

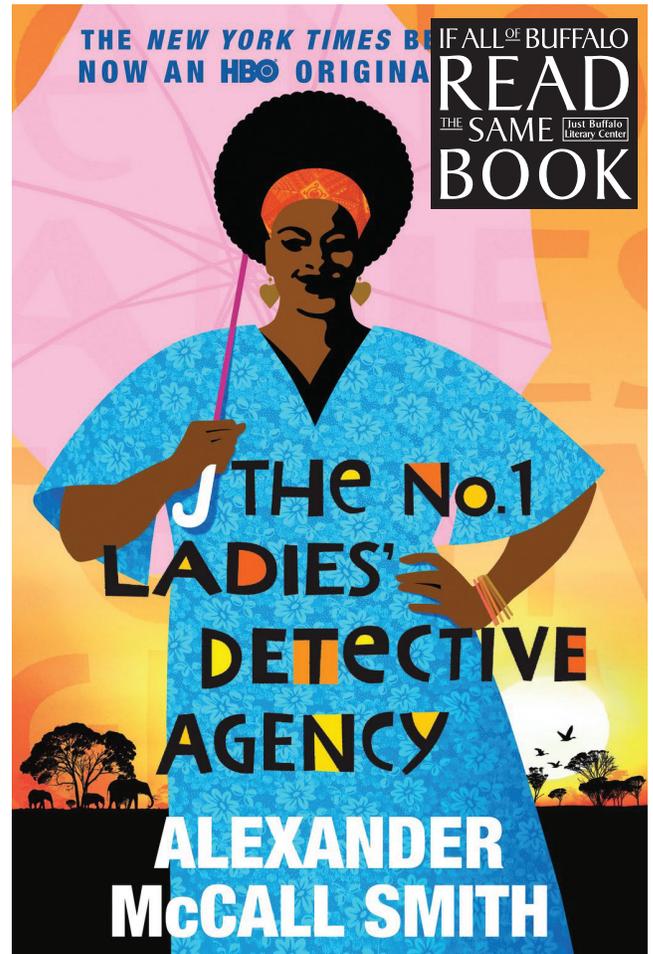


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# ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

## READER'S GUIDE



# Alexander McCall Smith

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It could be said that prolific writer Alexander McCall Smith creates worlds in which readers love to live. An internationally respected medical ethicist by training, McCall Smith has been writing about the world around him for more than 50 years, penning a staggering 90 books in his lifetime that includes academic titles, short story collections, serial mystery novels, and children's books. His adult fiction features unforgettable characters and deceptively simple yet clever storylines that explore the human condition, and many evoke nostalgia for days gone by. His gentle, straightforward style, combined with a fairness and acute sense of observation informed by his expertise in law and ethics, immerses the reader in various world cultures in ways that never fail to enlighten, charm, and amuse. Writes British novelist William Sutcliffe in a 2006 *Guardian* review, "McCall Smith's great skill is that he can write stories with a strong sense of time and place that somehow also possess a fabular, timeless quality."

Like any good writer, McCall Smith focuses on the places he knows well—southern Africa and Edinburgh, Scotland. He was born in 1948 in the city of Bulawayo in Rhodesia, then a British colony and now known as Zimbabwe. He wrote his first story when he was just eight but began seriously writing adult fiction much later in his professional career. Commercial success came quickly with his 1998 mystery novel, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, which recounts the adventures, trials, and triumphs of Precious Ramotswe, a self-made private investigator in the African country of Botswana—a nation, like its heroine, often caught between traditional and modern values. The book, which has sold 20 million copies worldwide, singlehandedly brought McCall Smith international fame, and in just five years he went on to write five more popular books in the series: *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000), *Morality for Beautiful Girls* (2001), *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (2002), *The Full Cupboard of Life* (2003), and *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies* (2004). More fiction series followed, including the "Isabelle Dalhousie Mysteries" set in an Edinburgh suburb; *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, a collection of short stories he self-published in 1997 that parodied academia through their main character, the German philologist Professor Von Igelfeld, and subsequently launched the trilogy "The 2½ Pillars of Wisdom"; and a 2004 serial novel, *44 Scotland Street*, which he published in *The Scotsman* in 800-word installments. "Corduroy Mansions" is his most recent series, written between 2009 and 2011.

