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Fixing the guilt: Detective fiction and the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series

Detective fiction and the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series

This article examines the emergence of popular detective fiction in Africa as part of a new third wave of literature. While the new wave is a very particular response to conditions on the continent it nevertheless taps into the main streams of detective fiction that have emerged from Britain and in some respects the USA in the last hundred years. In particular this article focuses on the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series by Alexander McCall Smith and examines ways in which the postcolony reproduces the colony and how, in some respects the erstwhile empire desires to produce the postcolony. **Key words:** African literature, detective fiction, Alexander McCall Smith.

Introduction

To date, two distinct waves in African Literature have been identified. The first wave is defined as writing back to colonialism and includes elite authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe while the second wave manifests as post-colonial disillusionment, exemplified by Dambudzo Marechera's writing. Andersson (2005a) has contended that a third wave is emerging from where the second wave left off and can most clearly be identified in African popular detective fiction. This is an organic movement that works with audiences' own experiences through intertextual references to political memory, witty word play, reversals, cinema noir and theatre of the absurd techniques, its techniques being a form of resistance to what Andersson calls the "dialogic violence" that arises from the contradictions between the claims of official memory and the experiences of popular memory.

As resistance to this "dialogic violence" detective stories generally, especially where those poorly paid private eyes or amateur sleuths do better at their part-time jobs than the professionals, seem to suggest an unconscious quest to involve civil society in a social audit. Thus, if the first wave of African literature was the literature of nationalism as response to colonialism and the second wave registered a critique of the nationalist agenda, then the third wave concerns reformulating healthy community and intimate relationships.¹

Most popular literature engages with the themes of elite and canonical literature

and frequently disputes its ideologies, in some genres challenging the triumphalism and the nationalist basis of the first wave, in others apparently not projecting the disillusionment of the second wave at all but subtly finding ways to critique social polity. In popular literature there is a continued projection of a dignified postcolonial world populated mostly by chirpy citizens who feel positive about their countries. Violence, coming in new and surprising forms, is alluded to, not dwelt upon. It is manifested, as Andersson (2005b: 16) contends with protagonists becoming someone else, assuming another unlikely identity, rewriting race, rewriting class, rewriting gender, being the bringer of Aids or the rapist of babies in order to access memory that might otherwise be flattened in the glare of rainbow light – or even worse, silenced, because it is out of place and out of time – is a practice that is on the rise among Africa's pop culture fashionistas.

Narrators work through their ideas about democratic and constitutional matters – their feelings about governance and the threats to the new society – in a discursive chat-show way that allows readers to consider how *we* Africans feel about these issues. Within popular literature much of the new private-eye fiction is upbeat, expressing hope about the future. It appears to constantly be pulling its lessons from history as it collars the problems of the present, along with the reader. Popular detective fiction in Africa generally, taps into the familiar conventions of detective fiction from especially Britain and the USA and it is thus necessary to examine the genre first.

Detective fiction as genre

Crime fiction has several categories of its own. Firstly there is classical detective fiction, which enjoyed its own golden age. While there may be variations on a theme, classical detective fiction is formulaic in approach. According to P.D. James (in Radice 1989: 1-2) it works in exactly the same way in every book:

There will be a violent death; a limited circle of suspects all with motives, means and opportunity; false clues; and a tenable ending with a solution to the mystery which both author and reader hope will be a satisfying consummation of suspense and excitement but which the reader could himself arrive at by a process of logical deduction from revealed facts with the aid of no more luck or intuition than it is reasonable to permit to the detective himself.

Mental acumen was the most sophisticated tool in solving a puzzle. Readers could play the game as well. A.A. Milne (quoted in Coffmann 1995: 4), writing in his Preface to *The Red House Mystery*, echoes James:

In real life, no doubt, the best detectives are the professional police, but then in real life the best criminals are professional criminals. In the best detective stories the villain is an amateur, one of ourselves: we rub shoulders with him. For this is what

we really come to: that the detectives must have no more special knowledge than the average reader. The reader must be made to feel that, if he too had used the light of cool inductive reasoning and the logic of stern remorseless facts (...) then he too would have fixed the guilt.

