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Tears of the Giraffe
by Alexander McCall Smith

About this Book
Tears of the Giraffe finds Precious Ramotswe firmly established as Botswana's first and only lady detective. She's not getting rich, but she's not losing money either, and under the imaginary ledger for happiness, her account is full. Indeed, she is about to marry Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, owner of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni is a thoroughly honest and loving man, a man whose generous impulses not only send him to the local orphanage to fix a water pump free of charge but also, somehow, bring him home with two small children. Now Mma Ramotswe has not only a husband but a family to care for, something she had not allowed herself to hope for after her own child died at birth.

But into this rich, full life comes Mrs. Curtain, an American whose son disappeared in the Kalahari desert ten years ago. Michael Curtain had been living in a commune, working on finding a better way to grow vegetables in the harsh land of Botswana, when he vanished one night without warning and without a trace. Stricken with grief, Mrs. Curtain has searched in every way possible for years, exhausting every avenue of inquiry, until the American Embassy recommended Mma Ramotswe. And even though Mma Ramotswe knows that old unsolved cases such as the one Mrs. Curtain brings her are what is known in the business as "stale enquiries," she agrees to try to discover what happened to Michael Curtain.

Given her own experience of losing a child, she can empathize with Mrs. Curtain. And in many ways empathy—between Mma Ramotswe and Mrs. Curtain, between Mr J.L.B. Matekoni and the orphan children, even between wheelchair-bound Motholeli and the engine of a van—is the central theme of Alexander McCall Smith's extraordinary novel. The idea that we are all "brothers and sisters" is what guides the story, sustains the lives of its remarkable characters, and offers readers so much more than the satisfaction of seeing a mystery solved.

Discussion Questions
1. What distinguishes Tears of the Giraffe from most other mysteries? What qualities make it such a charming and affirmative book? In what ways does Mma Ramotswe differ from such archetypal detectives as Sherlock Holmes, Sam Spade, and Philip Marlowe?

2. Mrs. Curtain says that when she first came to Africa, she had "the usual ideas about it—a hotchpotch of images of big game and savannah and Kilimanjaro rising out of the cloud . . . famines and civil wars and potbellied, half-naked children staring at the camera, sunk in hopelessness" [p. 27]. How does her experience of
Africa alter these ideas? Why does she feel that "everything about my own country seemed so shoddy and superficial when held up against what I saw in Africa" [p. 29]? What deeper and truer understanding of Africa does the novel itself offer readers who might share Mrs. Curtain's preconceptions?

3. Mma Ramotswe knows that Mrs. Curtain's case—finding out what happened to her son ten years ago—is what is referred to in The Principles of Private Detection as "a stale enquiry" [p. 61]. Why does she accept the case, in spite of that? What special empathy does she feel for Mrs. Curtain?

4. When Mr J.L.B. Matekoni wonders why his apprentice mechanics take everything for granted, a friend explains, "Young people these days cannot show enthusiasm. . . . It's not considered smart to be enthusiastic" [pp. 80-81]. Is this an accurate observation? Where else does the novel demonstrate this kind of understanding of human behavior?

5. Why does Mr J.L.B. Matekoni allow himself to be talked into adopting the orphans? What specific memory enables him to open his heart to them? What does this act say about his character?

6. Mma Ramotswe thinks that "the Americans were very clever; they sent rockets into space and invented machines which could think more quickly than any human being alive, but all this cleverness could also make them blind" [p. 113]. What is it that she thinks Americans are blind to? Is she right? How do her own values differ from those of mainstream America?

7. Tears of the Giraffe poses some difficult moral dilemmas for Mma Ramotswe. Should one always tell the truth, or is lying sometimes the better choice? Does a moral end justify immoral means? Which cases raise these questions? How do Mma Ramotswe and her assistant Mma Makutsi answer them?

8. When Mma Ramotswe prepares her accounts for the end of the financial year, she finds that "she had not made a lot of money, but she had not made a loss, and she had been happy and entertained. That counted for infinitely more than a vigorously healthy balance sheet. In fact, she thought, annual accounts should include an item specifically headed Happiness, alongside expenses and receipts and the like. That figure in her accounts would be a very large one, she thought" [p. 225]. What enables Mma Ramotswe to live happily? How would most American CEOs and CFOs respond to the accounting innovation she suggests in the above passage?

