

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

by Alexander McCall Smith

About the Book

This first novel in Alexander McCall Smith's widely acclaimed "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" series tells the story of the delightfully cunning and enormously engaging Precious Ramotswe, who is drawn to her profession to "help people with the problems in their lives." Immediately upon setting up shop in a small storefront in Gaborone, she is hired to track down a missing husband, uncover a con man, and follow a wayward daughter. But the case that tugs at her heart, and lands her in danger, is that of a missing eleven-year-old boy, who may have been snatched by witch doctors.

Praise for the Book

"One of the best, most charming, honest, hilarious and life-affirming books to appear in years."

— *The Plain Dealer*

"Smart and sassy . . . Precious' progress is charted in passages that have the power to amuse or shock or touch the heart, sometimes all at once."

— *Los Angeles Times*

"One of the most entrancing literary treats of many a year. . . . A tapestry of extraordinary nuance and richness."

— *The Wall Street Journal*

"The Miss Marple of Botswana."

— *The New York Times Book Review*

"The author's prose has the merits of simplicity, euphony and precision. His descriptions leave one as if standing in the Botswana landscape. This is art that conceals art. I haven't read anything with such alloyed pleasure for a long time."

— **Anthony Daniels,**
The Sunday Telegraph

Courtesy of Anchor Books

About the Author

Alexander McCall Smith

1948-

Updated: 08/22/2007

Personal Information: Born 1948, in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); married; children: two daughters.

Education: Studied law in Scotland.

Avocational Interests: Plays bassoon in Really Terrible Orchestra.

E-mail: alexander@alexandermccallsmith.co.uk.

Career: Educator and writer. Professor of medical law at Edinburgh University. Taught law at University of Botswana; helped create a criminal code for Botswana. Human Genetics Commission of the United Kingdom (vice chairman), UNESCO (member, International Bioethics Commission).

Awards: Saga Award for Wit, 2003, for *The Full Cupboard of Life*; Scotland on Sunday/Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Award, 2003; British Book Awards Author of the Year, and Crime Writers' Association Dagger in the Library Award, both 2004, both for "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" series; Commander of the British Empire (CBE), 2007, for services to literature.

WRITINGS

NONFICTION

- (Editor, with Tony Carty) *Power and Manoeuvrability*, Q Press (Edinburgh, Scotland), 1978.
- (With John Kenyon Mason) *Butterworths Medico-Legal Encyclopedia*, Butterworths (Boston, MA), 1987.
- (Editor, with Elaine Sutherland) *Family Rights: Family Law and Medical Advances*, Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh, Scotland), 1990.
- (With John Kenyon Mason) *Law and Medical Ethics*, 3rd edition, Butterworths (Austin, TX), 1991.
- (With Kwame Frimpong) *The Criminal Law of Botswana*, Juta (Cape Town, South Africa), 1992.
- (Editor, with Michael A. Menlowe) *The Duty to Rescue: The Jurisprudence of Aid*, Dartmouth (Brookfield, VT), 1993.
- (Editor, with Colin Shapiro) *Forensic Aspects of Sleep*, Wiley (New York, NY), 1997.
- (With Daniel W. Shuman) *Justice and the Prosecution of Old Crimes: Balancing Legal, Psychological, and Moral Concerns*, American Psychological Association (Washington, DC), 2000.
- (With Alan Merry) *Errors, Medicine, and the Law*, Cambridge University Press (New York, NY), 2001.

“NO. 1 LADIES’ DETECTIVE AGENCY” SERIES

- *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, D. Philip (Cape Town, South Africa), 1998, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Tears of the Giraffe*, Polygon (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2000, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Morality for Beautiful Girls*, Polygon (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2001, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*, Polygon (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2002, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Full Cupboard of Life*, Polygon (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2003, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2004.
- *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Miracle at Speedy Motors*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2008.

“SUNDAY PHILOSOPHY CLUB” SERIES

- *The Sunday Philosophy Club*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Right Attitude to Rain*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Careful Use of Compliments*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 2007.

“VON IGELFELD” SERIES

- *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Polygon (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2003, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005.

Also the omnibus *The 2 1/2 Pillars of Wisdom*, 2002.

“SCOTLAND STREET” SERIES

- *44 Scotland Street*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005
- *Espresso Tales: The Latest from 44 Scotland Street*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2006
- *Love over Scotland*, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Also author of *The World According to Bertie*, 2008.

