

## No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency Discussion Questions

by Alexander McCall Smith

**Author Bio:** (Fantastic Fiction & <http://www.litlovers.com> )

**Alexander McCall Smith** is a Professor of Medical Law, as well as being an author with over fifty books on a wide range of subjects. These range from specialist titles such as 'Forensic Aspects of Sleep', (the only book on the subject) to 'The Criminal Law of Botswana' (also the only book on the subject) and from the widely translated 'The Perfect Hamburger' (a children's novel) to 'Portuguese Irregular Verbs' (a collection of stories about eccentric German professors). His collection of African stories, 'Children of Wax', received critical acclaim and has been the subject of an award-winning film.



Alexander McCall Smith was born in Bulawayo, in what was then Southern Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe. Over time, he lived in Scotland, Ireland, and Ireland. He returned to southern Africa in 1981 to help co-found and teach law at the University of Botswana. In 1984, he returned to Edinburgh, Scotland, where he lives today with his wife, Elizabeth, a physician, and their two daughters Lucy and Emily.

### Characters:

- **Mma Precious Ramotswe:** The first female private investigator in Botswana.
- **Obed Ramotswe:** Precious' father. Worked in the mines of South Africa.
- **Note Mokoti:** Mma Precious Ramotswe's former husband and father of her child. He treated Mma Ramotswe poorly and left soon after their marriage.
- **Mma Grace Makutsi:** The Agency's secretary and Mma Ramotswe's assistant.
- **Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni:** Mechanic and proprietor of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, Mma Ramotswe's suitor and eventual husband.
- **Happy Bapetsi:** The Agency's first client. Does not think the man claiming to be her father is her father.
- **Mma Malatsi:** Agency client whose husband disappeared (during a baptism).
- **Mr. Patel:** A very rich retired Indian businessman. Agency client. Worried about his daughter.
- **Dr Maketsi:** Old Friend from Mochudi who wants Precious to look into one of his doctors.
- **Thobiso:** Missing boy.

## Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. 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?
3. 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"?
4. What did you learn about Botswana from *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*?
5. How is the pace of life different in Botswana than it is in America?
6. How are men's and women's roles in Botswana portrayed in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*? How are they different than in America? How does Mma. Ramotswe defy stereotypes about women's roles?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. Do you think Mma. Ramotswe's father would be proud of the business she started? How is it different than the type of business he might have expected her to buy with her inheritance?
11. 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?
12. When Mma Ramotswe decides to start a detective agency, a lawyer asks her "...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?

13. 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?
14. 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?
15. 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?
16. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni feels conflicted about having to tell lies in order to help Mma. Ramotswe investigate the case with the witch doctor. When, if ever, do you think it is justified to lie? Is there a difference between the forms of deceit Mma. Ramotswe uses and lying? How does she justify her deceit?
17. How surprising is Mma Ramotswe's response to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's marriage proposal? How appropriate is the ending of the novel?
18. Alexander McCall Smith has both taught and written about criminal law. In what ways does *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* draw upon this knowledge? How are lawyers and the police characterized in the novel?
19. 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?
20. There are 16 books in the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series. Will you read more books in this series? He has a number of other series. Will you read any of those?

## References:

- About Entertainment - [http://bestsellers.about.com/od/bookclubquestions/a/ladyDetective\\_q.htm](http://bestsellers.about.com/od/bookclubquestions/a/ladyDetective_q.htm)
- Fantastic Fiction - <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/m/alexander-mccall-smith/>
- Goodreads - <https://www.goodreads.com/book/similar/826298-the-no-1-ladies-detective-agency>
- Lit Lovers - <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/745-no-1-ladies-detective-agency-smith?showall=1>
- Readers Corner - <http://mmscl-adultblog.blogspot.com/2011/12/if-you-like-no-1-ladies-detective.html>
- Wikipedia - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botswana>
- Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_No.\\_1\\_Ladies%27\\_Detective\\_Agency\\_%28novel%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_No._1_Ladies%27_Detective_Agency_%28novel%29)

## If you liked No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, try...

- Thyme of Death - Susan Wittig Albert
- Wish You Were Here – Rita Mae Brown
- The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax – Dorothy Gilman
- The Witch Doctor's Wife – Tamar Myers
- On What Grounds – Cleo Coyle

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## No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency Series

1. *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (1998)
2. *Tears Of The Giraffe* (2000)
3. *Morality for Beautiful Girls* (2001)
4. *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (2002)
5. *The Full Cupboard of Life* (2003)
6. *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies* (2004)
7. *Blue Shoes and Happiness* (2006)
8. *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive* (2007)
9. *The Miracle at Speedy Motors* (2008)
10. *Tea Time for the Traditionally Built* (2009)
11. *The Double Comfort Safari Club* (2010)
12. *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party* (2011)
13. *The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection* (2012)
- 13.5 *The Cleverness of Ladies* (2012)
14. *The Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon* (2013)
15. *The Handsome Man's De Luxe Cafe* (2014)
16. *The Woman Who Walked in Sunshine* (2015)