9. How is Mma Ramotswe able to solve the mystery of Mrs. Curtain's son's disappearance? What role does her intuition play in figuring out what happened to him? Why is this information so important for Mrs. Curtain?

10. When Mma Potokwane tells Mr J.L.B. Matekoni that their pump makes a noise, "as if it is in pain," he replies that "engines do feel pain. . . . They tell us of their pain by making a noise" [p. 77]. Later, he tells his apprentice, "you cannot force metal. . . . If you force metal, it fights back" [p. 198]. What do these statements reveal about Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's character? About his approach to being a mechanic? Are his assertions merely fanciful or do they reveal some deeper truth about the relationship between the human and the inanimate world?
11. One of Mma Makutsi’s classmates at the Botswana Secretarial College tells her that "men choose women for jobs on the basis of their looks. They choose the beautiful ones and give them jobs. To the others, they say: We are very sorry. All the jobs have gone" [p. 109]. In what ways does *Tears of the Giraffe* suggest ways around the stifling roles dictated by "brute biology"? What examples does it provide of girls and women overcoming the restrictions placed on them and assuming traditionally male roles?

12. The housemother of the orphanage explains to Motholeli, "We must look after other people. . . . Other people are our brothers and sisters. If they are unhappy, then we are unhappy. If they are hungry, then we are hungry" [p. 124]. In what ways does the novel demonstrate this ethic in action? How is this way of relating to other people different from the starker examples of American individualism?

13. In what ways are Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni and Mma Ramotswe well-suited to each other? How do they treat each other in the novel? How do they complement each other?

14. In what ways is *Tears of the Giraffe* as much about family relationships as it is about solving crimes? How does the novel provide emotionally satisfying resolutions to the parental pain that both Mrs. Curtain and Mma Ramotswe have suffered?

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### Critical Praise

"The Miss Marple of Botswana."
— *The New York Times Book Review*

"I haven't read anything with such unalloyed pleasure for a long time."
— Anthony Daniels, *The Sunday Telegraph*

"Smart and sassy . . . Precious' progress is charted in passages that have the power to amuse or shock or touch the heart, sometimes all at once."
— Los Angeles Times

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### Author Interview

**Q:** 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?

**AMS:** *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.
Q: 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?

AMS: 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.

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

AMS: 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.

Q: 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 No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*), she even sends away for an instructional manual, *Principles of Private Detection*. What interests you about "education of the detective"?

AMS: 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.<

Q: 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?

AMS: 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.

Q: 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?

AMS: 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.

**Q: How have these books been received in Botswana? What about other parts of Africa?**

**AMS:** 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.

**Q: 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?**

**AMS:** 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.

**Q: 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?**

**AMS:** 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.

**Q: 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?**

**AMS:** 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.

**Q: 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?**

**AMS:** 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.
Q: 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?

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

Q: 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?

AMS: 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.

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Alexander McCall Smith

1948-

Also known as: Alexander McCall Smith, Alexander Alasdair McCall-Smith, Alexander McCall-Smith

Entry Updated: 01/24/1006

Birth Date: 1948
Place of Birth: Southern Rhodesia

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Writings by the Author


Occupation: Writer

Career: Professor of medical law at Edinburgh University. Taught law at University of Botswana; helped create a criminal code for Botswana. Human Genetics Commission of the United Kingdom (vice chairman), UNESCO (member, International Bioethics Commission).
WRITINGS:

NONFICTION

- (Editor with Tony Carty) *Power and Manoeuvrability*, Q Press (Edinburgh, Scotland), 1978.
- (Editor with Michael A. Menlowe) *The Duty to Rescue: The Jurisprudence of Aid*, Dartmouth (Brookfield, VT), 1993.

NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY SERIES


SUNDAY PHILOSOPHY CLUB SERIES

von IGELFELD SERIES

- *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005.

SCOTLAND STREET SERIES

- *44 Scotland Street*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2005
- *Espresso Tales: The Latest from 44 Scotland Street*, illustrated by Iain McIntosh, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 2006

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- *Akimbo and the Crocodile Man*, illustrated by LeUyen Pham, Bloomsbury Children's Books (New York, NY), 2006.
Author of more than fifty books, including children's books such as *The White Hippo*, Hamish Hamilton; *Marzipan Max*, Blackie; *The Ice-Cream Bicycle*, Viking Read Alone; *The Doughnut Ring*, Hamish Hamilton; *Paddy and the Ratcatcher*, Heinemann; and *The Princess Trick*, Puffin.

