The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency
by Alexander McCall Smith

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

When Precious Ramotswe decides to use the money her beloved father left her to open the first ever Ladies' Detective Agency in Botswana, everyone is skeptical. "Can women be detectives?" asks the bank's lawyer. Mma Ramotswe herself feels unsure of her success. After all, her only assets are a tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone, an old typewriter, a teapot, and three teacups. But she does possess the intangible assets of intuition and intelligence. These she has in great supply, along with perseverance, a keen knowledge of the human mind and heart, a steadfast sense of right and wrong, and a personality that inspires trust and loquaciousness in nearly all who meet her. What she also has is a deep love for Africa generally and for Botswana and its people especially. "They are my people, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to help them to solve the mysteries of their lives. That is what I am called to do" [p. 4].

These mysteries aren't the standard stuff of detective novels. There are no bludgeoned millionaires or murdered sexpots *in The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency.* Mma Ramotswe's cases range from exposing a freeloader posing as a father, to discovering whether or not a young Indian girl has a boyfriend, to determining the legitimacy of a worker's injury claim, to revealing the real reason behind a doctor's inconsistent performance. Mundane concerns, by the standards of most American mysteries, but much of the charm of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* lies in just this quality of ordinariness—the problems that ordinary people confront in the course of their everyday lives. The threat of something more violent, more sinister, appears when a young boy goes missing and Mma Ramotswe suspects he has fallen victim to witch doctors. This crime will bring Mma Ramotswe face-to-face with one of Africa's most frightful traditions—the use of human bones in the making of *muti* (medicine).

Throughout, readers are treated to Mma Ramotswe's penetrating observations on human behavior—"It was curious how some people had a highly developed sense of guilt, she thought, while others had none. Some people would agonize over minor slips or mistakes on their part, while others would feel quite unmoved by their own gross acts of betrayal or dishonesty" [p. 125]—as well as her trenchant and often humorous assessments of the failings of men, her unflinching struggle for gender equity, her keen love for her country and its people, and the warmth, generosity, and intelligence of her expansive spirit.

READING GUIDE

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 Mme 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 in *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 in *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?

Back

4 page(s) will be printed.

Title: Alexander McCall Smith

Document Type: Author Read-alikes

Author: Zellers, Jessica

Book Author: McCall Smith, Alexander

Fiction/Nonfiction: Fiction

Description: Alexander McCall Smith has written four adult series that are strikingly distinct from each other, but every title features richly-drawn characters, engaging prose, and vivid settings. (added January 2007)

Reading Level: Adults

NoveList Read-alike List

Alexander McCall Smith

by Jessica Zellers

Genre: **Mystery**
Literary Fiction
Satirical Fiction
Humor
Gentle Reads

After twenty years spent writing academic texts, short stories, and children's books, **Alexander McCall Smith** waltzed onto the popular adult novel scene with *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* in 1998. Since then he has written a plethora of books in four different genre-bending series: The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, Portuguese Irregular Verbs, The Sunday Philosophy Club, and 44 Scotland Street. The four series are strikingly distinct from each other, but every title features the richly-drawn characters, engaging prose, and vivid setting that have earned McCall Smith his loyal following.

Within a few pages of any McCall Smith novel, the careful attention to setting is delightfully apparent. McCall Smith uses abundant details and background clues to describe the environment in his books, whether they are set in Botswana (No. 1 Ladies'), Scotland (Sunday Philosophy Club and 44 Scotland Street) or college-town Germany (Portuguese Irregular Verbs). Frequent references to each country's art, culture, and literature strengthen the setting. Even the characters' dialogue contributes to the atmosphere: their idioms and phrasings resonate with distinctly Scottish, Germanic, or African overtones.

Within the backdrop of national context, McCall Smith establishes small-scale setting by creating close-knit communities of memorable characters. He excels at creating a wide range of people, including a sleuthing Botswanan business owner, a busybody Scottish philosopher, a pompous German scholar, and various Edinburgh apartment dwellers. The thoughts and perspectives of these characters are central to McCall Smith's novels. They are intelligent, likable, and amusingly human. The characters' delusions about their own flaws lend a gentle humor to the stories; the three novellas of Portuguese Irregular Verbs, in particular, are hilarious because Professor von Igelfeld is oblivious to his shortcomings.

The plot of McCall Smith's novels relies entirely on the whims of the characters. If Mma Ramotswe feels like investigating a case in the No. 1 Ladies' series, the mystery jumps into the foreground, but if she feels like visiting friends for the day, the mystery elements fade into the background. In the other series, the plot is determined by the day-to-day interactions of the characters. Chance encounters with neighbors, evenings at the symphony, or humorous mishaps at the university constitute the action of the story. Likewise, the characters determine the pace of the stories. The story bustles when the characters are feeling ambitious but slows to a stroll when the characters are daydreaming.

McCall Smith writes with clear, straightforward prose, though it is by no means simplistic. He pays great attention to word choice and sentence structure — explicitly so in *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, in which the hero is a philologist, a lover of words. The chapters are usually short, especially in *44 Scotland Street*, a collection of vignettes originally published as serialized newspaper columns.

Strong language and explicit sex are never present in McCall Smith's novels, though mild epithets and allusions to sex do crop up. The tone is usually warm but never saccharine, and difficult personal problems, though rare, sometimes appear. In this way McCall Smith's tone and subject matter is reminiscent of novels written in the early-to-mid twentieth century. Modern fans of McCall Smith might consider revisiting some of the popular writers of past decades such as Graham Green, Evelyn Waugh, or Flannery O'Connor.

Readers new to Alexander McCall Smith may wish to start with the first novel of his best-known series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, which introduces the unforgettable Precious Ramotswe. The inquisitive Mma Ramotswe decides to open Botswana's only female-led private detective agency and, against all odds, begins to establish a reputation for solving minor crimes and strange occurrences. Those who have enjoyed the print version of No. 1 Ladies' may wish to revisit the books in their audio form, read aloud by South African narrator Lisette LeCat. Readers may also wish to explore McCall Smith's website, http://www.mccallsmith.com/, which includes plot synopses for each title in series order.

Read-alikes:

Seminal Mystery writer **Agatha Christie** is the inspiration and role model for Precious Ramotswe's private detecting. Though not a professional investigator like Mma Ramotswe, Christie's character Miss Marple has a likeable, inquisitive nature that should resonate with fans of Ramotswe. Miss Marple's amateur, busybody sleuthing should also appeal to fans of Isabel Dalhousie, McCall Smith's occasional gumshoe in the Sunday Philosophy Club series. Christie's other famous investigator, Hercule Poirot, might be a good character for fans of Professor von Igelfeld of Portuguese Irregular Verbs. Though merely an academic, not a detective, von Igelfeld has the same conceit and pompousness that make Poirot so endearing. All of Christie's Mysteries feature charming characters, minimal violence, and gentle sensibilities. The first Hercule Poirot book is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in which the detective must use his wits and observation to pinpoint a poisoner from a large circle of suspects. The first Miss Marple book is *The Murder at the Vicarage*, wherein Miss Marple uses her intuition and insight into human nature to find a killer.

Fans of McCall Smith's vivid settings and early twentieth century style should consider **R. K. Narayan**. His wonderfully detailed Malgudi books create a compelling vision of India; without Narayan, said his eminent author friend Graham Green, "I could never have known what it is like to be an Indian." Ordinary, interesting people do ordinary, interesting things in the Malgudi stories, much like the characters in McCall Smith's books, especially in the 44 Scotland Street series. Straightforward but thoughtful prose illuminates Narayan's investigation into human nature, and a gentle touch of humor and irony speaks to universal themes that transcend the fictional Indian town. As it is not necessary to read the books in series order, readers may wish to start with one of Narayan's most acclaimed books, *The Guide*, winner of India's most prestigious literary award, the National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy. Attention to character drives *The Guide*, in which a newly-released prisoner is mistaken for a holy man and decides to act the part.

James Thurber, a prolific writer during the first part of the twentieth century, may be a good choice for those who love McCall Smith's subtle but constant humor. As a columnist for the *New Yorker*, Thurber became a master of short comedy. His characters will be familiar to McCall Smith fans for their peculiar perspectives and laughably human flaws. They manage to turn ordinary, trivial occurrences into comical interludes of giant proportion. Those who like the drawings in Portuguese Irregular Verbs and the 44

Scotland Street series might enjoy the lighthearted illustrations interspersed throughout much of Thurber's work. Fans of the linguistic humor in *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* may wish to try *The Wonderful O*, an absurdist fable about the dire consequences of outlawing a vowel. For a more general introduction to Thurber's lightly ironic humor, try the short stories in *My World — And Welcome to It*, populated by well-drawn characters with comic delusions.

Clyde Edgerton is a master at creating the sort of close-knit communities that characterize McCall Smith's novels. Normal people with normal problems form the heart of Edgerton's books, which study human nature with humor and compassion. Edgerton, like McCall Smith, writes books that are gentle but not spineless, warm but not bland. Mildly strong language is infrequent, though it does occur, especially for comedic effect, and difficult personal problems do crop up, albeit rarely. Edgerton shares McCall Smith's ear for dialogue, though his books are set in the American South, rather than Europe or Africa. Try starting with *Lunch at the Piccadilly*, set in a nursing home and starring several quirky elderly ladies, one eccentric preacher, and a long-suffering, able-bodied nephew. This lighthearted study of aging may especially appeal to fans of 44 Scotland Street for the sense of community shared by different people living in the same building.

