



The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

Alexander McCall Smith



About the author

Alexander McCall Smith is British but he was born in Zimbabwe (then called Southern Rhodesia). He went to school there and in Scotland. After university, he became a professor of law, working first in Scotland and later in Botswana. He has always loved Africa and its people, and he has written many stories about it for both children and adults. Mma Precious Ramotswe and many of the other characters in the book are based on real people.

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency was published in the UK in 1998 and soon everyone was talking about Mma Precious Ramotswe. *Tears of the Giraffe* and *Morality for Beautiful Girls* – also about Mma Ramotswe – soon followed. Suddenly, after years of writing, Alexander McCall Smith was a famous author. At the moment there are seven books about Mma Precious Ramotswe – and there are more to come!

Until 2004 McCall Smith was still working as a professor at university as well as writing books and newspaper stories. Later that year, he decided to stop teaching for a while to concentrate on his writing career. As well as the Mma Ramotswe books, he started a new series of books about a woman professor living in Edinburgh. He also continued writing *44 Scotland Street* – his popular daily story for *The Scotsman* newspaper.

McCall Smith lives in Edinburgh with his wife and two daughters. Today, his books are enormously popular and Mma Precious Ramotswe is loved by readers all over the world.

Summary

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency is the first in a series of books by Alexander McCall Smith about Mma (Mrs)

Precious Ramotswe. This large African lady has an instinctive talent for solving mysteries, so she decides to set up the first (and only) ladies' detective agency in Botswana. The book follows the story of the agency in its early days, the mysteries that Mma Ramotswe is hired to solve and the growing friendship between the heroine and the charming Mr JLB Matekoni. Most of the mysteries that Mma Ramotswe solves are not serious crimes. Each of the stories is very charming, and the perpetrators of the crimes are often shown to be normal human beings with strengths as well as flaws in their characters.

Chapter 1: In this chapter, a puzzled woman asks Mma Ramotswe to discover the true identity of the old man who says he's her father.

Chapter 2: This chapter shows how Mma Ramotswe has lost much of her trust in men. She was abandoned by her abusive husband when she was younger.

Chapter 3: A woman asks Mma Ramotswe to find her missing husband.

Chapter 4: Mma Ramotswe has a special friendship with Mr JLB Matekoni. He is from the same village, Mochudi. She likes talking to him over a cup of tea. In this chapter Mma Ramotswe tells Mr JLB Matekoni about a letter she received from a teacher, whose son is missing. They think it has something to do with a witchdoctor.

Chapter 5: A rich Indian gentleman asks her to spy on his daughter because he thinks she has a boyfriend.

Chapter 6: Mma Ramotswe returns a stolen car to its owner without telling the police who stole the car. At the end of this chapter, Mr JLB Matekoni proposes to Mma Ramotswe but she refuses. The book follows their developing friendship from this point until the end of the book.

Chapter 7: Mma Ramotswe unravels an insurance scam.

Chapter 8: Mr JLB Matekoni finds a witchdoctor's bag with a human bone in it. It seems that the missing boy has been kidnapped and murdered – and Mma Ramotswe and Mr JLB Matekoni begin the search for the boy's killers.

Chapter 9: Mma Ramotswe discovers some cheating doctors.

Chapter 10: The book ends dramatically with Mma Ramotswe rescuing the missing boy from captivity and reuniting him with his family. Mma Ramotswe finally agrees to marry Mr JLB Matekoni at the end of this chapter.



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Background and themes

Botswana: Alexander McCall Smith has often lived and worked in Africa over his lifetime. He writes about Botswana with great affection for the country and its people. Mma Precious Ramotswe becomes a private detective because she loves the people of Africa and wants to help solve their problems. Although the book is light-hearted, it also touches on the larger problems in modern Africa. In *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* we hear about children being killed for muti (witchdoctor's medicine), for example. The book also describes the beauty of the Botswanan countryside and the warmth and generosity of the people. Details of everyday objects, places and events help to create an atmospheric setting for the characters and story.

Human nature: Human nature is an important theme in the book. Mma Ramotswe has known great love, great loss and great pain in her life so far. She knows that people can be good and generous, but she knows they can be weak, selfish and cruel too. As well as solving problems, Mma Ramotswe likes to deliver justice. She doesn't tell the police about Solomon Moretsi because his crime doesn't hurt anybody and he is only trying to support his family. But she is very happy to drive away, leaving the witchdoctor's wife in the desert, because she knows she is a cruel and greedy woman.

Truth and lies: Truth and lies is another important theme in the book. Many characters lie in order to get what they want: Happy Bapetsi's 'Daddy' lies about his own identity in order to have an easy life, Nandira Patel lies in order to keep her boyfriend a secret from her father and Solomon Moretsi lies in order to get insurance money for his family. Mma Ramotswe often tells small lies too. She strongly believes that 'lies are all right if you are lying for a good reason'. Mr JLB Matekoni, however, finds it very difficult to lie. It is a strong indication of his love for Mma Ramotswe that he is prepared to lie when she asks him to.

Sense of community: McCall Smith creates a wonderful sense of community in the novel by including a range of characters that interact and help one another. Not only does Mma Ramotswe get help from her friends (Billy Pilani, Dr Gulubane), but also from strangers. When a snake gets stuck in her car, she soon gets help from another driver. Although there are some cruel characters in the book, most of the people in it are good and helpful. Mma Ramotswe thinks of her African friends and

neighbours as her 'brothers and sisters' and this optimistic tone makes the book uplifting and inspiring to read.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Each pair looks at the front cover carefully for one minute. Then student A takes the book and asks Student B questions about the picture. Student B should answer as many questions as possible without looking at the cover.
- Predict:** After the pair work in Activity 1, ask each pair to predict what the story is about. Have them imagine what the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency is like. Encourage them to talk about what they think the detective is going to do in the story.