Secondly, there is the modern detective novel, which sees a change in emphasis – usually on characters, psychological details and social context – rather than a change in formula. Obviously language is used differently in the sense that it is more contemporary and streetwise and the pace heats up in many of the modern novels to create suspense. The modern detectives can be divided into “private eye” or “amateur sleuths” or “police procedural” novels. Modern British detective fiction, certainly many of the increasingly popular police procedurals of the last 30 years, has substituted the amateur sleuth with the professional detective. Specialist SOCOs (Scene of Crime Officers), forensic pathology, chemical analysis and data technology as well as tightened security around a crime scene dictate that the professional is more often than not, the only one capable of “fixing the guilt”. The real life shift to professionalism and increasing specialisation and its recoding as fiction runs the danger of alienating readers who do not have access to or knowledge of the specialities that have become intrinsic to crime-solving. Many authors have come up with an ingenious solution: the professional, while he or she may be a senior member of the police services, is increasingly drawn as an outsider – troubled, troubling and sometimes troublesome.² It is often this outsider status which enables the professional to solve crimes and to “fix the guilt”. For instance, one of Scotland’s premier crime novelists, Ian Rankin, writes about the dark underbelly of a gloomy and perpetually sodden Edinburgh – its crime bosses, drug cartels, political corruption and increasingly vicious murders. Rankin’s protagonist, Detective Inspector Rebus, is an alcoholic outsider who often has to simultaneously counter threats of suspension from the police service and solve the crimes that some of his either by-the-book or, corrupt colleagues, and superiors are stumped by. Edinburgh is portrayed in Rankin’s Rebus novels as a city with a heart of darkness.

Almost as corrective and counterfoil to Rankin’s writing, another Edinburgher, albeit ex-African, Alexander McCall Smith,³ attempts to reinvent the amateur sleuth in the form of a Motswana amateur detective, Mma Precious Ramotswe, in the No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series which is set in hot, dry, perpetually sunny Botswana. While conventions of the golden age and hard-boiled detective fiction genre have an inevitable portability across continents, the third wave’s critiques are too singular to regard such fiction on this continent as simply another set of “European” scripts. McCall Smith’s Botswana novels straddle both the memory and consciousness of Europe as well as Africa’s third wave critiques. For instance, McCall Smith begins the first book in the series with a parody of what Europeans have come to regard as “prelapsarian” Africa.

The opening line of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*: "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills," is echoed by McCall Smith in the opening line of the first book in the series, *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (1998): "Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill". Unlike Blixen, McCall Smith does not proceed to draw the aesthetic landscapes of the African savannah of prelapsarian times but moves immediately to the spare but adequate interior of the little office that Mma Ramotswe has set up. It is only after listing the agency's modest assets that McCall Smith returns to the exterior: a thorn tree, a dusty road and "the roofs of the town under a cover of trees and scrub bush; on the horizon, in a blue shimmer of heat, the hills, like improbable, overgrown termite mounds" (McCall Smith 2003a: 1). Africa has changed and McCall Smith has translocated Blixen's Kenyan African Eden to a modernised and functioning independent Botswana. Before urbanisation there was neither a need for detectives nor detective agencies. Neighbours were each other's sleuths and the fact that everybody knew everyone else's business kept traditional communities relatively balanced and in check. Now, with increasing movement to the towns and cities and modern infrastructural development, mysteries and the complications of everyday life evolve in tandem with imported life styles and events: evangelisation, industries, insurance policies, beauty competitions, and the rise of a petty bourgeoisie and urban middle class. Someone who has access to most spaces in society needs to solve these complications. These solutions, even if they are in Mma Ramotswe's own mind, restore equilibrium. Individual moral failure, guilt and lack of virtue are exposed, are found out and then expelled.