Literary Fiction writer **Jon Hassler** writes remarkably funny books that explore the human experience, from personal minutiae to shared universal problems. As in McCall Smith's books, the characters tend to be likable, though they have their share of failings. Hassler's tone can be darker and his topics more serious than what is typically found in McCall Smith, but he always treats his subject with compassion and grace. Over the course of several books he has established a community of such richness to rival anything by McCall Smith. The first book about this small Minnesota community is Hassler's debut novel, *Staggerford*. Taking place over the course of a week, *Staggerford* examines lives of ordinary, richly-flawed people and the difficult things that can happen to them.

Jessica Zellers works in Adult Services at the Williamsburg (VA) Regional Library whenever she's not reading fat Russian novels.

Back

Alexander McCall Smith is a professor of medical law, a member of the Really Terrible Orchestra and author of the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency novels, which sold more than two million copies last year. Nick Smith met him at the RGS-IBG to discuss the ways in which Africa has inspired his writing.(In Conversation)(Interview).Nick Smith. ***Geographical*** 76.3 (March 2004): p130(1). (805 words)

Why did you choose to set the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series in Botswana?

I spent my childhood in Zimbabwe, and in the early 1980s, I went to work in the University of Swaziland and I set a number of short stories there. I was then asked to go to Botswana to set up a law programme at the university and that was when I first became attached to the country. I set the series in Botswana because it's such an exceptional, striking country and it has such an effect on people.

Your characters ale very proud of their traditional ways. Are you recording an old Botswana before it disappears?

I think that many sub-Saharan African societies have their own interesting features, but modernity is having its impact. Some of the fine qualities of the older societies have survived and will/survive. Others are rather bruised by contact with Western materialist values, to use a cliche.

Botswana is quite a successful country, in terms of sub-Saharan Africa ...

If you look at the history of Botswana, it has probably been the only really successful modern national state. Since independence in 1966, it has been consistently well run, with little corruption by African standards. Open politics has tolerated an opposition, it pinned its colours to a human

rights constitution and it has also observed the rule of law, which is so important. It is an extraordinary society, but it does have one or two problems.

Such as AIDS?

I don't want to make too much of AIDS. I allude to it very discreetly in my novels, because that's how they tend to talk about it. People in Africa don't want to be seen by the test of the world as being sick. They want to carry on with their lives. We can call that denial, but you can't contemplate the horror of AIDS for too long; you have to go on living. Precious Ramotswe [the main character of the novels] wouldn't sit there and talk about it all the time in real life.

There are a lot of orphans in your books--the local orphanage is central to your story. Is this something that is close to your heart?

The orphanage is becoming much more prominent for obvious reasons, in Botswana, there are 69,000 registered orphans in a population of 1.4 million. In the traditional society, the grandmothers would have looked after these children. Now, there are grandmothers there looking after ten, 12, 14 children, so the safety net is breaking.

I was very impressed with a local orphanage called the SOS Children's Village. They have little houses with about ten children in each cottage The children are lovely, and they are happy. I think that's why it made such an impression on me. I was so struck by the feeling of love. They try to replicate the family; they have a man there who must have one of the most unusual job descriptions in the world--he's the official father figure.

Your work is bringing Botswana forward in people's imaginations. Ale you concerned about this resulting in irresponsible tourism?

Botswana has its tourism quite well under control. They go for the high-end tourism--the

expensive safaris, not the backpackers. The books are having an impact on tourism. People have said to me, "We've read the books and we've gone to Botswana." If they are fitting into the existing tourist plans that Botswana has then that's fine, and they probably are. To a certain extent, the books may be revealing a slightly private secret about Botswana, about what a remarkable society and country it is. As always, when you shine a light into little corners it can lead to vulgarisation.

The repackaging of your books seems to have taken away some of the original charm. Why did this happen?

The new covers do the trick that was intended, they appeal in the mass market. I think those covers are very skilful and are taking them to a broader audience. The old covers have a slightly dreamy feel and a certain naivety. The cover of The Kalahari Typing School for Men is a photograph of a simple chair. That picture says it all. What you need in life is few possessions. You don't need a big expensive chair if you have a chair that is made with love and you have a bit of sun to sit in. You don't need anything else.

The sixth volume of The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency is due for publication this summer. Can you tell me what happens?

It was going to be called 'The Night-time Dancer', but I think that it will eventually be called 'The Society of Cheerful Ladies', as that's more in keeping with the atmosphere of the other titles. Something very nice happens to Mme Makutsi. Beyond that, I can't say.

Named Works: No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency (Book)

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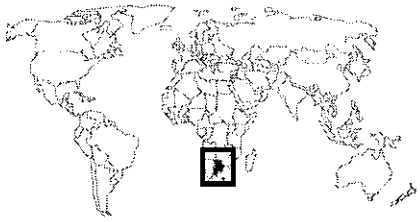
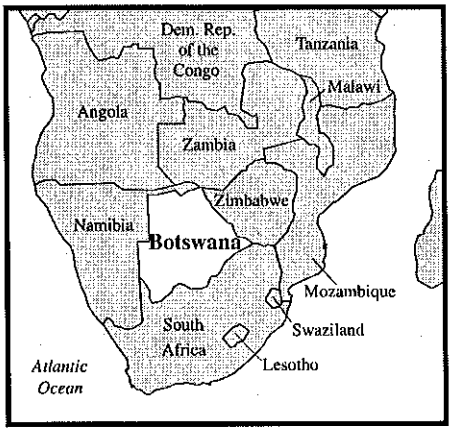
Republic of Botswana





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▼ AFRICA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Botswana, a landlocked country in southern Africa, covers 231,800 square miles (600,370 square kilometers), an area about the same size as France, or Arizona and New Mexico combined. Eighty percent of Botswana's territory (west of most cities) is covered by the Kgalagadi (Kalahari) Desert, which consists of savanna grasses and shrubs but virtually no water. Gently rolling hills form the eastern border. The Okavango Delta, the world's largest inland delta, is found in the north. Its wetlands harbor a wide variety of wildlife, including crocodiles, hippopotamuses, elephants, Cape buffalo, and African fish eagles. National parks and other protected wildlife areas cover nearly one-fifth of Botswana's territory; the government has designated another one-fifth as wildlife management areas.

Reservoirs provide water for major urban areas, but most water comes from wells. Small dams catch rain runoff for cattle, which far outnumber the human population. Drought cycles are common. Summer is from October to April, with temperatures often above 100°F (37°C). During winter, which lasts from May to August, days are typically windy and sunny. Temperatures may drop below freezing at night in some parts of the country.

History. Tswana ethnic groups began moving into Botswana from the southeast in the early 1500s. They displaced and absorbed other peoples as they spread out to claim all land that had surface water or was suitable for grazing and agriculture. Various chiefdoms developed over the next several decades.

Ethnic disputes beginning in the mid-1700s left Tswana chiefdoms vulnerable to invasions by refugee armies from Zulu wars in Natal (now in South Africa). These wars began in the early 1800s and caused great upheaval in southern Africa. *Boer* (white settler) encroachment from 1852 onward led major Tswana chiefs, under the direction of Khama III, to seek protection through the British government. The British, eager to secure a labor supply for their South African mines and a route to newly discovered gold in Matabeleland (Zimbabwe), established the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885.

In the 20th century, unrest in the Rhodesias (now Zambia and Zimbabwe) and apartheid in South Africa led various groups to form political parties and demand independence from Britain. The Bechuanaland Democratic Party (BDP) led the way to independence in 1966. The founders of the BDP, Sir Seretse Khama and Sir Ketumile Masire, were declared president and vice president, respectively, of the new Republic of Botswana.

Their BDP (now the Botswana Democratic Party) is credited with maintaining one of the most stable democracies in Africa. Khama won three consecutive elections. When he died in 1980, Masire succeeded him as president. Masire went on to win reelection three times before retiring in 1998. The BDP's Festus Mogae, who served as Masire's vice president, took over from Masire and was confirmed as president when the BDP won the next elections in 1999.

Mogae secured a second term in November 2004 elections as the BDP continued its longstanding majority in the National Assembly. The BDP won 44 of 57 seats, while the main opposition party, the Botswana National Front, won just 12. Although opposition parties complained about their limited access to the media, especially the government-run television station, election observers declared the vote to be free and fair. In accordance with a constitutional term limit, Mogae has said he will step down at the end of his current term.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Botswana's population of 1.8 million is growing at an annual rate of 1.5 percent. Descendants of Botswana's original Tswana peoples (Kwena, Ngwato, Ngwaketse, Kgatla, Tawana, Lete, Tlokwa, and Rolong) constitute about half of the total population. These groups essentially consider themselves to be one people because they descend from a common ancestor, but they tend to concentrate in different areas. The other half of the population is composed of the Kalanga, Kgalagadi, Birwa, Tswapong, Yei, Mbukushu, Subiya, Herero, and Khoesan ethnic groups. Small populations of whites, Indians, and other Asians also live in Botswana.

