has until now gone largely unrecorded.

Recently, however, I stumbled on a remarkable book, quite by accident. It has received very little attention, and has slipped onto the shelves of the local bookshops with no fanfare. This is an enormous pity, because it deserves to be read by every South African. I picked it up by chance, and was blown away. It is **Father Michael's lottery**, by Johan Steyn.

Steyn appears to be a very unusual man: a medical doctor who is also a gifted writer, and who has spent his life working in rural hospitals in Africa. I think there must be a good deal of him in his central character, Morgan, also a doctor in a hospital in a village somewhere in Africa. Morgan is impatient and rebellious, totally dedicated to his profession (you could call it a vocation), but with a great sense of humour and a tremendous empathy for his patients, and for the wildlife and the landscape of Africa.

He does not suffer fools gladly. The thorn in his flesh is the hospital superintendent, Holmes, the epitome of the bungling bureaucrat, totally devoid of understanding and compassion. To Holmes, and his sidekick, Thunderbird, a paved carpark is more important than antibiotics for the patients. Their cost-cutting measures lead to a reduction in the kitchen staff and a consequent outbreak of salmonella, with a tragic outcome.

Morgan's ongoing battle with Holmes is one of the threads of the tale. There are others: the book is a series of vignettes, painting a picture of a community surrounded by poverty and disease, but facing life philosophically and with humour.

There is the puzzling riddle of Shrodinger's cat; the patient who survives an encounter with a 44-gallon drum; and Naledi, brought in because she is thought to be dying of Aids, who turns out not to have Aids at all. There is the Wild Man, who should be in a mental institution; and Smirnoff, so-called because of his liking for the bottle. There is Mary, who is dying of Aids, but who spends her last days in quiet serenity, studying the owls and yellow billed kites from her wheelchair on the hospital verandah.

And there is Rastodika, the tall African who strides through the bush, but who now needs a kidney. Morgan along with Father Michael, the village priest, aided and abetted by Rachel, the village prostitute with the proverbial heart of gold, and Dorcas, the shebeen queen, devise a Machiavellian plot to raise the funds for a transplant for Rastodika by persuading the rich Mr B to part with his cash.

This is an angry tale, but it is tempered with humour, ranging from a gentle smile to savage farce, and is filled with poignancy and compassion. It resonates with the richness of the African landscape and its wildlife, particularly the birds. Above all, it is a beautifully understated love story.

In the cover blurb, Edwin Cameron describes it as 'a great-spirited novel that tells its tale - about a committed doctor's search for more "happy endings" in all-too-unpromising circumstances - with heart and passion and hope. The telling is fired by Johan Steyn's fervour for justice for poor patients in Africa, but also by his sense of humour and his love of the people, the birds, the animals and the vistas of our continent.' If you read only one book this year, it should be **Father Michael's lottery**.