FOR CHILDREN

- *The Perfect Hamburger*, illustrated by Laszlo Acs, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1982.
- *Film Boy*, illustrated by Joanna Carey, Methuen (London, England), 1988.
- *Mike’s Magic Seeds*, illustrated by Kate Shannon, Young Corgi (London, England), 1988.

- *Suzy Magician*, Young Corgi (London, England), 1990.
- *The Muscle Machine*, illustrated by Terry McKenna, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1995.
- *The Bubblegum Tree*, illustrated by Georgien Overwater, Hippo (London, England), 1996.
- *The Popcorn Pirates*, illustrated by Georgien Overwater, Hippo (London, England), 1999.
- *The Perfect Hamburger and Other Delicious Stories*, illustrations by Laura Rankin, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Author of many other children's books, including *The White Hippo*, Hamish Hamilton; *Marzipan Max*, Blackie; *The Ice-Cream Bicycle*, Viking Read Alone; *The Doughnut Ring*, Hamish Hamilton; *Paddy and the Ratcatcher*, Heinemann; and *The Princess Trick*, Puffin.

“AKIMBO” SERIES FOR CHILDREN

- *Akimbo and the Elephants*, illustrated by LeUyen Pham, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Akimbo and the Lions*, illustrated by LeUyen Pham, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Akimbo and the Crocodile Man*, illustrated by LeUyen Pham, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Akimbo and the Snakes*, illustrated by LeUyen Pham, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.

“HARRIET BEAN” SERIES FOR CHILDREN

- *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, Blackie (London, England), 1990, illustrated by Laura Rankin, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean*, illustrated by Laura Rankin, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats*, illustrated by Laura Rankin, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.

“MAX AND MADDY” SERIES FOR CHILDREN

- *Bursting Balloons Mystery*, illustrated by Georgien Overwater, Hippo (London, England), 1997, published as *Max and Maddy and the Bursting Balloons Mystery*, illustrated by Macky Pamintuan, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Max and Maddy and the Chocolate Money Mystery*, illustrated by Macky Pamintuan, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2007.

OTHER

- *Children of Wax: African Folk Tales*, Interlink Book (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Heavenly Date and Other Stories*, Canongate (Edinburgh, Scotland), 1995.
- *The Girl Who Married a Lion and Other Tales from Africa*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Dream Angus: The Celtic God of Dreams* (novel), Canongate (New York, NY), 2006.

Media Adaptations: The story “Children of Wax” was made into an animated film; other stories by Smith have been read on BBC Radio. A film adaptation of *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* will be directed by Anthony Minghella. Books by Smith have been adapted for audio, including *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, Recorded Books, 2006.

Sidelights

The diverse accomplishments of Alexander McCall Smith include a distinguished career as a legal scholar and more recent fame as a best-selling novelist. A professor of medical law at Edinburgh University, Smith has published many works on medical ethics and criminal law. For example, he has written about the duty to rescue and the impact of medical advances on parental rights. Smith also had numerous books of fiction for young children and short-story collections in print before he published a series of detective stories set in Botswana. The first installment, *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, became a best-selling novel in the United States after it was popularized by word of mouth. Readers and critics have been charmed by the stories, which are more about relationships, customs, and informal justice than sleuthing.

Born and raised in Britain’s southern central African colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Smith studied law in Edinburgh, Scotland. He then assisted in creating Botswana’s first law school, taught law at the University of Botswana, and wrote a criminal code for Botswana. Many years later, in 1992, he would publish *The Criminal Law of Botswana* with Kwame Frimpong. The book interested critics with its discussion of how the country’s criminal law is unlike others in southern Africa and how it resembles the Queensland Criminal Code of 1899. In the *Journal of African Law*, Simon Coldham advised that the book is “designed primarily for students,” while James S. Read wrote in the *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* that it provides “a short and selective introduction” to the subject.

Most of Smith’s legal scholarship treats subjects relating to medical and criminal law issues. He served as co-editor for and contributor to *Family Rights: Family Law and Medical Advances*, which contains seven essays about the legal and ethical implications of new medical capabilities that affect the creation of life as well as the extension of life. The essays consider the impact of laws on a family’s ability to make their own medical decisions. McCall’s contribution — “Is Anything Left of Parental Rights?” — addresses the increased autonomy of children.

