



The Miracle at Speedy Motors by Alexander McCall Smith

About the author:

Alexander McCall Smith has written more than 60 books, including specialist academic titles, short story collections, and a number of immensely popular children's books. Referred to as our new P.G. Wodehouse, he is best known for his internationally acclaimed No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, which rapidly rose to the top of the bestseller lists throughout the world. The fifth novel in the series, *The Full Cupboard of Life*, received the Saga Award for Wit. The ninth book in the series is *The Miracle at Speedy Motors* (April 2008), and the tenth book in this series is *Tea Time for the Traditionally Built* (April 2009). The series has now been translated into 45 languages and has sold over 20 million copies worldwide. The first episode of a film adaptation, directed by Anthony Minghella, and produced by the Weinstein Company, premiered on HBO in March 2009. Another series, beginning with *The Sunday Philosophy Club*, about an intriguing woman named Isabel Dalhousie, appeared in 2004 and immediately leapt onto national bestseller lists, as did sequels, *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, *The Right Attitude to Rain*, *The Careful Use of Compliments*, and *The Comfort of a Muddy Saturday*. The sixth Dalhousie novel is *The Lost Art of Gratitude* (Fall 2009). McCall Smith's serial novel, *44 Scotland Street*, was published in book form to great acclaim in 2005, followed by *Espresso Tales* and *Love Over Scotland*, and then by *The World According to Bertie* (Fall 2008) and also *The Unbearable Lightness of Scones* (Fall 2009). In late 2008, the serial novel, *Corduroy Mansions*, depicting the lives of the inhabitants of a large Pimlico house, began to be published and podcasted in 100 daily web episodes by the UK's *Daily Telegraph* prior to its hardcover release in 2009. Alexander McCall Smith published a solo novel, *La's Orchestra Saves the World*, in December 2009.

In addition, McCall Smith's delightful German professor series, *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs*, and *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances* were published in the US in January 2005. He is also the author of several children's

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books, including the Akimbo series, about a boy in Africa, the Harriet Bean series, the Max & Maddy series and *The Perfect Hamburger and other Delicious Stories*. *Akimbo and the Baboons*, the fifth book in the Akimbo series, will be published in November 2008. Pantheon has published Alexander McCall Smith's collection of African folktales, *The Girl Who Married a Lion*. McCall Smith is also the author of *Dream Angus: The Celtic God of Dreams*, a contemporary reworking of a beloved Celtic myth and *Heavenly Date and Other Flirtations*, a collection of short stories examining the mysteries of dating and courtship.

McCall Smith was born in what is now Zimbabwe and was educated there and in Scotland. He became a law professor in Scotland, and it was in this role that he first returned to Africa to work in Botswana, where he helped to set up a new law school at the University of Botswana. For many years he was Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh, and has been a visiting professor at a number of other universities elsewhere, including ones in Italy and the United States. He is now a Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh.

In addition to his university work, McCall Smith was for four years the vice-chairman of the Human Genetics Commission of the UK, the chairman of the British Medical Journal Ethics Committee, and a member of the International Bioethics Commission of UNESCO. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including The Crime Writers' Association's Dagger in the Library Award, the United Kingdom's Author of The Year Award in 2004 and Sweden's Martin Beck Award. In 2007 he was made a CBE for his services to literature in the Queen's New Year's Honor List. He holds honorary doctorates from 10 universities, most recently from Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

Source: Author's Website (<http://www.alexandermccallsmith.co.uk/>)



About this book:

The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency - Book 9

Fans around the world adore the bestselling No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, the basis of the HBO TV show, and its proprietor Precious Ramotswe, Botswana's premier lady detective. In this charming series, Mma Ramotswe navigates her cases and her personal life with wisdom, and good humor—not to mention help from her loyal assistant, Grace Makutsi, and the occasional cup of tea.

Under the endless skies of Botswana, there is always something Mma Ramotswe can do to help someone and here she finds herself assisting a woman looking for her family. The problem is the woman doesn't know her real name or whether any of her family members are still alive. Meanwhile, Mma Makutsi is the recipient of a beautiful new bed that causes more than a few sleepless nights. And, at Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni has come under the influence of a doctor promising a miracle cure for his daughter's medical condition, which Mma Ramotswe finds hard to accept. Nonetheless, Precious Ramotswe handles these things in her usual compassionate and good-natured way, while always finding time for a cup of red bush tea.

Source: Author's Website (<http://www.alexandermccallsmith.co.uk/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. After Mma Makutsi protests about the agency's address being “in care of” Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, Mma Ramotswe thinks about the meanings of the phrase. “Yes, we were all care of one another in the final analysis, at least in Botswana, where people looked for and valued those invisible links that connected people, that made for belonging” [p. 5]. Would you consider this idea central to the book? To which characters or events in the story does this phrase “in care of” seem most pertinent?

