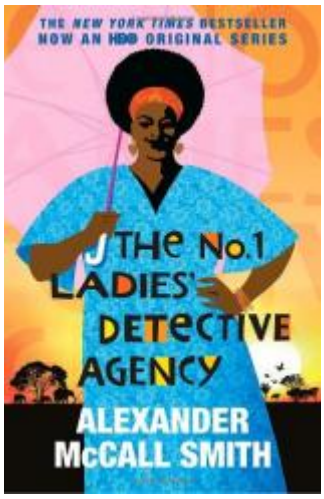
The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

by Alexander McCall Smith



About the Book

This first novel in Alexander McCall Smith's widely acclaimed *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series tells the story of the delightfully cunning and enormously engaging Precious Ramotswe, who is drawn to her profession to "help people with problems in their lives." Immediately upon setting up shop in a small storefront in Gaborone, she is hired to track down a missing husband, uncover a con man, and follow a wayward daughter. But the case that tugs at her heart, and lands her in danger, is a missing 11-year-old boy, who may have been snatched by witchdoctors.

Discussion Guide

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" [p. 4]?

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" [p. 10]. 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" [p. 79]. 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?" [p. 61]. 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" [p. 85]. 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" [p. 162]. 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" [p. 215]. 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 Mme 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 in **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?

Author Bio

Alexander McCall Smith is the author of the beloved, bestselling No. 1 *Ladies' Detective Agency* series, the *Isabel Dalhousie* series, the *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* series, the *44 Scotland Street* series and the *Corduroy Mansions* series. He is also the author of numerous children's books.

He is professor emeritus of medical law at the University of Edinburgh and has served with many national and international organizations concerned with bioethics. He was born in what is now known as Zimbabwe and taught law at the University of Botswana. He lives in Scotland.

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