There are literary references to Agatha Christie in the No.1 series too, tapping into a vague residue of general knowledge left behind by British colonists. Every now and then, Mma Ramotswe finds it necessary to remind the men of Botswana that women can be detectives and that they only have to think of Agatha Christie. Whether they have read her or not is debateable but both a lawyer and a customs official at a border post are cowed by Mma Ramotswe's confident assertions (McCall Smith 2003a: 57, 201).⁴

McCall Smith's plots are simple whodunnits and, in some instances, whydunnits. They have no complex, cunning twists like P.D. James *but* they do seem to have broken at least four of the classic "detective writing" rules (in italics below) of Ronald Knox's *Decalogue* (in Radice 1989: 14, original italics):

1. The Criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All Supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. *No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.*
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.

6. *No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.*
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. *Should a detective come across a clue, the author must instantly produce it for the benefit of the reader.*
9. The Stupid Friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. *Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.*

The amateur

It is the notion of the amateur, as cultivated by empire, which needs further elaboration first before proceeding to Mma Ramotswa in Botswana. Classic detective fiction, in the British golden age mould (which reached its height in the period between the two World Wars), reproduces constantly an unequal binary opposition between the professional and the amateur. Often the tension is created because the private eye or amateur sleuth proves to be smarter than the police. Marjorie Garber (2000: 5) is of the opinion that like terms of “any binary opposition, *amateur* and *professional* (1) are never fully equal, and (2) are always in each other’s pockets. They produce each other and they define each other by mutual affinities and exclusions.” In literature this is nowhere more evident than in detective fiction. In W.H. Auden’s poem, “Detective Story”, the “local common sense” or policeman, is habitually in a feud with the “exasperating amateur”.⁵ Characters from classic detective fiction have become ingrained in the popular imagination even though people might not have read any of the books:

- Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, while an expert in various new sciences, finds his true *métier* as an amateur detective. Garber (2000: 10) notes that “Holmes and Watson are in competition not so much with the criminals they pursue as with the police, in the person of the literal-minded and long-suffering Inspector Lestrade – the professional detective”;
- In the year that Doyle died (1930) the reading public is introduced to Miss Jane Marple – the ever-observant, intelligent and intuitive elderly, amateur detective of many of the Agatha Christie novels. Often, condescending and misogynistic professionals look down upon Miss Marple.

Inevitably, despite her woollen shawls and seeming frailty, it is her ability to access the micro-societies of Christie’s villages and her acumen about human nature (which she does not regard too highly) that solves the crimes.

- In 1930 too, Dorothy L. Sayers’ amateur sleuth, the aristocrat, Lord Peter Wimsey, makes his first appearance. Wimsey’s protégé, Miss Climpson, is set up as

“head of an unofficial detective agency composed entirely of women like herself – unmarried women who can quietly take up positions as secretaries, clerks and paid companions, virtually unnoticed by their employers, “detect” and investigate crimes. Wimsey’s friend and brother-in-law, Charles Parker is a middle-class Scotland Yard policeman with all the hallmarks of the professional: unimaginative, methodical, and dull” (Garber 2000: 11).

The idea of the amateur is intrinsic to the politics of self-representation by the British. Doing something for the sheer love of it guaranteed a perception of virtue and over the last few centuries (at least until the 1950s) was also associated with gentility, rectitude, principle and fairness. It is a politics of self-representation that many were taught to believe in even though historical evidence and practice soundly refuted notions of principle and justice – especially in so far as the lower classes and colonies were concerned. Nevertheless, with or without virtue, it was largely a corps of landed amateurs who ran and administered one of the greatest empires known to history. So too, colonisation and other colonial incursions enabled some of the world’s most notable amateur natural philosophers, scientists, and later naturalists, to speculate, experiment, dissect, ponder, gather evidence and read their papers to members of the Royal Society.