Reviewers of *Family Rights* described the book as an in-depth treatment suitable for specialists and general readers. In the *Sydney Law Review*, Belinda Bennett recommended it as “a very readable collection” that avoids jargon and explains the necessary medical and scientific terminology. Jenny L. Urwin wrote in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* that it provides “interesting and thoughtful analysis” on a previously neglected subject. The book’s “interdisciplinary and comparative flavour” was noted in *Family Law* by Andrew Bainham, who also wrote: “The scholarship in this volume is, for the most part, as original as it is provocative and the two most impressive contributions are by the editors themselves.” Writing for *Nature*, Andrew Grubb commented on the context of Smith’s essay, saying: “Faced with this largely interventionist judicial attitude, it is left to Sandy McCall Smith to challenge its basis and to sound a note of caution.”

In *The Duty to Rescue: The Jurisprudence of Aid*, Smith compiles essays that discuss the moral and sometimes legal duty to provide aid. The writings cover theoretical and philosophical concerns, the possible ways of putting theory into practice, and the state’s duty to assist at-risk individuals. Reviewers commented that the work does a good job of addressing the diverse implications of making rescue a legal obligation. In a review for *Choice*, M.A. Foley called the book “rather comprehensive” and recommended it as a primary reference on the subject. In the *University of British Columbia Law Review*, Mitchell McInnes commented that Smith’s essay, “The Duty to Rescue and the Common Law,” raises an interesting and incomplete point on the subject of how a legal requirement would impact the formation of individual moral intuition. Celia Wells, writing in *Criminal Law Review*, noted: “This collection sweeps effortlessly across legal, jurisdictional, and philosophical boundaries posing on its way a series of fascinating questions and supplying some clues to the answers.”

Smith is also a prolific fiction writer. His books for children reflect both Western and non-Western cultural influences, and are mostly written for beginning readers. One example showing Smith’s African background is *The White Hippo*, a story set in Gambia about the unsuccessful efforts of villagers who want to protect an albino hippo from a white man claiming to be a photographer. In *The Perfect Hamburger*, an old man and a young boy join forces to try to save a family-run hamburger shop from being forced out of business by a chain restaurant.

The twenty-seven stories in *Children of Wax: African Folk Tales* are more suited for older children and storytellers. Smith collected the tales from old and young members of the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe. Featuring shape-changing animals and supernatural powers, they nevertheless contain realistic portrayals of hardship and danger. The stories often serve to condemn bad behaviors such as greed and unfounded trust and show that justice does not always follow wrongdoing. *Library Journal*’s Patricia Dooley warned that this is “emphatically not children’s pabulum.” In a review for *Choice*, P. Alden was not quite satisfied with the authenticity of Smith’s retelling, but said that the stories are “engaging” and that some are notable for their depiction of Zimbabwean women. A *Kirkus Reviews* writer admired the collection for its “evocative, involving narratives that reveal much about the culture from which they spring.”

The collection *Heavenly Date and Other Stories* is comprised of original stories by Smith that are international in scope. Among them, “Intimate Accounts” is set in a fictional world, “Bulawayo” happens in Southern Rhodesia, and others take place in Zurich, Lisbon, and Northern Queensland. The dark and funny pieces relate all kinds of strange dates, meetings, and exchanges between men and women. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Andrew Biswell made note of Smith’s inventiveness, stylistic range, and the influence of African oral storytelling on the collection.

Smith’s inspiration for *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* and the protagonist Mma Precious Ramotswe was his admiration for the women of Africa, according to an interviewer in *Publishers Weekly*. The novel and subsequent books in the series — including *Tears of the Giraffe*, *Morality for Beautiful Girls*, and *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* — are mostly about everyday life in Africa. The character of Mma Ramotswe is the dynamic central force behind these stories. A solidly built, divorced woman in her late thirties, she uses a tiny inheritance to start a detective agency. Her work takes place in the city of Gaborone and in cattle country near the Kalahari Desert. She deals mostly with family conflicts, including cheating husbands and employer-employee troubles. Mma Ramotswe runs a threadbare operation, but she does have an assistant, Mma Makutsi, a secretarial college graduate who has lost better jobs to her prettier classmates. Another key figure is J.L.B. Matekoni, a mechanic who assists them and later becomes engaged to Mma Ramotswe. The bride-to-be is a rather unconventional detective, one who also serves as family counselor, comments on manners and the lack of them, and is less concerned with legally administered justice than with doing right by her clients.

