

BOOK REVIEW:  
THE NO. 1 LADIES'  
DETECTIVE AGENCY SERIES  
BY ALEXANDER MCCALL  
SMITH

Rebekah Valerius on a Wise Lady Detective

*There was a teapot, in which Mma Ramotswe — the only lady private detective in Botswana — brewed tea. And three mugs — one for herself, one for her secretary, and one for the client. What else does a detective agency really need?*<sup>1</sup>

Avid readers can often look back over the seasons of their lives and see them characterized by distinct kinds of reading. I certainly can, and for me, this is especially true of fiction. One constant for me, and I think many would agree, is detective fiction. Regardless of the season, there is at least one mystery novel in my rotation of books and lately, Alexander McCall Smith's series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* has been in the queue. His Botswanan detective, Precious Ramotswe, differs from more conventional sleuths such as Christie's Poirot or Doyle's

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Narrated by Lisette Licat (Recorded Books, 2003), audiobook.

Holmes as she relies more on intuition than any professional training or intense study. Likewise, the mysteries are lighter than the usual fare, forming more of a backdrop to the main narrative. Nevertheless, McCall Smith is able to establish a distinct presence in the genre with this amateur sleuth and her agency on the edge of the African bush.

Examining why detective fiction is continually popular is not the aim of this article, but it is worth a bit of speculation. I imagine it stems from a combination of the simple enjoyment of solving puzzles and a deeper need to see justice prevail. G.K. Chesterton suggested that humans have a keen desire to go from darkness to light. He writes that the mystery novel “is written for the moment when the reader does understand, not merely for the many preliminary moments when he does not understand.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the best detective fiction reveals our intuition that, to paraphrase G.K.’s own unconventional sleuth, Father Brown, none of us are that far removed from the criminal if we are truly honest with ourselves. “No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be,” he says, and “his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat.”<sup>3</sup>

Within the genre, there is a wide range of styles to suit any season. There are the lighter, so-called cozy mysteries that can be read in a day, to gritty, so-called

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<sup>2</sup> G.K. Chesterton, “How to Write a Detective Story,” Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, December 3, 2018, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://www.chesterton.org/how-to-write-detective/>.

<sup>3</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Father Brown*, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0201041h.html>.

realistic ones in which it is often hard to distinguish between those that solve the crimes and those that commit them. Over twenty years ago, Alexander McCall Smith carved out his own corner within the detective category when he published the first book in his *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series (now with over twenty novels). This series is simple in the stories it tells and the characters that experience them, involving as they do a people whose way of life resides on the borderland between agrarian and modern. Likewise, the mysteries are not overly complex. Readers looking for stories that depict dramatic plots filled with high-stakes intrigue will be disappointed. Indeed, these stories are considerably lighter than most modern detective novels. Nevertheless, they are surprisingly deep when it comes to resolving the ethical dilemmas that arise for his detective — such as how to best handle a distrustful parent who has employed the agency to spy on his teenage daughter. McCall Smith accomplishes such resolutions without coming across as sanctimonious on one hand, or superficial on the other, which is not an easy accomplishment. Perhaps this is because he is no stranger to moral philosophy having been a professional legal scholar and bioethicist before writing this series. He is also no stranger to the series' setting — the southern borders of the Kalahari Desert in Gaborone, Botswana — as he was raised just north of there in Zimbabwe. Put together these seemingly disparate circumstances, and add in lucid prose and an evident love for his subject, and you get the distinctiveness of the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

Each novel in this series follows the agency's investigations into mysteries that range from missing

persons, stolen property, and fraudulent business practices to serious crimes involving murder. With the exception of a particularly gruesome one concerning a witch doctor, none of the mysteries are overly dark, though some are quite unusual — like an orphaned boy, discovered in the bush, who smells and acts like a lion. The reader gets a sense that McCall Smith does not aim to disturb his audience. More often than not, the mysteries are used as means to explore philosophical and cultural themes, such as when it is best to refrain from telling the entire truth and the changes in Botswanan mores brought on by modernization.

McCall Smith's detective, Mma Ramotswe, is an exceedingly commonplace woman of "middle-age" and "traditional build" who has an endearing love for her late father and an unalloyed appreciation of the good things in her life. "Mma" is a term used to show respect, and such terms are used throughout this series as they are embedded deep within Botswanan culture. Mma Ramotswe is exceedingly human, too, complete with a love for her country and its traditions and a gentle suspicion of outsiders, which is not limited to countries outside her beloved Africa. Though she readily admits its faults, she loves her nation with an affection that all of us possess for our own at some level, though it may have been buried under miles of sophistication. "I love all the people whom God made, but I especially know how to love the people who live in this place," she remarks. "They are my people, my brothers and sisters."<sup>4</sup> Her love of Botswana helped me grow in appreciation for a place I have not known while unearthing the love for the place I

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

know best. "Every man has a map in his heart of his own country," she says at one point, "and the heart will never allow you to forget this map."<sup>5</sup>

McCall Smith's heroine is wise, and her success lies in her unpretentious desire to help individuals find the truth they seek. "It is my duty to help them solve the mysteries in their lives," she states, "That is what I am called to do."<sup>6</sup> Mma Ramotswe is uncommon in the detective world because she begins her career from a place of gratitude. It is out of appreciation for the ways her life has been blessed — and this, despite having been beaten by her first husband and miscarrying her only child as a result — that she feels compelled to aid others in finding peace in theirs. Her philosophy is to "do whatever you can do to bring to others such contentment, and joy, and understanding that you have managed to find yourself."<sup>7</sup>

In one particular case, Mma Ramotswe is able to help an American woman find the truth about her son's disappearance. As a bereaved mother herself, Mma Ramotswe understood the mother's intuition to reject the official findings that her son had wandered off and died in the Kalahari. She is not only able to solve the mystery; she brings precious closure to wounds that have been open for a decade. On her way to communicate her findings, on impulse she buys a traditional Botswanan basket for the grieving mother. It had marks in the weaving that were said to be the tears of a giraffe.

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *The Double Comfort Safari Club*, Narrated by Lisette Lecat (Recorded Books, 2010), audiobook.

“The giraffe gives its tears to the women and they weave them into the basket,” she tells the mother.

“You are very kind, Mma,” she said. “But why did the giraffe give its tears?”

Mma Ramotswe shrugged; she had never thought about it. “I suppose that it means that we can all give something,” she said. “A giraffe has nothing else to give — only tears.” Did it mean that? she wondered. And for a moment she imagined that she saw a giraffe peering down through the trees, its strange stilt-borne body among the leaves; and its moist velvet cheeks and liquid eyes; and she thought of all the beauty that there was in Africa, and of the laughter, and the love.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, readers will learn of the beauty, laughter, and love in Africa through the story of this gracious and wise lady detective. In the end, this lesson is what makes this series unique amongst detective fiction — the stories involve much more than solving puzzles and seeing justice prevail. Through Mma Ramotswe and her No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency, McCall Smith has captured the best of Botswanan culture and its overarching ethic of *ubuntu*, or “humanity towards others.” His series is immensely humane and enjoyable as a result.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *Tears of the Giraffe*, Narrated by Lisette Licat (Recorded Books, 2003), audiobook.

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