Less than half of the population lives in rural areas; many people are moving to cities for work and education. Gaborone, the capital, is a rapidly growing city; about one-third of Gaborone's population (currently 170,000) lives in Old Naledi, Botswana's largest shantytown. Most people live in the eastern part of the country, where the railroad is located, soil supports agriculture, and rain falls sufficiently to sustain life.

Language. Although English is the official language of government and education, most people speak the national language, Setswana. For many, Setswana is a second language because each minority group speaks its own language. For instance, the Tjikalanga language (also called Ikalanga) is predominant in the northeast. Like Setswana, these other languages are Bantu tongues and are related.

In Bantu languages, the noun prefix is the key to grammatical connections. For example, the *mo-* prefix can refer to a person. Thus, a *Motswana* is a Tswana person. The plural of *mo* is *ba*. So *Batswana* means "Tswana people" (and "citizens of Botswana," regardless of ethnicity). There are seven other two-letter noun classes. Non-Bantu tongues are known collectively as Khoesan (or Sarwa). Languages in print include English, Setswana, and Ikalanga.

Religion. Religious freedom is protected under the constitution, but Christianity is accepted as an official religion in the sense that the school day and official functions begin with prayer. Schoolchildren sing Christian hymns before classes begin, but religious instruction is not compulsory.

Christianity was introduced in the early 1800s by missionaries (David Livingstone and others) traveling from South Africa. This opened the interior of Africa to exploitation by European hunters and slave traders. Because Christianity was often viewed as a means to Western technology, education, and health care, many chiefs allowed missions on their lands. During his reign (1835–1923), Chief Khama III, who converted to Christianity in 1862, tried to abolish many traditional practices (polygamy, initiation ceremonies, passing widows to a deceased man's brother, rainmaking ceremonies, and other rites) that conflicted with Christian teachings. But some outlawed traditions remain part of village life.

It is estimated that as many as half of all Batswana continue to exclusively follow aspects of their indigenous beliefs. The other half are Christian; Catholics and Protestants together comprise approximately one-fourth of the population. Many local churches combine traditional beliefs with those of Western Christianity. The largest of these churches is the Zion Christian Church; another major congregation is the Spiritual Healing Church.

General Attitudes. Batswana society is founded on traditional law, with the community as the core of Tswana life and the chief as the symbol of unity. Traditionally, schools, roads, and health clinics were built through local organization. This practice of self-help, evident in such Setswana words as *ipelegeng* (carry yourselves), continues today, even though the government is now more responsible for infrastructure. Each individual is expected to benefit the community. The more a person does, the greater that person's status within the group. Anything that can benefit the group is valued, such as one's educational level, integrity, and generosity. People are expected to house traveling relatives for as long as necessary, and working family members are expected to support those without jobs. Batswana generally try to avoid conflict. Public criticism is inappropriate, as is raising one's voice in anger.

Personal Appearance. Western dress is common in most areas. Urban men wear business suits and ties, and women wear fashionable dresses or a skirt and blouse. Some young urban women wear pants. Rural women often wear a wrap over their dresses to protect them from dirt. Mothers carry their babies on their backs in fabric slings. Older men wear overalls to protect their clothing. Many men wear hats, except in the *kgotla* (meeting place), and rural women cover their heads with a kerchief. Both sexes typically have short hair.

Cleanliness and neatness are important. Smooth hands and longer fingernails are a status symbol for men, indicating they can pay someone else to do their farming or manual labor. For a rural woman, rough hands are considered honorable because they indicate that she works hard.

Many Batswana attend church services wearing uniforms that distinguish their denominations. People also display their political party's colors through clothing. Women of the Herero ethnic group, which migrated from Namibia in 1904, wear a long bouffant-skirted costume introduced in Namibia by German missionary wives. The heavy, colorful dress may require as much as 10 yards of fabric. A woman arranges a matching headdress to indicate her marital status.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Greetings are important; failing to greet someone is rude. To show respect when greeting, particularly to an elder or superior, one shakes with the right hand while supporting one's elbow with the left hand. The handshake is less of a grasp and more a matter of palms and fingertips touching. A slight head bow may also be added to lower one's eye level below that of an elder. A younger person will wait for an elder to initiate the greeting. Likewise, someone approaching a person or group will greet first.

A common adult greeting is *Dumela, Rra/Mma, O tsogile jang?* (Greetings, sir/madam, how did you wake?). The response is *Ke tsogile sentle* (I awoke well). At social gatherings, people greet those they know and are introduced to others. Children and peers use informal greetings. For instance, the Setswana reply to *O kae?* (How are you?) is *Ke teng* (literally, "I am here," meaning "fine"). *Tsamaya sentle* (Go well) is said to one departing and *Sala sentle* (Stay well) is said to one staying.

Greeting customs vary for other ethnic groups. For example, among the Kalanga the younger person always greets first. Young children greet elders by extending both hands or clapping; the elder responds by kissing both hands and saying *Wa muka?* (Are you well?).

Children may be named for some circumstance related to their birth and also given a pet name by which they are known at home. Students often give themselves nicknames for use at school. Traditionally, the father's first name became the child's surname. Now, however, the child takes the father's surname.

Upon the birth of her first child, a woman is thereafter referred to as the mother of that child (e.g., *Mma Jamey* in Setswana or *Bakajamey* in Tjikalanga).

Gestures. One may press the hands (palms and fingers) together in front of the chest before accepting a gift with both hands. Gifts are given with both hands or with the right hand supported by the left at the elbow. Batswana use a variety of gestures to suggest "no," "no thanks," or that something is all gone. One way is to rotate the wrist with fingers outstretched or pointing down. Hitchhikers rapidly wave their right hand with arm extended to hail a vehicle.

It is impolite to walk between two people in conversation. If passing through cannot be avoided, one bows below the level of the conversation and says *Intshwarele* (Excuse me). One can best show respect for elders during conversation by looking down toward the ground rather than into their eyes. Public displays of affection are inappropriate.

Visiting. Relatives visit one another as often as they can. Because Batswana value personal relationships, they welcome unannounced visitors. Most visits cannot be arranged in advance due to a lack of telephones. Hosts offer guests water or tea to drink. They will invite anyone who arrives at mealtime to eat with the family. Guests who are not hungry at least try the food and take some home. Urban relatives often bring staples and household goods as gifts, while people from rural areas bring in-season crops. Acquaintances are not expected to bring gifts. Hosts accompany departing guests to the gate or even part of the way home (if traveling on foot) to show they were welcome. Socializing takes place at the standpipe (where people get water), general stores, and church activities. Men socialize at local *chibuku* depots (bars selling sorghum beer).

Eating. Eating habits vary between urban and rural settings, but sharing is the common denominator. For most, family meals involve eating from common bowls or plates. Visitors receive separate plates. Children share a bowl among them. Drinks are never shared; each person has a cup. Batswana use utensils but eat some foods with their hands. They frequently eat outside in the shade of a nearby tree. Everyone usually leaves a little food behind to indicate the meal has been filling. Guests often use the phrase *Ke itumetse* (I am pleased) to thank the hosts. Smelling food before eating it implies something is wrong with it. Leftovers are kept for later or are given to departing guests.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Batswana historically lived in large villages with their agricultural and grazing lands at a distance. With women at the lands and men at cattle posts, families were separated much of the time. In colonial times, many men worked in South African mines. Later, the youth moved to cities in search of work. Families remained tied through an extended family network. Today, schooling and employment keep families apart. Women are primarily responsible for the family, agriculture, and entrepreneurial pursuits. They head most rural families with support from nearby relatives. Batswana children take on chores at an early age.

Housing. A fenced family compound, or homestead, contains several traditional *rondavels*: round, thatched dwellings built using a mixture of mud and cow dung. A compound also has a courtyard, a cooking area, and an outhouse. Animals are penned within the compound, which women keep clear of grass and debris. Modern homes are made of cinder blocks and have cement floors. These homes are more prevalent in cities, but it is not uncommon for a rural property to have a combination of traditional and modern structures.

Dating and Marriage. The migration of young Batswana from their home villages to urban areas dramatically impacts the way they socialize. Interaction in villages is rather restricted, but urban youth meet at discos and other sites. School competitions and youth clubs also provide contact.

Because of the expense and obligations involved in formal marriage, more than half of all Batswana couples live together rather than marry. Those who do marry may choose rites under either civil or customary law. Customary wedding celebrations involve two or more days of eating, drinking, dancing, and speeches. The family of the groom pays a negotiated *bogadi* (bride-price) to the family of the bride. The bride-price shows respect for the bride's parents, thanks them for raising the woman, and helps compensate them for the loss of a productive member of the family.

Life Cycle. An expectant mother stops going out in public immediately prior to giving birth, and she remains secluded from all but immediate family members for up to three months after the birth. An elder female cares for her during this period. It is believed that the seclusion will protect the baby from disease and that a diet of rich foods will ensure that the mother can provide the baby with plenty of milk.

Batswana males enter adulthood at puberty. To signify this transition, most boys undergo circumcision. Today, the circumcision is generally performed at a hospital to reduce the risk of infection. The government also provides traditional doctors with sterilized equipment.

When a person dies, family members and friends gather each day to mourn together and offer prayers. The evening before the burial, mourners keep an overnight vigil with the body at the family homestead. The next day, a funeral service is held and the body is buried at a grave site.