These books' collective mass appeal have transformed McCall Smith into a literary brand of sorts; he travels the world giving readings and other literary appearances, has had his work translated into 40 languages as well as into audio books, DVDs, and BBC television specials—he even has his own smartphone app.

The youngest of four children, McCall Smith spent his childhood in Zimbabwe and attended the Christian Brothers College in Bulawayo. When he was just 17, he left Africa to study law in the United Kingdom. After earning an LLB and Ph.D. he taught in Belfast, Northern Ireland, but returned to Africa and ended up at the University of Botswana, where he helped found the law school there and co-wrote the country's criminal code, later published as *The Criminal Law of Botswana*.

But writing fiction was never far from his heart. In his twenties, McCall Smith had begun writing children's books, entering and winning a contest run by Chambers with pieces of children's fiction and adult fiction. He went on to publish 30 children's titles, including *Film Boy*, *Suzy Magician* and *Children of Wax*, a collection of African folk tales that was later made into a TV series.

By the time McCall Smith had turned to adult fiction in the 1990s, he was a professor of medical law at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He soon had to scale back and, ultimately, set down his teaching and research to keep up with his publisher's breakneck schedule. Luckily, he was a fast writer, once noting that he could, with the proper inspiration, write an impressive 1,000 words an hour or 4,000 words a day.

*The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* was born out of what's been described as an "inspirational incident" during one of McCall Smith's trips to Botswana. As he told the *Guardian*, "We were going to have chicken for lunch, and there was this woman in a red dress who chased and chased the chicken and eventually caught it, and wrung its neck. I thought to myself: I would like to write about an enterprising woman like that." Mma. Ramotswe, as she is known, establishes Botswana's "first all-female detective agency" using her father's inheritance of cattle and begins solving her friends' and neighbors' problems (and, in

several cases, their culturally significant crimes) in the city of Gaborone. Often compared to Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Precious is more than a caricature of the colonized African, McCall Smith insists. She represents the continent's more positive attributes—especially the high moral standards and relative freedoms upheld in Botswana, a dry yet devastatingly beautiful place dear to the author and his patriotic protagonist. Some critics have been skeptical of his white Anglo-Saxon's insights into black society and the female mind. But he is from Africa, too, and readers remain loyal in part because of the believability of his characters, whether black or white, male or female. This universality, along with what Sutcliffe calls their "timeless quality," is what makes McCall Smith's stories shine.

McCall Smith has won several awards for his work, including the 2003 Saga Award for Wit, and the 2004 British Book Awards Author of the Year for *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series. Before establishing his writing career, he served as chairman of the British Medical Journal Ethics Committee, deputy chairman of Human Genetics Commission for Britain and as the UK bioethics representative for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He lives in Edinburgh with his wife, Elizabeth Parry, and their two daughters.



Edinburgh, Scotland

# BOTSWANA'S BOTHO CULTURE

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*"Motho ke motho ka batho."*

Loosely translated from Setswana, the language of the southern African nation of Botswana, this phrase means, "a person is a person because of other people." At its core is the concept of *botho*, one of Botswana's five national principles (along with democracy, development, self-reliance and unity). Citizens are encouraged to be enterprising, keeping in mind to "pay it forward" so that one man's success becomes the success of his family, village and entire community. *Botho* spans generations and crosses gender and economic lines. It is also the local version of *ubuntu*, an ancient and often spiritual philosophy behind many African societies. South African anti-segregation activist and leader Nelson Mandela once described *ubuntu* with a simple story:

"A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?"