Mma Ramotswe, and Smith’s novels about her, have charmed reviewers, who have found the novels fresh, amusing, and affecting. In a *BookLoons* review, G. Hall described the first installment as “truly unique,” explaining that “the best part of the book is, in fact, not the mysteries but the stories of Precious and her father.” Mahinder Kingra of the *Baltimore City Paper* judged that in this “deceptively frivolous” novel there is “as honest and sympathetic a portrait of contemporary African life as [Nigerian writer Chinua] Achebe’s.” Kingra commented that the book is “one of those rare, unassuming novels that seems to contain all of life within its pages, and affirms life in telling its story.” Christine Jeffords noted on the *Best Reviews* Web site that Smith “succeeds in giving his story a lilting, lyrical flavor that makes the reader feel almost as if she is listening to a story being spun by a native tale-teller.” Comments on the first three novels by Anthony Daniels in the *Spectator* included the assessment: “I know nothing else like them.” Daniels credited Smith with an admirably simple writing style and the remarkable feat of “creating fictional characters who are decent, goodhearted but not in the least bit dull.” In addition, the critic advised that “for all their apparent simplicity, the Precious Ramotswe books are highly sophisticated.”

When Alida Becker reviewed the first three books for the *New York Times*, dubbing Mma Ramotswe the “Miss Marple of Botswana,” it dramatically increased public awareness of the series. As Becker noted, film rights for the series had already been sold to Anthony Minghella, director of *The English Patient*. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Matthew

Gurewitsch found *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* to be no less than “one of the most entrancing literary treats of many a year.” Gurewitsch exulted that Smith planned more stories about Mma Ramotswe and would be publishing a series of academic satires about a professor of Romance philology named Dr. Mortiz-Maria von Igelfeld.

Smith has continued his prodigious output of novels, mysteries, and children's works. For example, his “Harriet Bean” series of books for children begins with *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, first published in England in 1990 and then in the United States in 2006. This story was followed in 2006 by two new entries titled *Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats* and *The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean*. The series features Harriet and her five aunts — Veronica, Harmonica, Majolica, and twins Japonica and Thessalonika — who happen to be private detectives. In *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, the reader meets nine-year-old Harriet as she searches for the five aunts she has not yet met. Kathleen Meulen wrote in the *School Library Journal* that “all of them [the aunts] are likable characters with interesting personality quirks and gadgets.”

Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats finds Harriet and her aunts investigating what is making Mr. Fetlock's stable of racing horses so slow, with one horse even sitting down in the middle of a race. At her aunts' request, Harriet pretends to be a jockey to find out what is going on. “This was a fun, simple mystery to read,” wrote Teresa Hughes in *Resource Links*. “The ending reinforces the notion that good will triumph over bad and that cheaters never prosper!” The third entry in the series, *The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean*, features Harriet and Aunts Thessalonika and Japonica traveling to the American West to help Aunt Formica protect her cows from cattle rustlers. Pat Leach, writing in the *School Library Journal*, noted the story's “light touch and fun language.”

In his novel *Dream Angus: The Celtic God of Dreams*, which an *Internet Bookwatch* contributor referred to as “a buoyant and sensuously enjoyable fantasy,” Smith retells an ancient Celtic tale of the god of dreams and love. Son of the main Celtic god Dagda and a water nymph named Boann, Angus is sent to be raised by his brother. Angus brings out feelings of love when people see him, and he searches for his own true love as he flitters through people's dreams. “This slim, elegant volume is further evidence of his [the author's] consummate ability to blend wit, wisdom, and heart,” wrote Allison Block in *Booklist*. Referring to the novel as “an elegant contemporary reworking,” a *Publishers Weekly* contributor also noted that Angus “is nicely reimagined in this spare, polished work.”

The author continued his popular “No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency” series with the 2006 entry *Blue Shoes and Happiness*. This installment finds Mma Ramotswe dieting and Grace Makutsi buying pointy-toed shoes that are very impractical in her surroundings. In the meantime, a blackmail racket is being run by a newspaper advice columnist. Other cases involve a cook stealing food for her overweight husband and a doctor falsifying blood pressure readings. In a review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness* in *Booklist*, Block noted that it is the “ties [between people] and . . . [a] sense of community that continue to make this series so appealing to both genre and nongenre readers.” Gigi Lehman, writing in the *Miami Herald*, commented that Smith “understands that familiarity and even

formula are no excuse for laziness. That means that *Blue Shoes* throws a few new existential questions into the mix.”