Diet. *Bogobe* (porridge) made from *mabele* (sorghum), maize, or millet (in the northeast) is a staple food. *Bogobe* is served soft and often soured for breakfast but served thick for the midday and evening meals. *Paleche* (white maize), although vulnerable to drought, is replacing sorghum as the primary grain. Many people have tea or *mageu* (a thick sorghum drink) instead of porridge for breakfast. Some enjoy *fat cakes* (deep-fried dough) with tea for breakfast or lunch. *Bogobe* is accompanied by a relish, such as a popular relish made of onions, chicken stock, and tomato sauce. Batswana eat seasonal fruits and vegetables and raise goats and chicken for meat. *Phane* worms, a delicacy gathered from the *mophane* trees in the northeast, are dried in hot ashes and eaten. Men slaughter cattle for special occasions. Rice replaces *bogobe* at weddings.

Recreation. Batswana enjoy visiting, dancing, singing, and playing sports. Young men play *football* (soccer), often competing on village teams. Schools offer track-and-field and ball sports (such as soccer, softball, volleyball, and netball) to their students. Track-and-field competitions held at the local, regional, and national levels bring great prestige to a winning student and his or her school.

The Arts. Schools sponsor choirs and traditional dance groups, which perform at public events. Traditional dancing is popular in villages, where women play drums to provide the dancers with rhythm. Young urban professionals like ballroom dancing, and most Batswana enjoy African disco and *kwasa kwasa*, a Congolese style of dance music.

Batswana folk artists produce basketry and pottery using natural dyes and materials. Stylized animals commonly adorn

these crafts. Jewelry is worked in silver, although animal hair and glass beads are also used. Many domestic textile items (blankets, tablecloths, and floormats) are woven from wool and decorated with geometric patterns. Khoesan men sew and tan leather items, which the women beautify with beads made from ostrich eggshells. These folk arts are cultivated for tourism and international sale.

Holidays. Batswana celebrate the New Year (1–2 Jan.), Easter (Friday–Monday), Ascension, President's Day (third weekend in July), Botswana Day (30 Sept.–1 Oct.), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). For Christmas, people return to their home villages to celebrate with relatives. Family members do not exchange gifts, but they usually receive new clothes. Batswana also go home for a four-day weekend on President's Day. During this weekend, government-sponsored programs begin with prayer and include traditional dancing, singing, speeches, and praise poems. Easter is a time for church and family.

SOCIETY

Government. Botswana is a parliamentary republic. The president (currently Festus Mogae) is head of state and head of government. The 57-seat National Assembly elects the president to a five-year term. Members of the National Assembly are directly elected to five-year terms. The voting age is 18. Batswana cite several factors contributing to their nation's political stability: Tswana cohesion and tolerance, a pastoralist heritage, traditional local democracy, a sound economy based on diamond mining, and well-educated and strong leaders.

A 15-member House of Chiefs, representing major ethnic groups, advises the National Assembly on legislation pertaining to custom and tradition. Judiciary cases involving customary law are heard in the *kgotla* by local chiefs and *headmen*, while statutory cases are heard in the Magistrates' Courts or the High Court. There is also an appeals court.

Villages are divided into *wards* (neighborhoods), each with a *headman* (an elder appointed by the village chief) and a *kgotla* (meeting place). Decisions at the *ward* and village levels are made in the *kgotla* by all adult males through a consensus process. Women may express opinions but remain in the back of the *kgotla*. The chief's *kgotla* is used to consider matters that cannot be settled at the *ward* level. Local councils govern schools and health clinics.

Economy. Botswana has enjoyed a stable economy since independence. Diamonds account for more than three-fourths of export revenue. The government is trying to diversify the economy to guard against world price fluctuations. Other exports include copper, nickel, and beef. Tourism is also an important industry. Botswana's currency is the *pula* (BWP). The word *pula* (meaning "rain") is also used as a greeting or at the end of speeches to mean "Good wishes."

Despite relative stability, problems exist. High unemployment has a significant impact on the younger Batswana. A shortage of skilled labor keeps industrial growth low, and land deterioration hampers agriculture. Despite a relatively high gross domestic product per capita, more than 60 percent of the nation's cattle, a traditional measure of wealth, are owned by less than 10 percent of the population. Hence, economic prosperity is enjoyed by a small percentage of people.

Transportation and Communications. Trains, buses, and *combies* (minibuses) are used for longer distances. A paved highway and a rail line parallel the eastern border, linking the major towns. The Trans-Kgalagadi Highway crosses the desert into Namibia. Rural people often walk long distances or hitchhike. If given a ride, they pay bus fare to the driver. Many people use bicycles for local transport. A minority own cars, but more urban residents are buying them.

Few people, even in towns, have landline telephones, but cellular telephones are widespread. Pay phones are located in post offices. Radio Botswana, a government-run station, broadcasts in Setswana and English. Private radio stations also operate. Television stations include a government-run station and one private station. Independent newspapers enjoy freedom of the press and wide circulation; the government sends free copies of the *Daily News* to schools.

Education. Botswana has a high primary school completion rate. The abolition of school fees in 1987 marked the first step in offering primary and secondary schooling to all children. Fees were reintroduced for secondary students in 2006. Teaching young children English before junior secondary school is a priority. Lack of English skills and lack of rural senior schools prevent many Junior Certificate (JC) holders from advancing. The Brigades (units providing technical training) and other vocational programs accept some JC students. Senior secondary graduates qualify for higher education by earning the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate and performing one year of community service. Botswana houses a number of institutions of higher education: the University of Botswana, a National Health Institute, six teacher-training colleges, a polytechnic institute, and an agricultural college.

Health. Botswana has many commonly diagnosed illnesses that are related to poverty and malnutrition. Still, nurse-staffed primary-care clinics are within reach of most people. Doctors practice in cities and larger towns. For many Batswana, traditional healers' herbal medicine and charms provide a popular alternative to Western medicine. Malaria, schistosomiasis, and sleeping sickness are found in the north. Botswana currently faces a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic: one-fourth of the adult population is infected.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	1,815,508 (rank=147)
Area, sq. mi.	231,800 (rank=44)
Area, sq. km.	600,370

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	124 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	108 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita	$12,387
Adult literacy rate	80% (male); 82% (female)
Infant mortality rate	87 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	48 (male); 49 (female)

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information. Embassy of Botswana, 1531–1533 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 244-4990; web site www.botswanaembassy.org.

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Biography from Book Browse

Biography

Alexander McCall Smith began the now highly successful 'No 1 Ladies Detective Agency' series in 1996, after being inspired by the sight of a 'traditionally built' Botswanan lady chasing down a chicken for a meal. The first book in the series - '*The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency*' was published in the UK in 1998 but didn't arrive in the USA until 2001.

Series Order
1. The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency
2. Tears of The Giraffe
3. Morality For Beautiful Girls
4. The Kalahari Typing School For Men
5. The Full Cupboard of Life
6. In The Company of Cheerful Ladies
7. Blue Shoes and Happiness
8. The Good Husband of Zebra Drive
9. The Miracle at Speedy Motors

Known to his friends as Sandy, McCall Smith describes the Botswanans as 'genuinely courteous people' He knows Botswana well as he grew up there and also spent several years on the law faculty of the University of Botswana; his volume on the legal system of Botswana (*The Criminal Law of Botswana*)remains the definitive and in fact, only book on the subject.

In 2004 he published the first in a new series, '*The Sunday Philosophy Club'* featuring Isabel Dalhousie, a Scottish-American professor of moral philosophy. The second in the series, *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, was published in 2005; *The Right Attitude To Rain* followed in 2006 and *The Careful Use of Compliments* in 2007.

When asked what ties the two series together he says that he believes it to be 'the comfort of the settings - not too cozy, but interesting and comfortable enough that you get caught up in the worlds of Mma. Ramotswe and Isabel'.

In addition to all his other projects, McCall Smith also finds time to play in the Really Terrible Orchestra and writes a daily column for *The Scotsman* newspaper titled *44 Scotland Street* - writing over 110,000 words in 6 months! Television and movie rights based on the series have recently been sold to Working Title Films (who produced Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*). The series have been published in 3 separate books to date: *44 Scotland Street, Espresso Tales* and *Love Over Scotland.*

In 2006 he, along with two other prominent Edinburgh authors (Ian Rankin and Irvin

Welsh), published a series of short stories titled *One City*, with the proceeds going to the Edinburgh based charity, One City.

Up until 2004 he juggled his career as a Professor of Medical Law, with his writing (in addition to the Mma Ramotswe and Isabel Dalhousie books, he has written over fifty other books ranging from specialist titles such as *Forensic Aspects of Sleep* (the only book on the subject) to *The Perfect Hamburger* (a children's novel) and *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* (a collection of stories about eccentric German professors). However, in late 2004 he took a 3 year leave from his academic position in order to focus on writing and, to the best of our knowledge, has not returned.

Profile: Book series "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency".(10:00-11:00 AM)(Broadcast transcript).***Morning Edition*** (May 12, 2003)(1188 words) From *General OneFile.*

LYNN NEARY, host:

Some mystery novels about a detective who doesn't really solve crimes have become best sellers in the United States and the United Kingdom. Set in Botswana, the stories are written by a Scotsman in Edinburgh. Minnesota Public Radio's Euan Kerr reports on the word-of-mouth success of Alexander McCall Smith and "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency."