### OTHER


**Media Adaptations:** The story "Children of Wax" was made into an animated film; other stories by Smith have been read on BBC Radio. A film adaptation of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* will be produced by Richard Sydney Pollack and directed by Anthony Minghella.

**"Sidelights"**

The diverse accomplishments of Alexander McCall Smith, include a distinguished career as a legal scholar and more recent fame as a best-selling novelist. A professor of medical law at Edinburgh University, Smith has published many works on medical ethics and criminal law. For example, he has written about the duty to rescue and the impact of medical advances on parental rights. Smith also had numerous books of fiction for young children and short-story collections in print before he published a series of detective stories set in Botswana. The first installment, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, became a best-selling novel in the United States after it was popularized by word of mouth. Readers and critics have been charmed by the stories, which are more about relationships, customs, and informal justice than sleuthing.

Born and raised in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Smith studied law in Edinburgh, Scotland. He then assisted in creating Botswana's first law school, taught law at the University of Botswana, and wrote a criminal code for Botswana. Many years later, in 1992, he would publish *The Criminal Law of Botswana* with Kwame Frimpong. The book interested critics with its discussion of how the country's criminal law is unlike others in southern Africa and how it resembles the Queensland Criminal Code of 1899. Two reviewers regretted that the work is not more detailed: in the *Journal of African Law* Simon Coldham advised that the book is "designed primarily for students," while James S. Read said in the *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, that the book provides "a short and selective introduction" to the subject.
Most of Smith's legal scholarship treats subjects relating to medical and criminal law issues. He served as co-editor and contributor for *Family Rights: Family Law and Medical Advances*, which contains seven essays about the legal and ethical implications of new medical capabilities that affect the creation of life as well as the extension of life. The essays consider the impact of laws on a family's ability to make their own medical decisions. McCall's contribution, "Is Anything Left of Parental Rights?," addresses the increased autonomy of children.

Reviews of *Family Rights* described the book as an in-depth treatment suitable for specialists and general readers. In the *Sydney Law Review* Belinda Bennett recommended it as "a very readable collection" that avoids jargon and explains the necessary medical and scientific terminology. Jenny L. Urwin said in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* that it provided "interesting and thoughtful analysis" on a previously neglected subject. The book's "interdisciplinary and comparative flavour" was noted in *Family Law* by Andrew Bainham, who also said, "The scholarship in this volume is, for the most part, as original as it is provocative and the two most impressive contributions are by the editors themselves." Writing for *Nature*, Andrew Grubb commented on the context of Smith's essay, saying, "Faced with this largely interventionist judicial attitude, it is left to Sandy McCall Smith to challenge its basis and to sound a note of caution."

In *The Duty to Rescue: The Jurisprudence of Aid* Smith helped compile essays that discuss the moral and sometimes legal duty to provide aid. The writings cover theoretical and philosophical concerns, the possible ways of putting theory into practice, and the state's duty to assist at-risk individuals. Reviewers said the work does a good job of addressing the diverse implications of making rescue a legal obligation. In a review for *Choice*, M. A. Foley called the book "rather comprehensive" and recommended it as a primary reference on the subject. In the *University of British Columbia Law Review* Mitchell McInnes commented that Smith's essay, "The Duty to Rescue and the Common Law," raises an interesting and incomplete point on the subject of how a legal requirement would impact the formation of individual moral intuition. Celia Wells recommended the volume and McCall's contributions in *Criminal Law Review*. She concluded, "This collection sweeps effortlessly across legal, jurisdictional, and philosophical boundaries posing on its way a series of fascinating questions and supplying some clues to the answers."

Smith is also a prolific fiction writer. His books for children reflect both Western and non-Western cultural influences, and are mostly written for new readers. One example showing Smith's African background is *The White Hippo*, a story set in Gambia about the unsuccessful efforts of villagers who want to protect an albino hippo from a white man claiming to be a photographer. In *The Perfect Hamburger*, an old man and a young boy join forces to try to save a family-run hamburger shop from being forced out of business by a chain restaurant.