In the post-colonial Botswana of *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Precious Ramotswe exemplifies the concept with her unshakable principles of fairness, and her insistence in treating her neighbors and clients as she would want to be treated. Embedded in the civic laws that Alexander McCall Smith once helped draft, *botho* is recognized as Botswana's "social contract of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability that members of society have toward each other and defines a process for earning respect by first giving it, and to gain empowerment by empowering others." It is the unspoken mission behind Mma Ramotswe's business, and helped create Botswana's standing as one of Africa's most stable and democratic post-colonial countries.

## *The ghost of apartheid*

Apartheid was the ugly reality that plagued South Africa, Botswana's closest and most influential neighbor, for decades. Beginning in colonial times, this unique brand of racial segregation was legislated by the South African

government between 1948 and 1994, although it was opposed worldwide. It resulted in economic and political turmoil throughout southern Africa, and in brutal violence between Afrikaners (South Africa's white landowners, also called Boers, descended from German-Dutch settlers) and "non whites" (native blacks, Indians, and a few other ethnic groups). Under apartheid laws, blacks were stripped of their citizenship and banned from establishing businesses or professional practices in white South Africa without permits. Tens of thousands of non-white families and business owners were forcibly moved between the 1960s and 1980s to the "homelands," a large swath of land known as the Republic of Bophuthatswana. This area was given pseudo-independence and included "bantustans," or annexed territories along or near the Botswana border designed to give Tswana-speaking groups—including indigenous Bantu tribes—a place to live. But apartheid in general purposefully and effectively cut off South Africa's black population from commerce, education, health care and other basic resources. The vans of police who patrolled white South African cities like Johannesburg, keeping blacks out, were in sharp contrast to Precious Ramotswe's "little white van" filled with the hope of reconciliation. During these years, Botswana was known as the British protectorate of Bechuanaland, under British rule until 1966 when it became a democratic, independent nation.

## *Communal culture*

There are many examples of *botho* in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. The Batswana language itself puts importance on human interaction, addressing strangers and loved ones alike with proper respect through the appropriate prefixes, including "Mma" (woman) and "Rra" (man). "Bo" means country and "Ba" people. "Mo" refers to one person. The main tribe of Botswana is the Tswana and the name Botswana therefore means "country of the Tswana." Families are tightly knit, and religion is, for the most part, homogenous; 70 percent of the country's citizens identify themselves as Christians who mix their Biblical interpretations of right and wrong (and gender roles) with their traditional African values. Communal culture is also evident in Batswana cuisine; Precious cooks J.L.B. Matekoni her beloved pumpkin stews; people grill meat together on open *braais*

(barbecues) and bags of dried Mopane worms are shared around as snacks. The only vestige of British life: the ever-present kettle of bush tea.

In a drought-prone land, most of which is taken up by the Kalahari Desert, cattle is valued as much as education as a way to “improve” one’s station in life; nearly three-quarters of Botswana’s land is used for communal grazing. Obed Ramotswa’s insistence that his daughter be well-educated, then, is just as surprising as her decision to sell her inheritance of 180 head of cattle and establish a detective agency. Before local diamonds were discovered in 1967—just one year after Botswana reached independence—and kick-started the young nation’s economy, young Batswana men like Obed were forced by poverty to cross the border to South Africa, where they clashed with other ethnic groups in Johannesburg’s deadly mines. Today, despite the variety of social ills they engender, diamonds are the key to Botswana’s self-sufficiency; the country enjoys a relatively low national debt, and the government can even provide all of its citizens with full university scholarships.

#### *Crimes and misdemeanors*

Throughout *No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, Precious Ramotswa confronts many of Botswana’s social problems, such as gender discrimination, rape, adultery, and domestic violence. She even takes the time to investigate the lesser crime of impersonating a relative for personal gain—one of the many national penal code violations

she memorized. Slowly, against long-held beliefs and traditions, Batswana women like Precious are making inroads as entrepreneurs, landowners and elected officials and taking part in modern African society.