EUAN KERR reporting:

Mma Ramotswe, owner and chief investigator at The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, is seldom overloaded with cases. There are no dingy rooms with drawn shades, no ashtrays brimming with butts. There's a lot of dust blowing in off the Kalahari, but very little crime. Alexander McCall Smith says, like private eyes around the world, the agency mainly watches wandering spouses.

Professor ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH (Author, "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency"): So Mma Ramotswe has to deal with that, with the badly behaved people of that sort, and little problems, I suppose--employees who are dishonest, that approaching crime and not real bawdy in the library stuff at all.

KERR: There is a rifle in the first book, but only because of a rogue crocodile. A handgun appears in the second book, "Tears of the Giraffe," but no one ever thinks of shooting it. It's planted to try to get someone in trouble. McCall Smith insists he's not even writing detective fiction, just stories about ordinary people in Botswana.

Ms. CARRIE STAR(ph): (Reading) `Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa at the foot of Kgale Hill.'

KERR: Carrie Star, a fan, reads from the first book, "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency."

Ms. STAR: (Reading) `These were its assets: a tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone and an old typewriter. Then there was a teapot in which Mma Ramotswe, the only lady private detective in Botswana, brewed red bush tea, and three mugs--one for herself, one for her secretary and one for the client. What else does a detective agency really need? Detective agencies rely on human intuition and intelligence, both of which Mma Ramotswe had in abundance. No inventory would ever include those, of course.'

KERR: Star is a manager at the Ruminator Bookstore in St. Paul. She likes the way Mma Ramotswe solves her cases. She says they're less about sleuthing and more about common sense.

Ms. STAR: She ends up making sort of decisions about what would be best for the victim involved sort of thing, and then it's a solution, and it's a very good solution.

KERR: Star has been recommending "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" novels to customers ever since she read about them in the independent book sellers newsletter Book Sense. With little money for publicity, the only real chance Mma Ramotswe had in getting to the US reading public was through the recommendations of independent bookstore staff. Carrie Star says she couldn't say enough about the first book to customers.

Ms. STAR: And I think it's really a word-of-mouth book because I noticed once that Book Sense newsletter came out and then I started reading them and we started to get them in the store, suddenly they were selling really well.

KERR: Star says Ruminator sells about 10 copies a week of each of the three novels. It adds up. Mma Ramotswe's US publisher estimates it has almost 600,000 copies in print. The first book was recently selected for the "Today" show book club. The success of "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" has been

big news in Scotland. Jan Rutherford(ph), the publicist for Polygon Press, Mma Ramotswe's UK publisher, says any international best sellers are a boost for the press and the Scottish writers it publishes.

Ms. JAN RUTHERFORD (Polygon Press): They're hugely important because they bring money back into a very small company, and therefore, they allow the publisher to carry on publishing and taking risks with unknown writers. And without the success stories, they wouldn't have the finance available to do that.

KERR: For a long time, Alexander McCall Smith was one of those lesser-known fiction writers, although he's had little problem getting published through his day job. He's a professor of medical law at Edinburgh University. He's actually written 50 books over the years, primarily legal textbooks, including work on medical ethics, African law and the Scottish legal system. He helped write the criminal code for the country of Lesotho, but says it was never implemented. He serves on the British Human Genetics Board. He is also well-known in Scotland for his children's books. He says moving from one kind of writing to another can have its uses.

Prof. SMITH: To move to fiction is a great relief because you can step into a world, you can let the characters take over. It's almost as if you move into a trance. You're merely the amanuensis for these people. You're really just describing something that is happening irrespective of any effort on your part.

KERR: The success of the Mma Ramotswe novels in Britain and the US has resulted in the book's translation and publication all over the world, including Botswana.

Ms. FIONA MOFFETT(ph): They have been selling well here.

KERR: Fiona Moffett lives in Botswana. She's Alexander McCall Smith's friend, and she appears as a character in one of the books.

Ms. MOFFETT: I think some of the comments I've had are that they are a little idealistic--that is, the way people would like to see Botswana, but it isn't always like that.

KERR: Moffett says the people of Botswana have achieved remarkable things in the years since

gaining independence in 1966. Yet, she says, there are real problem with AIDS, and Botswana is part of an Africa troubled by conflict and corruption. There are oblique references to all these issues in the Mma Ramotswe stories, but Alexander McCall Smith says that's not what his stories are about.

Prof. SMITH: I really want to portray the positive side of Africa, and I make no apology for this. It's unashamedly focused on the positive side. And so, for example, many countries in Africa have been deeply troubled by bad government, by corruption, by war an so on. And that's pretty a familiar story. I don't think I need to say anything more about that.

KERR: What McCall Smith says he does want to concentrate on is what he sees as an important trait in southern Africa, the willingness to forgive. He points to the way Nelson Mandela forgave the people who imprisoned him for decades. When Mma Ramotswe is on a job, she looks for a way to resolve the case and leave no hard feelings.

Prof. SMITH: I think she realizes that one doesn't really want to concentrate on recrimination or punishment. She takes the view that wounds can heal, why keep them open?

KERR: The fourth "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" book, called "The Kalahari Typing School for Men," has just been published here in the US. For NPR News, I'm Euan Kerr.

NEARY: This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Lynn Neary.

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"All that is fine in the human condition": crafting words, creating Ma-Ramotswe: Pinkie Mekgwe and Alexander McCall Smith in conversation.(Interview).***Research in African Literatures*** 37.2 (Summer 2006): p.176(11). (6004 words) From *General OneFile.*

ABSTRACT

Acclaimed Edinburgh-basedf author Alexander McCall Smith is a professor of Medical Law and a prolific fiction writer. He has written over fifty books. It is, however, with the fictional character Ma-Ramotswe that his name is most readily associated. Ma-Ramotswe is the protagonist in McCall Smith's Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency series, which comprises six novels to date. The seventh and last in the series, Blue Shoes and Happiness, is to be released in 2006. The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency series is widely read in thirty-two languages across the world. The novels are set in Botswana, where McCall Smith was previously in the Department of Law at the University of Botswana. The author retains a strong relationship with the country and its people. In July 2004, Alexander McCall Smith visited Gaborone, Botswana, to begin work on adapting The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency series into a film.

In this interview with Pinkie Mekgwe, McCall Smith talks about the importance of creating a character who represents "all that is fine in the human condition" in an era and geopolitical space where nihilism reigns. The author opens up on his life, work, awards, and future possibilities.

31 July 2004. Gaborone, Botswana.

PM: Alexander McCall Smith, thank you for making the time to speak to me.

AMS: Thank you very much indeed, Pinkie, for inviting me.

PM: You have often been described as someone who leads a double life as it were--as professor of Medical Law and prolific writer of over fifty books. Where and how do these two spheres meet?

AMS: Well, I suppose a lot of writers end up having double lives because writers have to earn their living when they start off--and they are often doing something else. I think in fact that it is a good thing that writers do more than one thing because that means that the writer gets experience from another area of existence, so to speak. So, I had a separate career--I was a professor of Law at the University of Edinburgh and indeed I had also worked at the University of Botswana some years back in the Law Department and continue to have quite a close association with the university of Botswana. So that was my career. In the meantime, at night and at weekends, I was a writer, and I continue to do this. Now recently because of what has happened to my books--and my books, generally I suppose, have taken off over the last few years--I have had to make certain decisions about that, so I have taken a very long unpaid leave of absence from my day job, so to speak, and I am spending my time now being a writer.

PM: Your many books bear testimony to the varied aspects of your life, don't they? I mean, you've written such books as The Forensic Aspects of Sleep, Criminal Law of Botswana--those would be

from your law background--and then there is The Perfect Hamburger! Children's books?

AMS: Yes, there's quite a variety of books I suppose, in the list of books which I've written. That book The Criminal Law of Botswana I wrote with my colleague and very dear friend, Professor Frimpong from the University of Botswana. I've often written books with people which I've very much enjoyed doing. The Forensic Aspects of Sleep is a peculiar book, and I wrote that with a number of other people. It is all about what happens when people have sleep disturbances and they become sleep walkers for example, and they may do something unfortunate while they are sleep walking--what are the legal implications of that?--there are also interesting legal questions surrounding the position of people who get excessively tired and then maybe operate machinery or drive or do something of that sort, and there may be accidents resulting from that which leads to legal questions. The Perfect Hamburger which you mention is not a recipe book; it's not a cookery book; it's not instructions how to make the perfect hamburger--I wouldn't know how to do that; in fact, I don't really like hamburgers--but I did write a book called The Perfect Hamburger which is a novel for children.

PM: I want to quiz you now on how you are able to wear various different thinking caps at the same time. Right now you are working on three different series at the same time. You are well known for the first of these, The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series (and we will go into the different series). Why write all three simultaneously, and how do you work that out?

AMS: Yes, I suppose I do rather like to do lots of different things at the same time. I find that a very attractive way of working as a writer--to have two or three books on the go at any one particular time, so that one might work on one book one week, and the next week on another book.

PM: And you don't lose your thread?