The next book in the series, *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, sees Mma Makutsi engaged to a wealthy man and a mystery in which several patients die the same week in the exact same hospital bed. In addition, Mma Ramotswe’s husband, J.L.B. Matekoni, decides to try his hand at the detective business to make himself seem more exciting to his wife. “Fans of the series will appreciate the deeper characterizations in this eighth entry,” wrote *Booklist*’s Block. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor pointed out Smith’s “subtlety of touch and humane portrayal of figures at all levels of society.”

In 2005, *44 Scotland Street*, the first book in the “Scotland Street” series, was published. In the follow-up, titled *Espresso Tales: The Latest from 44 Scotland Street*, the author continues the misadventures of his Edinburgh Georgian townhouse residents, from a young boy trying to ditch the pink pants his mother makes him wear to another resident dating a nudist. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted that the author “delivers plenty of twists and turns as he skewers . . . [his characters’] puffery, . . . pretense, . . . tedium and self-defeating moves.” A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor referred to *Espresso Tales* as “a winning human comedy redeemed and energized by its author’s manifest affection for even the silliest of his creations.”

The Right Attitude to Rain is the 2006 entry in the “Sunday Philosophy Club” series. The series began in 2004 with *The Sunday Philosophy Club*, followed by *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*. These books feature Scottish American Isabel Dalhousie, who is in her forties and well-off due to an inheritance. Each novel revolves around various ethical dilemmas that Isabel, a moral philosopher, faces. In *The Right Attitude to Rain*, Isabel ponders what to do about a the fiancée of a wealthy man who is only out for his money. She must also deal with her own attraction to her niece’s former suitor, who is fourteen years younger than Isabel. Block, again writing in *Booklist*, noted that the protagonist’s “assessments of human foibles are both hilarious and shrewd.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, March 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, p. 44; October 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *Dream Angus: The Celtic God of Dreams*, p. 38; October 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *The Right Attitude to Rain*, p. 6; March 15, 2007, Allison Block, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, p. 4.
- *Bookseller*, March 23, 2007, Chris Fowler, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, p. 13; May 11, 2007, Becky Riddell, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, p. 13.
- *Children’s Bookwatch*, December, 2006, review of *The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean*.
- *Choice*, February, 1992, P. Alden, review of *Children of Wax: African Folk Tales*, p. 903; July/August, 1994, M.A. Foley, review of *The Duty to Rescue*, p. 1792.

- *Criminal Law Review*, January, 1996, Celia Wells, review of *The Duty to Rescue*, pp. 71-72.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, April 21, 2006, Jennifer Reese, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, p. 77; July 14, 2006, Jennifer Reese, review of *Espresso Tales: The Latest from 44 Scotland Street*, p. 85; September 22, 2006, Jennifer Reese, review of *The Right Attitude to Rain*, p. 97; September 29, 2006, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh, review of *Dream Angus*, p. 87; April 20, 2007, Tina Jordan, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, p. 65.
- *Family Law*, April, 1992, Andrew Bainham, review of *Family Rights*, p. 135.
- *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, July, 1993, review of *The Criminal Law of Botswana*, pp. 748-749.
- *Internet Bookwatch*, January, 2007, review of *Dream Angus*.
- *Journal of African Law*, autumn, 1992, Simon Coldham, review of *The Criminal Law of Botswana*, pp. 193-194.
- *Journal of Medical Ethics*, June, 1992, Jenny L. Urwin, review of *Family Rights*, pp. 108-109.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 15, 1991, review of *Children of Wax*, p. 793; February 15, 2006, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, p. 165; April 15, 2006, review of *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, p. 416; May 15, 2006, review of *Espresso Tales*, p. 492; March 15, 2007, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*.
- *Library Journal*, July, 1991, Patricia Dooley, review of *Children of Wax*, p. 106; March 15, 2006, Leslie Patterson, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, p. 68.
- *Miami Herald*, April 26, 2006, Gigi Lehman, "Happiness Is 'Blue Shoes and Happiness' by Alexander McCall Smith."
- *Nature*, June 27, 1991, Andrew Grubb, review of *Family Rights*, p. 707.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 27, 2002, Alida Becker, "Miss Marple of Botswana," p. 12.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 22, 2002, Charlotte Abbott, "From Africa, with Love," p. 75; May 22, 2006, review of *Espresso Tales*, p. 31, and review of *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, p. 53; August 21, 2006, review of *Dream Angus*, p. 49; August 28, 2006, review of *The Right Attitude to Rain*, p. 31; February 26, 2007, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive*, p. 54.
- *Resource Links*, October, 2006, Mavis Holder, review of *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, p. 12; December, 2006, Teresa Hughes, review of *Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats*, p. 20.
- *School Library Journal*, November, 2006, Will Marston, review of *Espresso Tales*, p. 171; December, 2006, Kathleen Meulen, review of *The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean*, p. 108; January, 2007, Pat Leach, review of *The Cowgirl Aunt of Harriet Bean*, p. 98.
- *Spectator*, September 1, 2001, Anthony Daniels, "Something Really New Out of Africa," pp. 36-37.
- *Sydney Law Review*, June, 1992, Belinda Bennett, review of *Family Rights*, pp. 253-255.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, November 3, 1995, Andrew Biswell, "Mr Self and Ms Ms," p. 25.