It was the English that dictated the amateur status of most of the world’s sporting codes and influenced the idea of amateurism as one of the principal virtues in the revival of the Olympic Games. Amateurism was ranged against the perceived callous commercialism of the American professionals. Amateurism (especially if one could afford to be an amateur) was in opposition to occupation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the British also pooh-pooed the professionalism of the Germans, and especially that of the mercenary Prussians whom they loathed. Amateurs often conjured up British military expeditions which were sometimes surprisingly successful. For instance, in his book on the bizarre battle between the British and the far superior German naval forces for control of Lake Tanganyika during World War I, Giles Foden (2004: 117) reports that when the rag-tag British expedition, manhandling overland two small boats called *Mimi* and *Toutou*, arrived in the Belgian Congo, the commanding officer, Spicer, formally thanked the Belgian commander for the extra troops that the host country had provided. Freiesleben, in charge of the Belgian troops on the edges of the lake, retorted:

“You think we are here to protect you?” he asked. “No, *mon Commandant*, we are here to protect the Congo from you!”

His cigarette-holder poised halfway to his mouth, Spicer was for once rendered speechless and it fell to Dr Hanscell to step into the breach.

“I don’t think the Congo is in much danger from us,” he said. “We’re nearly all amateurs, you know, except for the Commander.”

“Exactly!” replied Freiesleben triumphantly. “That’s precisely the point. You English have a genius for amateurism. That’s what makes you so dangerous. It’s always pretty obvious what professionals are going to do, but who but amateurs could have dreamed up an expedition like this?”

It was the amateurs, who ostensibly did things for the sheer love and loyalty of it, which were indeed dangerous. Their often unexpected actions, imaginative thinking and sometimes eccentric behaviour was ranged against a perception of the literal-minded, unimaginative, and methodical professional. These amateur detectives sprang from a class-based system that largely enabled Holmes, Marple and Wimsey to operate outside the need for an occupation. However modest, each of the above amateurs had a private income and could eschew the need for finding a salaried occupation.⁶ The middle class readers of these immensely popular novels could and still did buy into the idea of the amateur as a person who did something for the love of it. With the exception of the fairly new science of fingerprint identification, lack of forensic technology obliged authors to leave visible superficial clues which the observant amateur and keen reader could unravel.

Botswana as locality

McCall Smith has abandoned the idea that amateurs almost always have a private income or funding from elsewhere. Mma Precious Ramotswe is a resident of the former British Protectorate, Botswana – a country that almost singularly in Africa has not been a victim of the rest of the world’s Afro-pessimism. It is a pacific sand-box in a continent of troubles.⁷ Its neighbours on the other hand, a new set of crime-ridden and corrupt “frontline states”, individually or severally, display higher propensities for violence, murder, syndicated crime, or human rights abuses and policies that have led to economic shambles and threaten social disarray.⁸ British newspapers readers who keep abreast of developments in the rest of the world would know that while Botswana’s HIV/Aids infection rate is the highest in Africa it is probably the most efficient, the least corrupt and has not suffered any form of civil strife since independence. Despite some southern African commentators’ misgivings about the true state of its democracy, it is considered persistently virtuous (see Good & Taylor 2005: 21). The confident, paternal authority of Britain’s *Economist* (2004c: 6) also claims that Botswana’s latest election was “admirably dull” and that its “moderate, efficient, British-educated presidents have been honest (...) have sound policies, ensure that civil servants implement them and leave office dutifully when the constitution says so.”⁹ For the initial Scottish and thereafter worldwide readers of the No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series, Botswana represents the fine line, in Africa at any rate, between order and chaos.¹⁰ It is not as if every Eden has its Serpent but rather that every Serpent finds

its Eden. While Botswana represents an orderly circle of security, the reader can nevertheless still experience little *frissons* of adventure and danger.¹¹ As far as can be established the books have also inspired the only organised literary tours on the continent where the protagonists are black Africans.¹²

If McCall Smith desired to credit his sojourns in Africa in his writing, he was almost obliged to choose Botswana as his protagonist's country of residence. In terms of his moral philosophy¹³ one could argue that he wanted to place a decent woman in what is largely perceived to be a decent country, known for its economic rectitude and its political stability (as opposed to the financial excesses of Zimbabwe's ruling elites and Swaziland's monarch). Should he have used Zimbabwe as the novel's locale, a country he is also intimately familiar with, his main protagonist, Precious Ramotswe, could hardly have functioned without the broader socio-political intrusions of famine, land issues, authoritarian rule, corruption and human rights abuses.