AMS: No ... although I don't like to stop if the writing of one book is going very well. If it is, then I'll see it through. I don't like to chop and change too much. I think that if I said right, I am only going to work on this today, and I will work on another book the following day, then I could lose my thread, so I try to avoid that.

PM: You are right now in the middle of serializing a novel, 44 Scotland Street, for a newspaper in Scotland. Tell us about that.

AMS: Well, that's an interesting story. Last year (July 2003) I was in the United States and I went to a party which was given by the American writer, Amy Tan. I was talking to someone at this gathering and they pointed out that another guest at the party, Armistead Maupin, had written a serial novel in the San Francisco Chronicle years back which was called Tales of the City, and this went on--I think it was a weekly instalment in his case--for a long time, then they would publish his books. And of course the idea of a serial novel being published in a newspaper has a reputable literary pedigree in that that's what Charles Dickens did. ...

PM: That's right! With Hard Times. ...

AMS: Definitely. Charles Dickens did it, I think Tolstoy also did it. Flaubert, who wrote Madame Bovary, also did that in France--and that almost landed him in prison--and I hope that is not going to happen to me. ...

PM: Oh my! Especially that in 44 Scotland Street you refer to real-life characters!

AMS: Oh yes, I do that. ... But what happened is that when I got back, I was asked by one of the newspapers in the UK to write about my trip and I wrote the article, and mentioned in it the conversation about the man who had done a serial novel in the United States, and I said what a pity it was that newspapers did not publish serial novels anymore. That was read by the editor of The Scotsman, which is a big newspaper in Scotland, and he asked me to write it.

PM: And now it has taken off remarkably, attracting a large world-wide readership particularly over the internet. There is now talk of turning it into a television series, right?

AMS: That's right. The other day I was involved in a very interesting program of discussions here in Gaborone which the British Council had organized with The Botswana Writers' Association together with a number of publishers from Gaborone. And I said to the writers there that this is one of the best ways to attract interest in the reading of fiction: why not get one of the newspapers here to publish a serial novel by a Motswana writer. I think that would be a great thing to do, so I hope that happens.

PM: I hope it does happen. I think it will. ...

AMS: I think you should write it!

PM: Actually, I will. Now that I have gone public about it, I will simply have to do it! But back to you: the other series you are working on is called The Sunday Philosophy Club. What I find interesting there is that once again the main character, as in your Ladies Detective series, is a woman, Isabel Dalhousie. Can you tell us about that?

AMS: Thank you, yes, The Sunday Philosophy Club is a new series of novels. It is about a woman who is a moral philosopher. She is very interested in the moral implications of what one does. She is always asking herself what the moral thing to do is, in different cases, and she gets involved in the mysteries and problems of other people. I've had great fun writing that, and I am contracted to write four of those, to start with.

PM: A woman, morals, mystery, an interest in other people: this sounds a bit like Ma-Ramotswe, the character at the centre of The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency Series. In fact, it is this series, which has sold some five million copies so far, that you are most well known for.

AMS: That's right. I think there's no question that that series is what really got my career going as a writer. It has taken off across the world and has been translated into some thirty-one languages including Chinese, Catalan, Icelandic, Thai. ... So Ma-Ramotswe is speaking to people all over the world, which is a great surprise to me, and I am delighted.

PM: She is speaking to the world about Botswana, and we are delighted about that. I will be asking you who Ma-Ramotswe is, but to ask first about the whole series to date, would you say that these are books that evoke traditional life in Botswana?

AMS: Maybe. To an extent. But I suppose also evoke other things as well. I am very interested in developing the characters in these books.

PM: Let us briefly go into these books to get a sense of the chronology, and trace the development of the characters because the characters do develop in rather interesting ways over time. To begin with, we meet Ma-Ramotswe in The No. 1 Ladies Detective. Her father, Obed, has just passed away and left her cattle. What does she do with her inheritance?

AMS: Well, he hopes, I think, that she will put the cattle to good use. He says to her that she might want to start a business and I think he had in mind a solid business, a butchery or something of that sort, and she says: "I know what I'll do, I'll start a detective agency." Poor Obed Ramotswe is pretty shocked by that, but unfortunately he is not long for this world, so she goes ahead--she starts a detective agency. She doesn't really know anything about being a detective, but she is a very intelligent, intuitive woman, and she feels, quite rightly, that she can tackle anything. So she gets a book called The Principles of Private Detection by Clovers Anderson, gets an office, and she is in business.

PM: Something that I find strongly evoked in that first one is the relationship, in particular the strong bond, between father and daughter. The love. Tell us why you chose to write about that.

AMS: Yes, that is a very important part of her story. I don't know why I particularly chose that. I suppose it's something that must interest me. Sometimes one sees a very strong bond between a father and daughter, a bond of affection and loyalty, I think that is something that I wanted to portray in literary terms, and it seems to me that this would be something which would add a depth to the characters. Precious Ramotswe is a very, very fine lady, I wanted her to represent all that is fine in the human condition. So this idea--where does this come from?--well, she had this wonderful father who was a very great man. He worked very hard and had a great eye for cattle. She says that he could build up a herd very well, and he did. He lived his life with honour and integrity. And that is something that I rather admire. You meet people like that. I wanted her to have him as her icon, the person whom she admires.

PM: And Ma-Ramotswe, his daughter, is precious to him. Understandably then, Obed is upset when Ma-Ramotswe's marriage goes sour. At the end of the first book then, we have come to know a woman with a gentleman for a father (she keeps saying that) who nonetheless "leaves" her for the next world; she gets less than a good man for a husband, and thus ends up alone. With these departures though, she does not buckle under. Rather, she sets up a detective agency and is all set to take on the problems of others--and this is the point at which we move on to the next book, Tears of the Giraffe.

AMS: I must point out that originally I had thought that I would only write one book--it started off as a short story, it became a book, and then I discovered suddenly that I was writing a whole series of books. In the second book, Tears of the Giraffe, we see a development in her professional life. She is asked by an American woman who had lived briefly in Botswana to find out what happened to her son who disappeared many years before. This woman has come back and wants to know the truth. Ma-Ramotswe is able to find out what happened in this sad event. The second book is about forgiveness, and about setting the past to rest--because I think that is something that we all face in our lives. We face problems of forgiveness: at what point do we forgive those who've wronged us, for example; at what point do we say that the past is the past and that we need to move on from that past? And it is very important in the development of Ma-Ramotswe's character that we see this strain of forgiveness. She often says, "I am a forgiving lady, and I don't see any sense in punishing people too much for what has happened," and that is what I develop in the second book.

PM: Effectively, then, the detective agency becomes a vehicle for interactions between people from all walks of life, with different issues, issues to be pondered over, issues to be resolved, issues that confront humanity and are the essence of life itself. And we are invited always by Ma-Ramotswe to join her in her bush-tea as we take brief pauses through the journey of life. Let's move on to the next book in the series, Morality for Beautiful Girls. What is this one about?

AMS: In this third book, we see some further developments in her career. She is approached by a

man who organizes beauty competitions. ...

PM: And we know all about beauty competitions--they are a big thing in Botswana!

AMS: That's right, and I have always been rather interested in reading reports about what has happened at beauty competitions, and that is very interesting. ...

PM: So this is something very strong within the culture of which you write. ...

AMS: Yes, but the beauty competition also provides us with the chance to develop a little mystery in that the person organizing the competition wants to make sure that a very good lady wins it, because he does not want any of the ladies being convicted with criminal offences after they win the beauty competition. So he wants to "fix" it and make sure of that--so Ma-Makutsi, Grace Makutsi, who is Ma-Ramotswe's assistant and is a very important character in these books--comes in and she finds out which one of the finalists is the nicest one.

PM: Morality in question! The fourth book in this series is entitled The KalahariTyping School for Men. What an idea!

AMS: Yes! The idea there again is the idea of Ma-Makutsi. She has had quite a hard life. She has had to struggle a bit, and she really worked very hard at secretarial college-she got 97% and we hear a lot about that! It's one of the jokes in the books: 97%--she's very proud of that. She's a very fine person. She feels that she needs to earn a little bit more money because Ma-Ramotswe can't really pay her a very good wage because the detective agency does not make that much money.

PM: Particularly because Ma-Ramotswe in her empathy and generosity does not always charge her clients.

AMS: You are right. She doesn't always collect the fees, she does not charge as much as she should. She is a very generous lady. But Ma-Makutsi has been working at the same time in the garage which is associated with the detective agency, that's Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni's "Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors." She's been working as assistant manager there as well as being assistant detective. She suddenly realizes that many men can't type! And many men are too ashamed to say they can't type. And they are too ashamed to go to a class where there will be women who will do better at the typing than they will. And so she thinks: she will set up a typing school just for men, where men can learn just among other men, so there will be no women who will laugh at them when they can't type very well.

PM: Very interesting. We should mention at this stage that J. L. B. Matekoni and Ma-Ramotswe have gotten engaged, but we do not know when they will get married. Still, their lives have physically merged at this stage, they work from the same building because Matekoni got sick in Morality for Beautiful Girls. Let us briefly go back to that episode of sickness.

AMS: Yes, that was a curious thing. In the third book, suddenly Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni suddenly became depressed. And I hadn't planned that. I hadn't planned that that would happen in the book. He suddenly behaved in a depressed way. And of course depressive illness as you know is a very common illness--it affects many people, there are many families that will be affected by this, and it is of course very treatable.