- *University of British Columbia Law Review*, winter, 1994, Mitchell McInnes, review of *The Duty to Rescue*, pp. 201-204.
- *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2002, Matthew Gurewitsch, "A Scholarly Scot Writes of African Intrigue," p. D8.

ONLINE

- *Alexander McCall Smith Home Page*, <http://www.alexandermccallsmith.co.uk> (July 23, 2007).
- *Baltimore City Paper Online*, <http://citypaper.com/> (September 5-11, 2001), Mahinder Kingra, review of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.
- *Best Reviews*, <http://thebestreviews.com/> (October 4, 2002), Christine Jeffords, review of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.
- *BookLoons*, <http://bookloons.com/> (December 12, 2002), G. Hall, review of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (July 23, 2007), Roz Shea, review of *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive* and *The Right Attitude to Rain*; Belinda Williams, review of *Blue Shoes and Happiness*; interview with author.
- *British Council Web site*, <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/> (July 24, 2007), biography of author.
- *Guardian Unlimited Books Web site*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/> (March 6, 2005), Kate Kellaway, "You Have to Make Sure Things Don't Go to Your Head" (interview with author).
- *Powells.com*, <http://www.powells.com/> (July 24, 2007), Dave Weich, "Red Bush Tea with Alexander McCall Smith."

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: You have written more than fifty books (from specialist titles such as *Forensic Aspects of Sleep* to children's books, including *The Perfect Hamburger*). Was *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* your first attempt at writing a mystery?

Alexander McCall Smith: *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is my first foray into this territory, although I do not think of it as a mystery. I like to think of it as a novel about a woman who happens to be a private detective. Mind you, I suppose that makes it a mystery . . . of a sort.

Q: Your detective, Precious Ramotswe, is a wonderfully unique character — a Botswana woman of traditional build who decides to become a professional private detective. Is Precious based on someone that you knew when you lived in Botswana or is she a creation of your imagination?

AMS: There is no particular person upon whom Precious Ramotswe is based, but there is an incident. Years ago I was in Botswana, staying with friends in a small town called Mochudi. A woman in the town wished to give my friends a chicken to celebrate Botswana National Day. I watched as this woman — traditionally built, like Mma Ramotswe — chased the chicken round the yard and eventually caught it. She made a clucking noise as she ran. The chicken looked miserable. She looked very cheerful. At that moment I thought that I might write a book about a cheerful woman of traditional build.

Q: Did you know immediately that the story of Mma Ramotswe would be the basis for an entire series of novels?

AMS: No, I did not. What happened is that I became so fond of the character that I could not let her go. To leave her where she was at the end of the first novel would have been rather like getting up and leaving the room in the middle of a conversation — rather rude.

Q: It is rare for an author to explore the evolution from amateur sleuth to professional detective, but one of the most appealing aspects of Precious’s character is that she doesn’t always know what she’s doing. In *Tears of the Giraffe* (the sequel to *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*), she even sends away for an instructional manual, *Principles of Private Detection*. What interests you about “education of the detective”?