Unlike Zimbabwe, Botswana generally does not elicit a sense of foreboding and darkness. It is not happenstance that McCall Smith located his lady detectives in a largely rural peaceful country which is considered the least corrupt of Africa.¹⁴ Botswana allows Ramotswe to concentrate on matters of individual moral failure. Such individual failures extend to issues of greed, avarice, petty fraud and life's mysteries such as missing or dishonest spouses. It is unnecessary for Ramotswe to call into question the systems of social and political justice which detectives of the hard-boiled genre do and which various authors' fictional detectives in surrounding states also comment upon.

Mma Precious Ramotswe

Ramotswe is the "moral eye" rather than the "private eye" of this particular fiction genre. She eschews the role, in the words of C.L.R. James, of the American "dyspeptic private eye [who sallies] forth in the name of the law, sharing some of the hoodlum chic of the gangsters themselves" (quoted in Comaroff & Comaroff 2004: 9). Ramotswe is in no position to adopt the kind of "hoodlum chic" of her female counterparts in the big cities – she has neither a gun, nor the sex drive and certainly not the requisite physique. Because the community is perceived as largely innocent, or virtuous, fixing a problem enables restoration to an Edenic state.

But to what extent is Precious Ramotswe the creation of an elder white male subconscious attuned to ideas of women detectives as genteel, rural figures and to what extent does she reflect the author's perceptions of a middle-class woman living not in urban Botswana but in the country? Is she, for example, based on a no-nonsense real-life Motswana like Botswana's current external affairs minister (former High Commissioner in the UK), Gaositwe Keagakwa Chiepe, daughter of S.T. Chiepe of Serowe? Or, is she an entirely fictional character. It is useful, in order to take this

discussion forward, to look at the possible fictional figures on whom McCall Smith has modelled Precious Ramotswe since she has none of the characteristics of the modern, gritty and urban African American or African female detectives. She is not a Harvard economics professor, like Pamela Thomas-Graham's Nikki Chase,¹⁵ nor a black urban professional, like Terris McMahan Grimes's Theresa Galloway. She is rural rather than urban, genteel rather than gritty, intuitive rather than street sharp and an observer of passions and culture rather than a lusty participant.

It would appear that McCall Smith has forged his detective from a template taken from between the two world wars. He is seeing a character who is a busy body. She is the stereotype of middle-aged, middle-class decency. In a *New York Times* book review of the first three books in the series¹⁶ Alida Becker (2002) likens Mma Ramotswe to Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Her book review is captioned "Miss Marple of Botswana". This is a catchphrase that seems to have caught on, but neither Becker nor subsequent reviewers who have intimated that Mma Ramotswe is the Marple of Africa, have bothered to analyse any likenesses. In reality there are very few and those that can be found are more a literary execution of McCall Smith's own views of the world rather than a parody (however gentle) of the intelligent busy-body Marple. Neither can one compare the self-consciously pretty villages of Christie's imagination – St. Margaret Mead and Chipping Cleghorn, (or the middle class Jessica Fletcher and architectural intimacy of Cabot Cove in *Murder She Wrote*) to the very real, largely unplanned, dusty sprawl of Gaborone and the straggling homesteads of dry Mochudi. But one can ask whether this is a preoccupation, like British detective fiction between the wars, with a stable hierarchical village life? The setting for the crimes Miss Marple solves is invariably a small country house while Mma Ramotswe lives at the foot of the Kgale hills, on the road between Gaborone and Ramotswa – also, "country". Like Miss Marple, Mma Ramotswe has to be acquainted with the rituals of sherry tipping and tea drinking, since this is the postcolony. Here the Britishness of the moment is diluted through the exchange of Ceylon for "bush" tea, a Royal Albert teapot for an "old enamel" one, as we see in this interaction in *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000) with Mma Makutsi, who is to Mma Ramotswe what Hastings is to Poirot or Watson is to Holmes:

