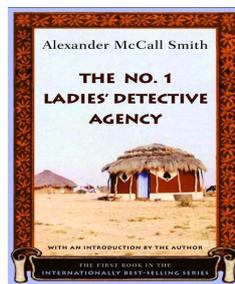




Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency (No. 1 in series)

by Alexander McCall Smith
(Polygon, 1998)



Target Audience: Readers who enjoy cozy mystery stories and female detectives, as well as those who like reading about different cultures

Synopsis: *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, located in Gaborone, Botswana, consists of one woman, the engaging Precious Ramotswe. A cross between Kinsey Millhone and Miss Marple, this unlikely heroine specializes in missing husbands, wayward daughters, con men and imposters. When she sets out on the trail of a missing child she is tumbled headlong into some strange situations and not a little danger. Deftly interweaving tragedy and humor to create a memorable tale of human desires and foibles, the book is also an evocative portrait of a distant world.

About the Author: Alexander McCall Smith was born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and went to school in Bulawayo, near the Botswana border. Although he moved to Scotland to attend college and eventually settled in Edinburgh, he always felt drawn to southern Africa and taught law for a while at the University of Botswana. He has written a book on the criminal law of Botswana, and among his successful children's books is a collection of African folk tales, *Children of Wax*.

Eventually, Smith had an urge to write a novel about a woman who would embody the qualities he admired in the people of Botswana, and the result, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, was a surprise hit, receiving two special Booker citations and a place on the *Times Literary Supplement's* International Books of the Year and the Millennium list. "The author's prose has the merits of simplicity, euphony and precision," Anthony Daniels wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*. "His descriptions leave one as if standing in the Botswanan landscape. This is art that conceals art. I haven't read anything with such unalloyed pleasure for a long time."

Reviews:

The Barnes & Noble Review:

The pantheon of brilliant detectives with great names - Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe, Sam Spade - has a new member: Precious Ramotswe. As Botswana's only female private investigator, Precious finds herself in some exotic situations -- flirting with wayward husbands in the Go Go Handsome Man's Bar one minute, confronting witch doctors about missing boys the next. But cases and solutions here are only half the fun. Author Alexander McCall Smith, the leading authority on Botswana's constitutional law, writes with such beautiful simplicity, he may actually give lawyers a good name. His slice of Africa is vividly rendered with an appropriately dry wit and an almost Dickensian array of characters, from the upstanding mechanic Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni to Precious' humble assistant, Mna Makutsi, to an assortment of cocky con men and frauds. Precious, meanwhile, is one of the most original private detectives ever put to page: a bright, fallible woman who gets duped romantically and on the job but bursts with compassion for everything in her path - especially Africa. Fans of transportive, literary mysteries have a reason to ululate. Loudly.

Publishers Weekly

The African-born author of more than 50 books, from children's stories to scholarly works, turns his talents to detection in this artful, pleasing novel about Mma (aka Precious) Ramotswe, Botswana's one and only lady private detective. A series of vignettes linked to the establishment and growth of Mma Ramotswe's No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency serve not only to entertain but to explore conditions in Botswana in a way that is both penetrating and light thanks to Smith's deft touch. Mma Ramotswe's cases come slowly and hesitantly at first: women who suspect their husbands are cheating on them; a father worried that his daughter is sneaking off to see a boy; a missing child who may have been killed by witchdoctors to make medicine; a doctor who sometimes seems highly competent and sometimes seems to know almost nothing about medicine. The desultory pace is fine, since she has only a detective manual, the frequently cited example of Agatha Christie and her instincts to guide her. Mma Ramotswe's love of Africa, her wisdom and humor, shine through these pages as she shines her own light on the problems that vex her clients. Images of this large woman driving her tiny white van or sharing a cup of bush tea with a friend or client while working a case linger pleasantly. General audiences will welcome this little gem of a book just as much if not more than mystery readers.