AMS: Mma Ramotswe sets up her agency without any relevant experience. However, she does have intuition — in abundance — and that is very much more important than anything she could learn from a book. In fact, the passages she cites from *The Principles of Private Detection* are ultimately not particularly helpful to her, the point being that a person without any training can achieve great things if he or she has natural intelligence and ability. In many African countries, including Botswana, people have great respect for books and for the learning they contain. I would hope to point out that this should not obscure the importance of real, practical wisdom.

Q: Although Mma Ramotswe is confronted by greed, lust, dishonesty, and murderous intent, these novels are rather optimistic and often humorous in tone. How do you maintain this rather delicate balance?

AMS: I think that many people living in Africa — in circumstances which are sometimes quite difficult — maintain that balance themselves, and with great dignity. I think that I merely reflect what is there in those fine people.

Q: In the Precious Ramotswe novels, Botswana emerges as a vivid character and a wonderful place to live. What do you hope that American readers will discover about Africa while reading these novels?

AMS: I very much hope that American readers will get a glimpse of the remarkable qualities of Botswana. It is a very special country and I think that it particularly chimes with many of the values which Americans feel very strongly about — respect for the rule of law and for individual freedom. I hope that readers will also see in these portrayals of Botswana some of the great traditional virtues in Africa — in particular, courtesy and a striking natural dignity.

Q: How have these books been received in Botswana? What about other parts of Africa?

AMS: I was recently in Botswana and I was delighted to find that people there liked the books. I was worried that they might have reservations about an outsider writing about their society. No. They appear to like the way in which their world is portrayed. I believe that they recognize themselves in them.

Q: You were born in what is now known as Zimbabwe and you have also lived in Botswana, the United States, and Edinburgh. In what ways have your international travels informed your writing?

AMS: The fact that I have been all over the world means that I tend to use a variety of locations for my work. I think it is important for a writer to see other societies and attempt to understand them. Of course, you have to be careful. It is easy to get things wrong. One might put palm trees in the wrong place, for example in New York.

Q: Do you see the Precious Ramotswa books within the context of the tradition of the classic African novel of writers like Isak Dinesen and Chinua Achebe? Or do you see them as a revamping of the mystery genre?

AMS: I think that these books might be difficult to put into any particular tradition. They are obviously about Africa, but they are very different from the works you mention. Some people say that they remind them of the novels of that great Indian writer R.K. Narayan, which is very flattering, but I suppose I can see the similarities in the world which his and my books portray.

Q: Anthony Minghella, who has directed *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* recently optioned *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* to be a major motion picture. Will you be involved in the production in any way?

AMS: I hope that this goes ahead as planned. They have shown me a script, which I read with interest. They said that I could come and see the shooting, one of these days. I shall stand well back and I suspect that I shall say nothing.

Q: The Precious Ramotswe books have a devoted following. Have you ever had the opportunity to meet with the Mma Ramotswe fan club that is based in New York? What question are you most frequently asked by your fans?

AMS: There seem to be many fans of the books in the U.S.A. I receive wonderfully warm letters from American readers, which I greatly enjoy. As far as New York is concerned, there is a splendid group of readers whom I met when I was last there. They love Mma Ramotswe and she would love them too. They, like many other readers, ask me when Mma Ramotswe and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni will eventually get married. I must think about that.

Q: Next spring, Pantheon Books will publish the fourth in the series of the Precious Ramotswe novels. Will there be other books in the series as well?

AMS: I hope so. I am writing the fifth at the moment and I am thinking of the sixth.

Q: In addition to writing novels, you are also a professor of medical law at Edinburgh University, and as if that wasn't enough to keep you busy, you also conduct a symphony. How do you find the time to do it all?

AMS: I struggle to find the time to do things. I have many commitments, but writing these books is such a pleasure for me that I shall always find the time, somehow. I don't conduct a symphony — I play in a distinctly amateur orchestra, of which I am the co-founder. I play the bassoon, but not the entire instrument, as I dislike the very high notes and stop at the high D, which I think is quite high enough. This orchestra is pretty awful, and that is why it bears the name The Really Terrible Orchestra. This brings it a wide and enthusiastic following. Recently we had a request from an American amateur orchestra to use our name. We said of course. So somewhere in the U.S. there is a bad amateur orchestra called The Really Terrible Orchestra. They will go far, perhaps.

