
THE POSSIBILITIES OF HAPPINESS



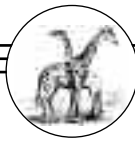
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH, AUTHOR OF *THE FULL CUPBOARD OF LIFE & THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY.*

by Charles L. P. Silet

Alexander McCall Smith was born to Scottish parents in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, where he spent his childhood and received his early education.

He returned to Scotland to attend the University of Edinburgh, where he currently holds a Chair in Medical Law. Since leaving Africa he has lived mostly in Scotland with periods in Botswana and Swaziland, and also in Dallas, Texas as a visiting professor. He has published some fifty

books including specialist academic titles, collections of short stories, and quite a number of children's books before beginning his current series. The fifth of the Mma Precious Ramotswe books, *The Full Cupboard of Life*, will be published in the United Kingdom in June.



The fourth, *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*, was published in the United States in April.

Mystery Scene: *How did you begin writing mystery fiction?*

Smith: Well, I suppose by accident, really, because I'd never really been involved in the genre prior to writing the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, and it is not a terribly conventional mystery. There is not a great deal of actual crime, and it's fairly incidental to the other problems that Mma Ramotswe deals with. Mystery readers read the books as mysteries; novel readers read them as novels. So they span both categories. I just became intrigued by the possibility of writing about a woman who has a small private detection agency in Africa, which struck me as being an odd and amusing thing for somebody to do, and the mysteries, such as they are, provide a vehicle for portraying the society and the people who live in Botswana. Obviously if you set up a character with a little tinpot detective agency, all sorts of characters can walk in the door—and do. Then once I'd done that, I realized what terrific possibilities the genre actually held. In mystery or crime fiction you can talk about so much within a society. If you were writing about someone who had a more mundane job, the possibilities would be more difficult. The detective genre also gives a nice potential structure, and then you can branch out and embellish and really write about the things you want to write about while feeling that you've still got your readers' attention.

Mystery Scene: *How did you decide to set the series in Botswana?*

Smith: In the eighties, while I was visiting a village in Botswana to the north of the capitol, my hostess took me for a walk, and we called on somebody who was proposing to give her and her husband a

chicken for an Independence Day lunch. This lady chased the chicken around the yard creating a tremendous kerfuffle. She was a very well-built lady, and she caught the chicken and promptly wrung its neck and handed it over. She was quite enter-

about everybody being bony and skinny is a Western idea which is not the traditional view of beauty in Africa. So she's a large, very cheerful woman, and she's also very intelligent and has considerable intuitive powers. She sees through people quite easily, she's very, very direct and sincere, and she can get to the quick of the matter quite easily. She's proud to be an African, and she's proud of her country. Plus she's just tremendous fun.

Mystery Scene: *The series is about a changing Africa and the conflict between the old and new ways. Why focus on a woman to deal with these issues?*

Smith: In some African societies women can have quite a difficult time, and because African women are usually very hard-working and resourceful and often very put upon, I thought it would be appropriate to describe the society from that particular angle.

Mystery Scene: *Tell me about the other characters in the series.*

Smith: The principal male character is Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni, who's Mma Ramotswe's fiancé. He's a garage mechanic and a great man. The idea of these books is to be as positive

as possible; there is a romantic streak to them, they are about the possibilities of happiness. Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni is very happy when Mma Ramotswe agrees to become engaged to him. Mma Makutsi really stands for all women who encounter a glass ceiling which prevents them from reaching their potential. She's a graduate of the Botswana Secretarial College, but she feels that she could be much more, and Mma Ramotswe gives her her chance. And there are the two orphans: Motholeli, and her brother, Puso. They're based on a couple of real children whom I saw when I visited an

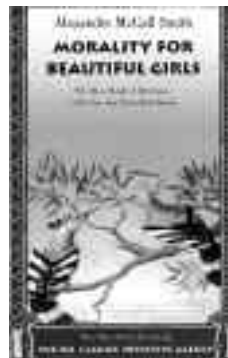
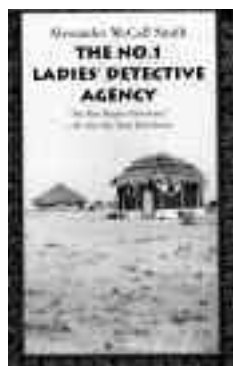


"People never hear about the decency, the humor, the warmth, the human niceness of so many people in Africa."

prising, cheerful, and ebullient, and I thought it would be interesting to write a story about such a Botswana woman. The germ of the idea was in my mind for a long time, and then around 1996 or 1997 I sat down and wrote the first Ramotswe story which became a book.

Mystery Scene: *Tell me a little about Mma Ramotswe.*

Smith: Physically she's described, and indeed she describes herself, as a traditionally built lady, which means that she is quite large. She often says this business



orphanage in Botswana. The man who ran the orphanage told me this extraordinary story of how the girl had saved her young brother and then brought him up in somebody's backyard in Francistown. There are stories like that in Africa of children who somehow survive a pretty difficult beginning. I met the little boy but I didn't meet his sister. When we go out to Botswana with the BBC—who are doing a show about the background of the books—we are going to track down the girl and find out more about what has happened to her. She does exist and, like the character Motholeli, she's in a wheelchair.

Mystery Scene: *There is a lyric quality to the books.*

Smith: There is something very beautiful and beguiling about Africa. There are these great empty spaces and the gorgeous skies and all of that. Also there is a spirituality in life in Africa which I really want to try to get across. One doesn't want to go over the top, but that does require the prose to have an adequate dignity. So that probably explains it, plus it's just my style of writing.