After reading

- Discuss:** After Chapter 1, have a whole-class discussion and talk about Happy Bapetsi's feelings. *Happy Bapetsi meets her 'Daddy' when she is thirty-eight years old. How does she feel at first? How do her feelings change after three months? How do you think she feels at the end of the story?*
- Discuss:** Have students work in small groups and discuss the following questions: *Why do you think Precious Ramotswe married Note Makoti? Why do you think Note Makoti left Precious Ramotswe?* Ask them to try to find as many reasons as they can think of.
- Group work:** In the first two chapters of the book, we learn about three very different men: Mma Ramotswe's father, Happy Bapetsi's 'Daddy' and Note Makoti. Ask students to work in small groups. They should think about the similarities and differences between the three men and make notes on a piece of paper. Then choose one student from each group to stand up and say something about one or some of the men to the rest of the class.

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

- Describe:** Have students look at the picture on page 11. Put students into pairs and have them talk about Mma Ramotswe's detective agency. Ask them the following questions: *What can you see in the room? What can you see out of the window? What is on Mma Ramotswe's desk?*

After reading

- Discuss:** After reading Chapter 3, talk about the important things in the story. Have students work in small groups to discuss why the following things are important in the story: *Reverend Shadreck Mapeli's Christian group, the river, a large yellow dog, Mma Ramotswe's father's gun, a crocodile and a man's watch.*



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- 8 Write:** Students work individually. They should write an article for the newspaper in Gaborone about the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. People will be interested to read about the new business in town and the article should also cover the agency's first case – the death of Peter Malatsi. Students should imagine an interview with Mma Ramotswe and include some quotes from her in the article.
- 9 Pair work:** After reading Chapter 4, have students work in pairs to talk about Mr JLB Matekoni and Mma Ramotswe. Encourage them to think of the reasons why they are good friends.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

- 10 Guess:** Have students look at the picture on page 21. Ask some students to describe what Mma Ramotswe is doing, where she is and what else there is in the picture. Encourage students to guess what the story is about.

After reading

- 11 Discuss:** Talk about boyfriends / girlfriends. Put students in groups. Ask them if they see their boyfriend / girlfriend without telling their parents. Have them think about pros and cons of a secret relationship.
- 12 Pair work:** Students work in pairs. Ask them to prepare and then act out the following conversation.
Student A: You are Nandira Patel. You are a modern young woman and you want to choose your own friends. You want to marry your boyfriend, Jack. Talk to your father and try to explain your views.
Student B: You are Mr Patel. You love your daughter, Nandira, and you want her to have good friends. You want to choose a good husband for her too. You don't know her boyfriend, Jack. Now, Nandira wants to marry Jack. Will you let her?
- 13 Discuss:** Have students imagine that they have a husband / wife who has stolen something. Put them into groups to discuss what they would do or wouldn't do. Later, ask each group to share their ideas with the rest of the class.
- 14 Write:** You are Mma Ramotswe. Why don't you want to marry Mr JLB Matekoni? Write a letter to him. He is an important friend and you don't want to hurt him. Think carefully about your words before you write.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 15 Predict:** Have students look at the titles of Chapters 7–8. Ask them to guess what the story is about.

After reading

- 16 Discuss:** Talk about killing a snake.
At the end of Chapter 7 Mma Ramotswe says 'I killed a big snake on the way here today.' Is this true? Why does she say this, do you think?

- 17 Role play:** At the end of Chapter 8, have students work in pairs. Student A is Charlie Gotso; Student B is his employee. The man tells Charlie Gotso about his car and the missing bag. Encourage them to think about the following questions: *What does Charlie say? What does he think about the lady detective? How does he feel about the missing bag?*

- 18 Discuss:** Talk about lies.

Write '*Lies are all right if you are lying for a good reason*' on the board. Ask students to think about their own lives. *Have you ever lied for a good reason? Why did you choose to lie? Did it help? What happened?* Students should write a few sentences about a lie they have told in the past. Then choose some students to tell the rest of the class about their lie and encourage whole class discussion. *Was the person right to tell the lie? Why? Why not?*

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 19 Discuss:** Some people in Botswana believe in the power of muti. Ask students if they know anything about witchcraft in Africa or anywhere else in the world. Ask them what they think of non-western-medicine doctors.

After reading

- 20 Discuss:** Talk about the missing boy and other characters. Write the following names and words on the board: the witchdoctor, the teacher from Katsana, the Basarwa, Mr JLB Matekoni and Charlie Gotso. Divide the class into five groups. Each group should think about one of these people and their involvement in the story about the missing boy. Have them discuss the following questions: *How are they important? How do they feel about the missing boy? How do they feel about each other?*

Extra activities

- 21 Research:** Ask students what they know about Botswana. Have them write a few sentences about the country. Prompt them to look at the map on page vi. Encourage them to look in other books and on the Internet too.
- 22 Pair work:** Students work in groups. Ask them to fold a piece of paper in half to make two columns. Label the first column 'Botswana' and the second column 'My country'. Students should then think of as many differences as possible between Botswana and their own country. (If students in a group are from different countries, they can make three or four columns accordingly.) After about ten minutes, ask students to share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.