PM: I find it interesting that you give depression to a male rather than a female character, and yet depression is often associated with women--perhaps because associated with weakness--are you saying here that a good man--and Matekoni is a good man--can say, "I have a weakness" when

they realize it, and solicit the help of loved ones?

AMS: That is right. I mean, I don't really set out deliberately to say that. But maybe that is what it says--it does make the point that depressive illness can strike absolutely anybody and it strikes in this case a very fine man, a very good mechanic, who you'd think would be perfectly okay--and I am happy to say that he gets fixed up and by the end of the book he has recovered.

PM: J.L. B. Matekoni himself is someone who fixes things, "the best mechanic in Botswana." He is also a character who develops. Let's take a closer look at him.

AMS: He's quite a quiet man. He's a very good man and he's rather taken advantage of by people. In particular, there's a matron at an orphanage who is--

PM: Ma-Potokwane!

AMS: Ma-Potokwane is very good at getting Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni to fix things for her. They've got an old pump at this orphanage that keeps breaking down and rather than get a new one, she phones him and says, "Please come and help us." He goes out there, and she knows that he has a weakness for fruit cake, and so she makes him a big fruit cake, and she says, "By the way, there's something I'd like you to do," and he goes off and fixes the pump yet again! And in one of the books--I forget which one it is--eventually he says, 'I've had enough of this pump, I am not going to fix it again. You've got to get a new pump!"

PM: In The Kalahari Typing School, then, Ma-Makutsi is at the center and we get to see her character develop. She is a hard-working, very enthusiastic woman--sometimes rather too much so because she sounds so enthusiastic that she often startles people when she answers the phone! And now we move on to the fifth in the series, The Full Cupboard of Life. What's going on here? Why are these two (Ma-Ramotswe and J.L.B. Matekoni) still not married?

AMS: Well, you may well ask! Ma-Ramotswe is getting a little bit impatient because people are saying to her, "You've been engaged for a very long time, when is the wedding going to be?" So she is a little bit concerned about this. But there is an important development in the marriage department in this book, and it involves a certain amount of "assistance" from Ma-Potokwane who's very good at forcing people to do things!

PM: She gets things moving. ...

AMS: Oh yes, she makes a strong fruit cake for Mr. Matekoni and I think that probably helps to get the marriage going, so to speak.

PM: And on the work front, Ma-Ramotswe is dealing with a wealthy woman who has several suitors and she is trying to figure out whether they have good intentions or are merely after her money. Once again morals in question?

AMS: That's right. What I like to do in my books--and not just in this series but in the Scottish series as well--I do find these moral issues interesting. And in this case I suppose it's a question of sincerity of motive that she is interested in checking up on. Ma-Ramotswe does find out who the best suitor is, but the problem with giving people advice is people don't take it!

PM: And Ma-Ramotswe gives a lot of advice generally. In fact, she seems to do more advising than detecting actually. I find it interesting too that it seems that it is good old common sense that often wins through in these books. Now taking into account how she learnt about the business, it

would seem to me that the message being relayed here--and I know you've already said you don't deliberately set out to deliver specific messages--is that education in itself does not necessarily equip one for life if it isn't accompanied by basic common sense?

AMS: I think that's right. Education is tremendously important and one would never doubt that. But at the same time we must remind ourselves that there are people who may not have had the benefits of a tertiary education, for example, but who are very clever and resourceful for people, and Ma-Ramotswe is somebody in that category. She wasn't fortunate enough to have a tertiary education, but she is a very intelligent, clever woman. In the first book, she outwits people who have had much more education than she has because she is so intelligent and intuitive. She's a clever lady.

PM: In these books, you focus primarily on the sunny side of life. The sixth book is even entitled In the Company of Cheerful Ladies. Problems are hinted at, in the whole series, and yet people seem always to overcome, and cheer, warmth--empathy--seem to be the order of the day.

AMS: I think that it is important to be optimistic. I don't really have much time for a nihilistic, denying philosophy of life. I don't see why one should go through life feeling that all is bleakness and that there are no possibilities. I think that it is important to believe that one can make a lot of life; that one can get a certain satisfaction from life. So I suppose I am a bit of a utopian novelist. I am not a social realist novel, I am not really concerned with describing things always as they are; rather I look at how they might be.

PM: And yet you don't necessarily present us with a perfect world: Ma-Ramotswe's first marriage is a disaster; her father dies; Ma-Makutsi struggles; she also has a sick brother to look after. But overall, you do paint a rather idyllic picture of Botswana. Considering that this is a society that is currently struggling with HIV/AIDS, why is the affliction so absent in the books?

AMS: In the books I do refer to it, but I don't go on about and I don't think one wants to refer to it in literature all the time because I think people just want to get on with their lives. Particularly as an outsider, I don't think it's for me to spend too much time on that particular issue.

PM: Talking about being an outsider, you were born in Zimbabwe, have lived in Botswana, and are now based in Scotland. And yet Botswana is the setting of the whole No. 1 Ladies Detective Series. Why base most of your writing on Botswana? What is the special connection there?

AMS: It's accidental really. I lived here briefly many years ago and I visit Botswana every year. I suppose I became very interested in this country and I admire the country a great deal. I think this is a remarkable country which has achieved a great deal--we all know that--and I think that it is a special place. I wanted to tell a readership in Western Europe and North America who might not really know that. I wanted them to know, and I think they are getting that message through Ma-Ramotswe.

PM: Botswana comes through as a character in its own right in these novels.

AMS: Botswana comes through as being the hero, yes. In a sense that's fine. I admire people who are proud of their country, this applies not only in Botswana, this applies anywhere. I think that if one can be proud of one's country, that's a great thing. And I celebrate that. Ma-Ramotswe says that she is a patriot and that she is proud of her country. And that's quite moving, I think. Pride in one's country--affection for anything-can be poignant and moving. And I bring that out, I think, in these books.

PM: That and sadness amongst the cars of Botswana!--the subject of the first chapter of the fifth book, The Full Cupboard of Life. Tell us about that.

AMS: Yes, that's the title of the first chapter. It comes from Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni's reflections on how his two apprentices aren't very good. And he's even seen one of them use a hammer on an engine--and that's a great sin if you're a mechanic--and he says, "I really don't know what's going to happen when these two young men go out and set themselves up as mechanics: there'll be a great sadness amongst the cars of Botswana!"

PM: J. L. B Matekoni's interested in the work ethic of the young apprentices while Ma-Ramotswe keeps a tab on their moral issues then? Girls, cleanliness ....

AMS: I am having fun with the apprentices, really. Mr. J. L. B Matekoni provides proper protection for the hands but they go and touch things in the office when they haven't wiped the grease off their hands, and that makes Ma-Ramotswe and especially Ma-Makutsi quite cross. There's a terrible scene in the sixth book, In the Company of Cheerful Ladies, in which the elder apprentice, Charlie, uses a new tea-pot that Ma-Makutsi has, to put diesel in, and she absolutely flies off the handle!

PM: And we know how important tea--bush-tea specifically--is to these women.

AMS: I must tell you something about that bush-tea. There was an article in the press in the UK--since the publication of these books, sales of red bush-tea--rooibos tea-have gone up by 70%.

PM: Interesting! Let's turn now to the craft of writing itself. You write prolifically, and you write very well. What prepared you?

AMS: That is very kind of you. I suppose what really prepared me for that was having been a voracious reader as a child. I think children who read a great deal often develop the ability to write. Writing is something that--you yourself know as a writer--you really feel you have to do. It is a creative urge. Where that comes from is anybody's guess. Most writers, I think, are trying to make sense of the world. They might have a sense of loss and separation somewhere, there may be some personal psychological factor which is producing this, but it's strong, and it has to come out.

PM: It has to come out. Some people talk about it as something that just has to be born. You travel a lot, speaking at conferences, literary events, charity events, raising money especially for children in Africa (such as those in Zimbabwe) so there's some direct financial benefit for the continent that you write about. Do these activities and your extensive travels especially, influence your writing?

AMS: It probably does because I set my books and my stories all over the place, so I suppose I'm a fairly international writer. I also find that the travel introduces me to people--I see people whom I might otherwise not see, so I find that very productive. But one thing that travelling does--and I think I should probably travel more--is it takes up time and I have to battle now for my writing time, because my time now is controlled by other people.

PM: Everybody knows that writing requires a certain level of discipline, for some people even a "special" environment. What is your writing regime?

AMS: That's a very interesting question, Pinkie, the environment in particular, that's very intriguing. I think a lot of writers are almost obsessive about their particular environment, some of them say I must sit by the window, or I must have yellow paper, or whatever it is, certain music

must be playing, or something like that. I don't mind too much about that as long as I'm not in an environment which is aesthetically unappealing. So I could never write in a modern motel room, which is a terrible disaster area for the soul. I like to write in simple, preferably quiet surroundings. I also tend to like writing in the morning, although I can write at other times, I rather enjoy getting up early-ish in the morning and working for three or four hours on something.

PM: You are a multiple award-winning writer, having scooped three awards within the first half of 2004 in addition to all your earlier awards. Tell us about the awards and what they mean to you.