Mystery Scene: *In the books you discuss the traditional values of African society.*

Smith: Southern African society has quite a strong communitarian culture built on sharing. If you look at traditional patterns of land ownership, the land was held in common, the people had com-

mon grazing rights, and neighbors shared common fields. And there were very strong expectations of personal support and help, so you could contact fairly distant cousins if you were in difficulty and claim some help from them. They're all involved with one another, and they've all got responsibilities for one another, but that is changing with urbanization and so on.

Traditionally in Africa there would be no such thing as an unwanted child. The whole idea would be pretty alien to them, in that somebody would take on the child or the child would have a place and an identity. People are raised by communal effort and everybody would have some sort of input into that effort. That's something that Ramotswa sees changing in Botswana, and she sometimes thinks about the behavior of young people and sees examples of rudeness that would not have happened in her day.

Also I think it's a great pity that when people think about Africa these days they think about the images of starvation, AIDS, and suffering—which admittedly are a part of the reality of Africa—but they are only one part of the reality. People never hear about the decency, the humor, the warmth, the human niceness of so many people in Africa. I would hope these books can try to do something in a small way about portraying some marvelous human values and qualities, to try perhaps to correct the overly sad picture of Africa we get. People are frightened of Africa, they feel there

will never be any end to Africa's suffering as disaster follows disaster. Well, yes, but there is the other side.

Mystery Scene: *The books have been a publishing phenomenon in the States. Do you have any sense why the series has been so popular?*

Smith: I've been delighted that they've been well-received in the United States, and I've thought quite a lot about why that might be so. It strikes me that people in the U.S. actually are quite open-minded, they're very open to something new, and these novels are a little bit different from what people are used to reading. I also think that perhaps there's something more profound than that. I don't know whether I misread the U.S., but it seems to me that there is a very strong trait of idealism in your country, and the people relate to Mma Ramotswa, to this strong idealistic character.

Mystery Scene: *The reviews here have been very positive.*

Smith: I can't tell you how delighted I am. I've had the best reaction of anywhere in the U.S. I feel that I have gotten through to my American readers in a way that I have not necessarily gotten through to my readers elsewhere.

Mystery Scene: *One review described Mma Ramotswa as the Miss Marple of Botswana.*



Smith: I'm flattered but I don't think she's really a Miss Marple at all. Precious Ramotswe is far more, how would one put it, modern. When Mma Ramotswe wants to find something out, she just goes and asks somebody and she usually gets the answer. End of the matter. There are no clues, no elaborate working out of convoluted plots; it's very direct.

Mystery Scene: *Is it true that The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency is going to be made into a film?*

Smith: We gave an option to an extremely nice American woman, Amy Moore, who is currently based in Johannesburg and has a production company there. Then she went to Anthony Minghella, and he became involved. They were talking about a T.V. series, and now they are talking about a feature film, but I'm not sure where we are.

Mystery Scene: *Are you going to be involved in any way?*

Smith: They very courteously tell me what they are doing, so I get regular emails from Amy Moore, but I wouldn't be involved. Obviously, movies involve money with strings, but I wouldn't want the books changed in too dramatic a fashion. If at all possible the one thing that I would want them to do is to try and preserve the feel of the books. That would be wonderful, but it's all very complex.

Mystery Scene: *Would you talk a little about a second series you are beginning featuring another lady detective, Isabel Dalhousie?*

Smith: She's a person who's a moral philosopher and who gets involved in people's affairs, and the book will deal with philosophical issues. She has a Scottish father and an American mother, and she

lives in Edinburgh, so there is a Scottish background but she travels around a bit. The first title, *The Crushed Strawberry*, is named after the color of corduroy trousers worn by the unsuitable boyfriend of the heroine's niece. You know, the sort



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of pinky reddish, crushed-strawberry color. What I'm writing about is the opposite side of Edinburgh from that which is portrayed in the usual Edinburgh novel in the genre, for example, of Ian Rankin. This isn't in any sense criticizing Ian

Rankin, but people are used to the underbelly of Edinburgh, now we're getting the other side of it. This will be the Edinburgh haute bourgeoisie. You know, very different. No bad behavior. We're tentatively calling the series the "Sunday Philosophy Club," and I think that actually works rather well. The title was suggested by my editor at Random House, Edward Kastenmeier. The BBC have optioned the book for a television series.

Mystery Scene: *What can you tell us about the fifth Mma Ramotswe book, which is going to be published in the U.K. this summer?*

Smith: It is called *The Full Cupboard of Life*. It continues matters at the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and a number of new issues arise. I don't want to give away what happens, but poor Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni is put in a tremendously awkward spot by the matron of the orphan farm, so he's got to try and get out of his difficulty. I just describe it as a very happy book.

Mystery Scene: *One final question: What is redbush tea?*

Smith: Redbush tea is a sort of tea that grows in South Africa. It's naturally caffeine free. It's a bit of an acquired taste, but if you put honey in it, it is quite refreshing. Edward said to me that he wanted more in the books about it, because the readers keep asking for more. In *The Full Cupboard of Life* there's a whole chapter especially written for Edward called "Tea Is the Solution to Everything." ♦

Charles L. P. Silet's interviews with crime writers have appeared in a wide variety of magazines, anthologies, and academic publications over the past dozen years. Talking Murder: Interviews with 20 Mystery Writers, was published in 1999 (Persea Books, \$14.00).