Courtesy of Anchor Books

Discussion Questions

1. Unlike in most other mysteries, in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* Mma Ramotswe solves a number of small crimes, rather than a single major one. How does this affect the narrative pacing of the novel? What other unique features distinguish *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* from the conventional mystery novel?
2. What makes Precious Ramotswe such a charming protagonist? What kind of woman is she? How is she different from the usual detective? Why does she feel “called” to help her fellow Africans “solve the mysteries of their lives” [p. 4]?
3. What is surprising about the nature of the cases Mma Ramotswe is hired to solve? By what means does Alexander McCall Smith sustain the reader’s interest, in the absence of the kind of tension, violence, and suspense that drive most mysteries?
4. Mma Ramotswe’s first client, Happy Bapetsi, is worried that the man who claims to be her father is a fraud taking advantage of her generosity. “All he does,” she says, “is sit in his chair outside the front door and tell me what to do for him next.” To which Mma Ramotswe replies, “Many men are like that” [p. 10]. What is Mma Ramotswe’s view of men generally? How do men behave in the novel?
5. Why does Mma Ramotswe feel it is so important to include her father’s life story in the novel? What does Obed Ramotswe’s life reveal about the history of Africa and of South Africa? What does it reveal about the nature and cost of working in the mines in South Africa?
6. Mma Ramotswe purchases a manual on how to be a detective. It advises one to pay attention to hunches. “Hunches are another form of knowledge” [p. 79]. How does intuition help Mma Ramotswe solve her cases?
7. When Mma Ramotswe decides to start a detective agency, a lawyer tells her “It’s easy to lose money in business, especially when you don’t know anything about what you’re doing. . . . And anyway, can women be detectives?” To which Mma Ramotswe answers, “Women are the ones who know what’s going on. They are the ones with eyes. Have you not read Agatha Christie?” [p. 61]. Is she right in suggesting women are more perceptive than men? Where in the novel do we see Mma Ramotswe’s own extraordinary powers of observation? How does she comically undercut the lawyer’s arrogance in this scene?
8. As Mma Ramotswe wonders if Mma Malatsi was somehow involved in her husband’s death and whether wanting someone dead made one a murderer in God’s eyes, she thinks to herself: “It was time to take the pumpkin out of the pot and eat it. In the final analysis, that was what solved these big problems of life. You could think and think and get nowhere, but you still had to eat your pumpkin. That brought you down to earth. That gave you a reason for going on. Pumpkin”

- [p. 85]. What philosophy of life is Mma Ramotswe articulating here? Why do the ongoing daily events of life give her this sense of peace and stability?
9. Why does Mma Ramotswe marry Note? Why does this act seem so out of character for her? In what ways does her love for an attractive and physically abusive man make her a deeper and more complicated character? How does her marriage to Note change her?
 10. Mma Ramotswe imagines retiring back in Mochudi, buying some land with her cousins, growing melons, and living life in such a way that “every morning she could sit in front of her house and sniff at the wood-smoke and look forward to spending the day talking with her friends. How sorry she felt for white people, who couldn’t do any of this, and who were always dashing around and worrying themselves over things that were going to happen anyway. What use was it having all that money if you could never sit still or just watch your cattle eating grass? None, in her view; none at all” [p. 162]. Is Mma Ramotswe’s critique of white people on the mark or is she stereotyping? What makes her sense of what is important, and what brings happiness, so refreshing? What other differences between black and white cultures does the novel make apparent?
 11. Mma Ramotswe does not want Africa to change, to become thoroughly modern: “She did not want her people to become like everybody else, soulless, selfish, forgetful of what it means to be an African, or, worse still, ashamed of Africa” [p. 215]. But what aspects of traditional African culture trouble her? How does she regard the traditional African attitude toward women, marriage, family duty, and witchcraft? Is there a contradiction in her relationship to “old” Africa?
 12. How surprising is Mma Ramotswe’s response to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni’s marriage proposal? How appropriate is the ending of the novel?
 13. Alexander McCall Smith has both taught and written about criminal law. In what ways does *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* draw upon this knowledge? How are lawyers and the police characterized in the novel?
 14. Is *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* a feminist novel? Does the fact that its author is a man complicate such a reading? How well does Alexander McCall Smith represent a woman’s character and consciousness in Mma Ramotswe?
 15. Alexander McCall Smith’s Precious Ramotswe books have been praised for their combination of apparent simplicity with a high degree of sophistication. In what ways does *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* have the appeal of simple storytelling? In what ways is it sophisticated? What does it suggest about the larger issues of how to live one’s life, how to behave in society, how to be happy?

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