"So, Mma Makutsi," said Mma Ramotswe, as she settled herself down in her chair in anticipation of the pot of bush tea which her secretary was brewing for her. "So I went off to Molepolole and found the place where those people lived. I saw the farmhouse and the place where they tried to grow the vegetables. I spoke to a woman who had lived there at the time. I saw everything there was to see."

"And you found something?" asked Mma Makutsi, as she poured the hot water into the old enamel teapot and swirled it around with the tea leaves.

"I found a feeling," said Mma Ramotswe. "I felt that I knew something."
(McCall Smith 2003b: 108)

She uses her family and class contacts to get things done. The author is assuming different types of knowledge – male/female. Female knowledge is “intuitive”. Ramotswewe turns to women, over and over, for advice and to ensure there is progress. Ramotswewe, as a female entrepreneur, straddles two worlds. In the one, Ramotswewe socialises outside the traditional homestead and village and sits comfortably in offices of lawyers, doctors and other officials and is not averse to taking a drink alone in a bar or tea on the verandah of an hotel. She has, above all, mobility in the shape of her little white van. In the other world, she maintains the traditional courtesies of greeting and respect and elicits, sometimes with the aid of a *pula* note or a gift of dress material, information from women. Such knowledge “grows out of the community networks of reciprocal exchange” as many of Ramotswewe’s informants’ “main source of information about the community and respite from work comes from these social interactions of daily exchange, which some might pejoratively call ‘gossip’” (Shetler 2003: 299).

It is the semi-rural setting of Gaborone where a great many people know each other or have connections to relatives in distant villages where Ramotswewe helps to solve these complications rather than violent crimes. Should a crime take place, or a mishap occur – these are individual lapses that do not represent a community or group culpability. This palliating effect does echo the “materially and morally comfortable world” inhabited by Miss Marple (Taylor 1990: 135).¹⁷ Both Ramotswewe and Marple understand and respect the social codes of the worlds in which they operate. Both Christie and McCall Smith recognise the access that women have into micro-societies. In Christie’s *A Murder is Announced* (1965: 57-58),¹⁸ an ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard muses with condescending admiration that a “nice old Pussy”, which translates as an elderly, unmarried woman who knits and gardens, is streets ahead of any detective sergeant. She can tell you what might have happened and what ought to have happened and even what actually *did* happen! And she can tell you *why* it happened!

When Mma Ramotswewe informs the lawyer handling the sale of her late father’s cattle that she wants to open a detective agency with the proceeds, the lawyer is sceptical about women’s abilities. She indignantly muses:

How dare he say that about women, when he didn’t even know that his zip was half undone (...)

“Women are the ones who know what’s going on,” she said quietly. “They are the ones with eyes. Have you not heard of Agatha Christie?”

The lawyer looked taken aback. “Agatha Christie? Of course I know her. Yes, that is true. A woman sees more than a man sees. That is well known.”

(McCall Smith 2003a: 57)

In Agatha Christie’s world, the “Pussies” are keen believers in and collaborators with the Police, even if the latter have to be helped in solving their crimes – it is a world free

of terrorists or demonic violence. It is world of prelapsarian order – cottages with hyacinth and lavender borders, stately homes, kindly vicars and genteel conversations about the difficulties of finding good servants. The glue that cements Agatha Christie’s micro-societies together is a tightly structured community that functions on the remnants of social hierarchies left over from the Victorian and Edwardian eras. In contrast, the glue that knits Botswana, and especially the village-like Gaborone, together, is largely genealogy. These genealogical lines are remembered continuously in the gendered spaces of women’s knowledge who spin the webs of kinship and of reciprocal obligation so necessary in extended families.