The twenty-seven stories in *Children of Wax: African Folk Tales* are more suited for older children and storytellers. Smith collected the tales from old and young members of the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe. Featuring shape-changing animals and supernatural
powers, they nevertheless contain realistic portrayals of hardship and danger. The stories often serve to condemn bad behaviors such as greed and unfounded trust and show that justice does not always follow wrongdoing. Library Journal's Patricia Dooley warned that this is "emphatically not children's pabulum." In a review for Choice, P. Alden was not quite satisfied with the authenticity of Smith's retelling, but said that the stories are "engaging" and that some are notable for their depiction of Zimbabwean women. A Kirkus Reviews writer admired the collection for its "evocative, involving narratives that reveal much about the culture from which they spring."

The collection Heavenly Date and Other Stories is comprised of original stories by Smith that are international in scope. Among them, "Intimate Accounts" is set in a fictional world, "Bulawayo" happens in Southern Rhodesia, and others take place in Zurich, Lisbon, and Northern Queensland. The dark and funny pieces relate all kinds of strange dates, meetings, and exchanges between men and women. In a review for the Times Literary Supplement, Andrew Biswell made note of Smith's inventiveness, stylistic range, and the "remarkable absence of excess baggage" in the collection that he thought showed the influence of African oral story-telling.

Smith's inspiration for The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and the protagonist Mma Precious Ramotswe was his admiration for the women of Africa, according to an interviewer in Publishers Weekly. The novel and subsequent books in the series--Tears of the Giraffe, Morality for Beautiful Girls, and The Kalahari Typing School for Men --are mostly about everyday life in Africa. The character of Mma Ramotswe is the dynamic central force behind these stories. A solidly built, divorced woman in her late thirties, she uses a tiny inheritance to start a detective agency. Her work takes place in the city of Gaborone and in cattle country near the Kalahari Desert. She deals mostly with family conflicts, including cheating husbands, and employer-employee troubles. Mma Ramotswe runs a threadbare operation, but she does have an assistant, Mma Makutsi, a secretarial college graduate who has lost better jobs to her prettier classmates. Another key figure is J. L. B. Matekoni, a mechanic who assists them and later becomes engaged to Mma Ramotswe. The bride-to-be is a rather unconventional detective, one who also serves as family counselor, comments on manners and the lack of them, and is less concerned with legally administered justice than with doing right by her clients.

Mma Ramotswe and Smith's novels about her have charmed reviewers, who have found the novels fresh, amusing, and affecting. In a BookLoons review, G. Hall described the first installment as "truly unique," explaining that "the best part of the book is, in fact, not the mysteries but the stories of Precious and her father." Mahinder Kingra of the Baltimore City Paper judged that in this "deceptively frivolous" novel there is "as honest and sympathetic a portrait of contemporary African life as [Nigerian writer Chinua] Achebe's." Kingra commented that the book is "one of those rare, unassuming novels that seems to contain all of life within its pages, and affirms life in telling its story." Christine Jeffords noted in Best Reviews online that Smith "succeeds in giving his story a lilting, lyrical flavor that makes the reader feel almost as if she is listening to a story being spun by a native tale-teller." Comments on the first three novels by Anthony Daniels in the Spectator included the assessment "I know nothing else like them." Daniels credited
Smith with an admirably simple writing style and the remarkable feat of "creating fictional characters who are decent, goodhearted but not in the least bit dull." And the critic advised that "for all their apparent simplicity, the Precious Ramotswe books are highly sophisticated."

When Alida Becker reviewed the first three books for the New York Times, dubbing Mma Ramotswe the "Miss Marple of Botswana," it dramatically increased public awareness of the series. As Becker noted, film rights for the series had already been sold to Anthony Minghella, director of The English Patient. In the Wall Street Journal, Matthew Gurewitsch found The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency to be no less than "one of the most entrancing literary treats of many a year." Gurewitsch exulted that Smith planned more stories about Mma Ramotswe and would be publishing a series of academic satires about a professor of Romance philology named Dr. Mortiz-Maria von Igelfeld.

**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**PERIODICALS**

ONLINE


*Source: Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

**Gale Database:** Contemporary Authors Online