Kirkus Reviews:

Botswana's only female detective, Precious Ramotswe-whose investigation of whether the father who's incontinently turned up on the doorstep of Happy Bapetsi, who's been getting along fine without him, is really her father edges her toward considerably darker waters-isn't just ready to confront everything from theft to kidnapping to murder: she's ready for prime time.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Unlike in most other mysteries, in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* Mma Ramotswe solves a number of small crimes, rather than a single major one. How does this affect the narrative pacing of the novel? What other unique features distinguish *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* from the conventional mystery novel?
2. What makes Precious Ramotswe such a charming protagonist? What kind of woman is she? How is she different from the usual detective? Why does she feel "called" to help her fellow Africans "solve the mysteries of their lives"?
3. What is surprising about the nature of the cases Mma Ramotswe is hired to solve? By what means does Alexander McCall Smith sustain the reader's interest, in the absence of the kind of tension, violence, and suspense that drive most mysteries?
4. Mma Ramotswe's first client, Happy Bapetsi, is worried that the man who claims to be her father is a fraud taking advantage of her generosity. "All he does," she says, "is sit in his chair outside the front door and tell me what to do for him next." To which Mma Ramotswe replies, "Many men are like that." What is Mma Ramotswe's view of men generally? How do men behave in the novel?
5. Why does Mma Ramotswe feel it is so important to include her father's life story in the novel? What does Obed Ramotswe's life reveal about the history of Africa and of South Africa? What does it reveal about the nature and cost of working in the mines in South Africa?
6. Mma Ramotswe purchases a manual on how to be a detective. It advises one to pay attention to hunches. "Hunches are another form of knowledge." How does intuition help Mma Ramotswe solve her cases?
7. When Mma Ramotswe decides to start a detective agency, a lawyer tells her "It's easy to lose money in business, especially when you don't know anything about what you're doing ... And anyway, can women be detectives?" To which Mma Ramotswe answers, "Women are the ones who know what's going on. They are the ones with eyes. Have you not read Agatha Christie?" Is she right in suggesting women are more perceptive than men? Where in the novel do we see Mma Ramotswe's own extraordinary powers of observation? How does she comically undercut the lawyer's arrogance in this scene?
8. As Mma Ramotswe wonders if Mma Malatsi was somehow involved in her husband's death and whether wanting someone dead made one a murderer in God's eyes, she thinks to herself: "It was time to take the pumpkin out of the pot and eat it. In the final analysis, that was what solved these big problems of life. You could think and think and get nowhere, but you still had to eat your pumpkin. That brought you down to earth. That gave you a reason for going on. Pumpkin." What philosophy of life is Mma Ramotswe articulating here? Why do the ongoing daily events of life give her this sense of peace and stability?
9. Why does Mma Ramotswe marry Note? Why does this act seem so out of character for her? In what ways does her love for an attractive and physically abusive man make her a deeper and more complicated character? How does her marriage to Note change her?

10. Mma Ramotswe imagines retiring back in Mochudi, buying some land with her cousins, growing melons, and living life in such a way that "every morning she could sit in front of her house and sniff at the wood-smoke and look forward to spending the day talking with her friends. How sorry she felt for white people, who couldn't do any of this, and who were always dashing around and worrying themselves over things that were going to happen anyway. What use was it having all that money if you could never sit still or just watch your cattle eating grass? None, in her view; none at all." Is Mma Ramotswe's critique of white people on the mark or is she stereotyping? What makes her sense of what is important, and what brings happiness, so refreshing? What other differences between black and white cultures does the novel make apparent?

11. Mma Ramotswe does not want Africa to change, to become thoroughly modern: "She did not want her people to become like everybody else, soulless, selfish, forgetful of what it means to be an African, or, worse still, ashamed of Africa." But what aspects of traditional African culture trouble her? How does she regard the traditional African attitude toward women, marriage, family duty, and witchcraft? Is there a contradiction in her relationship to "old" Africa?

12. How surprising is Mma Ramotswe's response to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's marriage proposal? How appropriate is the ending of the novel?

13. Alexander McCall Smith has both taught and written about criminal law. In what ways does in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* draw upon this knowledge? How are lawyers and the police characterized in the novel?

14. Is *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* a feminist novel? Does the fact that its author is a man complicate such a reading? How well does Alexander McCall Smith represent a woman's character and consciousness in Mma Ramotswe?

15. Alexander McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe books have been praised for their combination of apparent simplicity with a high degree of sophistication. In what ways does in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* have the appeal of simple storytelling? In what ways is it sophisticated? What does it suggest about the larger issues of how to live one's life, how to behave in society, how to be happy?

**Prepared by Lisa Hewel, Moffat Library of Washingtonville. July 2009
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**