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2. Mma Sebina comes to the agency in the hope that Mma Ramotswe will find her relatives: “Please find me a birthday, and find me some people” [p. 24]. So the novel begins like a Victorian orphan story—something like *Jane Eyre*—with a character seeking an identity. How else do the themes of family and identity arise in the novel?

3. Puso jumps out of the car when Mma Ramotswe mentions his Bushman background, of which he is ashamed [pp. 33–34]. She tells him, “You mustn't be cross with your mummy” [p. 35], and realizes she has called herself his mother for the first time. What progress does this family of two foster children and two nonbiological parents make throughout the course of the novel in strengthening their bonds of love and trust?

4. In Chapter Four, Mma Ramotswe and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni discuss Mma Makutsi's impending marriage and the question of whether men should have to pay the *bogadi* for their wives [pp. 45-50]. What is unsettling for Mma Ramotswe about this conversation? What details help to create the quiet comedy of the situation?

5. In her visit to Mma Sebina's village, Mma Ramotswe tells the woman under the tree, “I am a lady first and then I am a detective. So I just do the things which we ladies know how to do—I talk to people and find out what has happened. Then I try to solve the problems in people's lives. That is all I do” [p. 71]. Is it true that Mma Ramotswe is “a lady first”? How relevant or necessary is the fact of her being a woman to her success in solving problems for people?

6. As in all of the books of this series, the land plays a silent but important role in the lives of the characters. Mma Ramotswe, watching rainclouds gather, thinks “we Batswana are . . . dry people, people who can live with dust and dryness but whose hearts dream of rain and water” [p. 76]. Why are conditions of the land and the weather so central for Mma Ramotswe? Is it ironic that the rainclouds, “stacked in towering layers; so sudden, so welcome” [p. 74], cause the disaster that befalls Mma Makutsi's new bed?



7. Mr. Polopetsi becomes a suspect in the case of the threatening letters. Does it seem that Mma Ramotswe has become less generous in her attitude toward him [pp. 89–90]? What character traits bring him under suspicion? When the writer of the threatening letters is revealed, Mma Ramotswe's assumption that the writer was a man [pp. 14–15] is proven wrong. Is it unusual that Mma Ramotswe was wrong in her thinking on this matter?

8. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni meets a doctor who promises him that Motholeli's paralysis can be reversed [p. 96]. What difficulties does this unexpected development cause for Mma Ramotswe? Why does she come up with the money, given her lack of faith in the treatment? How does she behave when Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni and Motholeli return home [p. 211]? What is exceptional about her handling of the whole predicament?

9. Why is Mma Makutsi reluctant to tell her fiancé the truth about what happened to the new bed? What does it suggest about their relationship that she doesn't feel she can tell him? Why is his eventual response surprising to her [p. 187]?

10. In most detective fiction, readers seek the identity of the criminal or the resolution of a mystery. Who are the criminals, and where is the mystery, in **The Miracle at Speedy Motors**? In what ways does Mma Ramotswe differ from most fictional detectives? How do plot and pace differ, and what unique features distinguish The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series from conventional mystery novels?

11. Reflecting upon Motholeli and the suffering of Africa in general, Mma Ramotswe considers that “fundamental unfairness seemed to be a condition of human life. . . . What could one say to the poor, who had only one life, one brief spell of time, and were spending their short moment of life in hardship? And what could she say to Motholeli?” [pp. 145–46]. Does she have words of comfort for Motholeli?



12. What qualities make Precious Ramotswe such an unusual person? How would you describe the quality of her insight or wisdom? Do you find her inspirational, and if so why?

13. In the delicate matter of the health of Mma Ramotswe's van, Mma Potokwane is uncertain of how truthful she can be. Do you agree with her list of the matters that, even between close friends, cannot be criticized [p. 148]?

14. Why is Mma Makutsi shocked at the letter Mma Ramotswe dictates for Violet Sepotho [pp. 202–03]? What do you think of Mma Ramotswe's resolution that “we must answer her hatred with love” [p. 204]?

15. What is puzzling about Mr. Sekape and his attitude toward his newly discovered sister? Why is he so excited if, as he says, he dislikes women [p. 184]? Once it turns out they are unrelated, does it seem likely that Mma Sebina will succeed in marrying him [pp. 207–08]?

16. What miracles does Mma Ramotswe observe, in place of the large miracle her husband has hoped for? What is the significance of the title [p. 213]?

17. A typographic design, repeating the word *Africa*, follows the novel's final sentence. How does this affect your reading of the ending, and what emotions does it express?

Source: Author's Website (<http://www.alexandermccallsmith.co.uk/>)

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