Probably the darkest inversion of *botho* spirit is the traditional southern African concept of human flesh as powerful medicine, or *muti*. Muti killings, or “medicine murders,” are often confused with religious sacrifice. Instead, they involve the ritualistic murder and mutilation of a person, often someone young (children are considered sacred) so that certain body parts can be used to make powerful medicines and other potions used by witch doctorr, called *inyanga*. In the 18th and 19th centuries, “medicine murder” may have been used to improve crops or protect against a warring tribe, but following industrialization, muti was rumored (“you know,” as McCall Smith’s characters whispered to each other) to help gain political power and influence. Although under-documented and considered an urban legend by many, *muti* is said to be on the rise; the 1994 murder and dismemberment of 14-year-old Segametsi Mogomotsi in Mma Ramotswa’s hometown of Mochudi inspired McCall Smith to include it in his novel. *Muti* was suspected, and the case inflamed riots after the police were accused of destroying key evidence. In *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*, however, the ending is much happier, thanks to the enterprising, compassionate woman wielding the best of Botswana’s past and present.



The Village of Mochudi

# Reader's Questions

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1. In the first scene of the first chapter of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Alexander McCall Smith describes an acacia tree, which grows all along the Kalahari Desert, and features sharp thorns and "delicate" leaves. How does it function as a metaphor for Botswana?
2. How is Botswana portrayed as different from South Africa, its southern and more troubled neighbor? How is it similar?
3. How is African culture different from American culture?
4. Precious Ramotswa observes in Chapter 1 "how what is one thing today becomes quite another thing tomorrow." Find some examples throughout the book. What might McCall Smith be suggesting about change, and the transformation of Botswana into a modern African nation?
5. Why is the notion of "homeland" so important to Precious and to other characters in the book? Give some examples.
6. One of Mma. Ramotswe's first cases was helping a woman named "Happy." How is happiness thematically used throughout the book? Despite her own personal tragedies, why do you think Mma Ramotswe has such a positive outlook on life?
7. What parts of Precious's childhood helped prepare her to become a detective? Why is her chosen profession well-suited for Botswana?
8. African storytelling is traditionally oral, not written—as Precious herself says in Chapter Two, "who is there to write down the lives of ordinary people?"
9. Why, then, does McCall Smith document Obed's first-person history here? How does Obed's story of the Johannesburg diamond mines help to build the story's narrative around Botswana and its place in African history?
10. How does McCall Smith portray gender roles in the book? How does Mma. Ramotswe break from female stereotypes? How is her father different from a stereotypical male? Are there other examples of men like him in Precious's life?
11. Why do you think Precious is proud of her "traditional" body type? How is her self-image different from other female characters in the book?
12. In what ways does Precious use the dominant male culture against men? How does she conform to it?
13. Despite her inner strength and intelligence, why do you think Precious succumbed to the charms of Note Mokoti? What is McCall Smith saying about "woman's intuition" here and throughout the book?
14. How does McCall Smith juxtapose life in villages like Mochudi, and the larger towns and cities? Which seems to be more desirable?
15. How does the book distinguish between traditional and modern life? Why does Precious prefer the "old ways," like her father did?
16. What lesson does Chapter 9, "The Boyfriend," teach about traditional versus modern society? How does its surprise ending change that lesson, and what does that particular moment between Precious and Nandira say about Precious's beliefs and powers of intuition?
17. Starting from when she told the truth about the painting and discovered boys, how does Precious negotiate truth and lies, and right and wrong, throughout the book? How do her views change over time?
18. What power do "white lies" have in the detective business? How else are liars dealt with in this story?
19. What power does the Kalahari have on Precious? Why do you think she reacts to it the way she does?
20. Which seems like the worse crime in this novel: the ghost of apartheid in South Africa, or the realities of muti-worship—one of Botswana's most taboo subjects?
21. At the conclusion of Chapter 21, Precious/the narrator thinks, "There was so much suffering in Africa that it was tempting just to shrug your shoulders and walk away." What suffering is she referring to? Why is she so adamant that it's wrong to walk away?
22. How does the book distinguish between people with power—are they rich or poor, educated or non-educated? In what ways does McCall Smith blur these lines and redefine the idea of true power?
23. At the end of the novel, why do you think Mma Ramotswe agrees to marry J.L.B. Matakoni? How is that moment completely in her control?

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