AMS: I've been very fortunate in that I've received "author of the year" award in British Book Awards. I was absolutely delighted when that happened. I also got British Book Sellers "author of the year" as well as Waterstone's "author of the year" awards. I feel blessed, and I feel that people have been very generous to me.

PM: You have been very generous, as a writer, to have touched so many people in such gentle ways, emphasizing the good over the bad, nudging readers perhaps to go back to some "good old solid traditional ways," as Ma-Ramotswe would say.

AMS: She does, you see, she says that she admires the old Botswana ways and often tut-tuts a bit about some modern behaviour. She is, though, selective in the old values that she likes.

PM: Oh yes, she says she is modern as well.

AMS: She is a bit of a feminist, Ma-Ramotswe. She won't be pushed around by men and she manages to outwit many men as well.

PM: Why are all your central characters these strong women?

AMS: Oh, I don't know. You'd have to ask a psychologist or a psychiatrist to have a long talk with me. I don't know why.

PM: That would take us, I suspect, back to your childhood, your upbringing. Would you say any of your childhood experiences has gone towards shaping the kind of writer you have become?

AMS: Probably. I think every writer is affected by childhood because childhood decides what sort of person you're going to be, although sometimes people who've had a bad childhood can overcome and become the sort of person they want to be. I had the great privilege of spending my boyhood in Zimbabwe. We lived in Bulawayo, and I think that gave me the affection for Africa, obviously, although I have lived most of my life--certainly most of my adult life--in Scotland with one or two times away here in Gaborone, and at some point spent time in Swaziland. So that would explain my interest in this part of Africa, and why perhaps I am writing these books.

PM: Please tell us about your family.

AMS: I am married to Elizabeth, who is a doctor in Edinburgh. She is a General Practitioner in a practice with five other doctors, close to where we live. We've got two daughters, Lucy--who is twenty--and Emily, who is seventeen. In the past I've brought both my two daughters to see Botswana. Lucy is at the University of Cambridge reading for a degree in English. She is a very good jazz trombonist. Emily plays the trumpet--she's just finished school and wants to study medicine.

PM: I know you also play in an orchestra. Do you do this with your family, then?

AMS: Yes we do, and the orchestra is called "the really terrible orchestra." It is very bad!

PM: Sounds like another novel in the making ... maybe even a whole series?

AMS: Yes, indeed. You've got no idea how bad we are. We are really, really, weak: four weak musicians who can't play their instruments very well. I play the bassoon, but I really don't play the whole bassoon because I find the top notes just too difficult, so I stop when we get to difficult bits. My wife plays the e-flat horn, and we have great fun, but we make a terrible, terrible, noise--it's just awful!

PM: You're a professor of medical law; your wife is in medicine, you are in law. How did the two of you meet?

AMS: We met first at university in Scotland, a long time ago. We met again later on, and decided we'd get married.

PM: Clearly, you like music. Is listening to, and making music, your way of relaxing?

AMS: I do like listening to music. And I often will listen to music while I'm writing. Interestingly enough, I find that does help me quite a bit--and I've got very wide tastes in music. For relaxation, though, on a Saturday afternoon I'll go and lie down and sleep.

PM: If the house were to burn down and you had just yourself, a book, and something else to save from the house, what book would it he, and what would the something else be?

AMS: The family and the cat are out of the house, are they not?

PM: Absolutely! You'll see them afterwards.

AMS: My goodness me! One book: A collection of the poems of W. H. Auden, a poet I admire very greatly, and I have the first edition Auden's Collected Poems. I think I would also take my bass saxophone. I have a saxophone which is very unusual and rare. It is a big instrument, so heavy that you can't hold it around your neck. It has a stand with wheels, so I'd have to try and get that out of the house in time, though that might be quite difficult because it's so heavy!

PM: Alexander McCall Smith, thank you very much.

AMS: Thank you Pinkie, it has been my absolute pleasure.

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Interview

Q&A with Alexander McCall Smith

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?
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.

Your detective, Precious Ramotswe, is a wonderfully unique character—a Batswana 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?
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.

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

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 No1 Ladies' Detective Agency*), she even sends away for an instructional manual, Principles of Private Detection. What interests you about "education of the detective"?
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.

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?
> 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.

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?
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.

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

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?
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.

Do you see the Precious Ramotswe 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?
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.

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?
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.

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?
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.

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

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?
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.

A drowsy year, a sleeper hit.(book publishing, 'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency').Martin Arnold. ***The New York Times*** 152.(Dec 12, 2002): pB3(N) pE3 (L). (1066 words)

If there's a charming success story in book publishing to be told in what has generally been a bummer of a year, let it start in Botswana, an arid landlocked plateau. Place in it a "traditionally built" African woman, Precious Ramotswe, operative of a private detective agency. Add to that her creator, a Scottish law professor and author. Conjure up that endangered species, the independent bookstore, which still has the power of word of mouth and the ability to hand-sell a writer to success.

Put them together and out pops a series of three sleuthing novels -- the first being "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" -- that have in just over a year become a publishing phenomenon of sorts, proving not only that people will read something quirky if interestingly conceived, but also that, contrary to belief, there's a bit of romance left in publishing.

There are so many wonders about the series. There's the detective, Mma Ramotswe, as she's politely called by all, who founded her detective agency with proceeds from the sale of the herd of 180 cattle her father left to her. There's the author, Alexander McCall Smith, 54, born of Scottish parents in what is now Zimbabwe, who teaches medical law at the University of Edinburgh and who had written a collection of short stories and numerous children's and reference books before he went one day with friends to visit a woman in a Botswana village. He recalled: "She went out in the yard, where there was a chicken pen, and, smiling away, she wrung a chicken's neck and handed it to us. And I thought, 'What an enterprising woman' and, 'I would like to write someday about a woman like that.' "

So he did. "She was a detective because a detective sees lots of interesting and entertaining things in people," Mr. Smith said. "There's no crime in the books, but there are her insights, and little stories about little ordinary difficulties like adultery, badly behaved husbands."

As Mma Ramotswe says: "We help people with problems in their lives. We are not here to solve crimes." Mostly true, depending on one's definition of crime.

In fact, the books are more about Africa than about detecting. Mr. Smith said: "I suppose people would describe them as gentle books. But I want to portray the positive side of life in Africa. Mainly in the press we get wars and disasters, but there are mostly good people leading good lives."

Whatever is in the books, they have clearly enchanted the independent booksellers, who have been the driving engine, and are getting the attention of the chain stores.

Independent booksellers network. They call each other about books they like. They even have a high-tech service called BookSense that tracks book sales. They are pushing Mr. Smith's sales up and up and up.

The first Mma Ramotswe novel was published in 1998 by a small Edinburgh house, Polygon, and was distributed in the United States by the Columbia University Press, whose sales manager, Brad Hebel, said: "We fell in love with it. It was nice to have around, and we were sorry to see it go." The Columbia sales representatives did such a good job with the independents that Polygon sold the rights to Anchor Books, the trade paperback division of Pantheon Books. In September Anchor published its edition of the first in the series and the second, "Tears of the Giraffe," and last month came the third, "Morality for Beautiful Girls." Their success is in the numbers, hefty like the protagonist.

"The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" had a first Anchor printing of 37,500 copies, it now has 70,000 copies in print, and the publisher is not unrealistically hoping to sell 100,000. "Tears" had a first printing of 20,000 and is up to 45,000, and "Morality" also had a first printing of 20,000.

One of the textbook scenarios in publishing is to slowly build an author's following in trade paperback and then switch the writer to hardcover. It doesn't often work that smoothly, but it has for Mr. Smith. Pantheon Books will publish the fourth in his series, "The Kalahari Typing School for Men," in hardcover in April with a first printing of 50,000 copies. (Hint of what's to come: Mma Ramotswe has a sexist rival who opens up the Satisfaction Guaranteed Detective Agency.)

Here's how independents network. Daniel Goldin, buyer for the Harry W. Schwartz Bookstores in Milwaukee, said: "We first heard about it from the Columbia reps, and they were obsessed about getting it out. We speak to other stores, and when you find a person working in a store that really loves a book, you pay attention. That's what happened with 'Ladies.' We sold about 150 copies and are really focusing on 'Tears.' "

"We are always looking for something that can be hand-sold," he said. "These books are well written with great ambience and a great character. If we like a book, we can help build someone into a major author."

Carla Cohen, an owner of the Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington, said that through BookSense she got an idea of what her independent colleagues around the country liked. She read "Ladies" and liked it and "put up a little sign in the store saying to customers, 'You're going to like this book.' " So far she has sold 163 copies of the first novel in the series and 90 of the second, "and these are good sales for us."

"Really good, I should say," she continued. "It's very exciting."

Mr. Smith's editor, Edward Kastenmeier, said, "Mysteries have become so bloody, but these are about domestic life, and the wonderful character solves them with her insight and intuition."

All it takes is a small thing, like one bookstore employee who likes a book, and that's the start of the word-of-mouth campaign in that area. Certainly the numbers look good for Mr. Smith. An independent fiction best-seller list compiled internally by The New York Times will have the first book in the series at No. 4 next week and the second book at No. 15.

The assets of Mma Ramotswe's detective agency were small, too. A tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone, an old typewriter and a teapot. It will be as interesting to watch her business build as it will be to watch Mr. Smith's numbers.

Named Works: The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency (Book) Marketing

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