Ramotswa proves to be *better* than the police at solving crimes. As far as she is concerned, the police serve no purpose. Similarly, women are *better* than men at getting things done. Women are *more trustworthy* than men and are natural snoops, besides (this anyway, is McCall Smith’s conceit). Women are gossipers and hence they are always investigating other people’s lives. They talk, they exchange information, they are intuitive and *canny*. For these reasons, Precious Ramotswa frequently turns to women for assistance. Her cases involve women and children as victims, in one case a ritual killing related, in some fashion, with the taking of “power” from the female body by a male. Frequently, violence is involved. But McCall Smith’s protagonist, if the crime scenes are equated in her mind with moral landscapes, does not dwell on violence. As a settled, sensible and respectable woman sitting primly on the armchair of neo-liberal postcolonial politics, she takes on these social and political problems in jolly hockey sticks fashion. Ultimately the good woman is rewarded with a good man. Her journey from a poisonous early marriage is behind her. She is 34, running a small but successful detective agency and she has the love of a good man, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni.

It could be argued that marriage is a logical resolution for a heroine’s journey. Marriage is, if one were to use romance and melodrama conventions, the feminine equivalent of the hero’s attaining of the crown, or returning with the treasure. Getting a good man equals getting the crown. Yes? That, anyway, would be the approach in the Victorian romance. In her study of popular fiction Newell (2002: 5) has pointed out that

Since the 1950s African writers with diverse political interests and agendas employ the language of romantic love to voice ideals about the social rights and duties of individuals. These ideas may be egalitarian or conservative in their gender perspective: often relating to domesticity and to women’s status within marriage, these ideals are of course personal to the authors, but they are also deeply collective, promoting alternative social models for the community at large.

And marriage, it could further be argued, becomes the pillars of family just as family becomes the identifying factor of middle-class society. In this sense families do not exist as a private entity, but are rather part of the public sphere. Although Precious

Ramotswe lives in a world where the men behave very much like children and women are the adults, it is unrecognisably a patriarchal world. And Ramotswe is a man-identified woman. Her role models are her father, the late president Sir Seretse Khama and Mr Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

Furthermore, she seems to have the eyes and ears of an older person, with a different culture from her own. Lawrence Sanders' detective, Archie McNally, has been critiqued for something similar, as this online journal entry from Carrie Dorough (2003), a reader from Florida US, shows. It is reproduced at some length because Dorough's points apply to Precious Ramotswe too. Dorough writes:

So does anyone read these Lawrence Sanders books about a detective named Archie McNally? They aren't written by Sanders anymore (is he dead?) but the series goes on anyway.

I just got the latest paperback, and I'm about to start it. But before I do, I'm ready to be annoyed by all the things that annoy me about this guy. First of all, he never seems to really age. And he makes references to artists and pop culture from the 40s and 50s and 60s all the time, so he's either a complete geek or he's the product of reincarnation. (Yes, I know who Frank Sinatra was and the Rat Pack (...)) and I watch old movies with stars long dead so I've heard of Myrna Loy and Marilyn Monroe and Cary Grant, but I also often refer to Eminem or Nick Carter or Tom Cruise in my day-to-day musings.) If Archie McNally is 40 years old, it means he was born in 1961 or '62. So while he might remember growing up during the hippie years, Nixon and the Vietnam War, he's going to be more nostalgic about disco (can you be?) than swing.

Precious Ramotswe's author, no one seems to have noticed, spells kwela, "qwella",¹⁹ which term McCall uses inaccurately to refer to African jazz. Precious, if she is indeed a Motswana woman aged 34 in 2003 would know the difference between African jazz, mbaqanga and kwaito because she could not have escaped it. A plethora of South African musicians, including the exiled Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa and Steve Dyer, played every single club in Gaborone, Lobatse, Ramotswe, Kgale and Oodi in the 1980s when Precious Ramotswe would have been a teenager, the age when song is most readily remembered.²⁰ She *might* know, if her father played her the South African music of the 1950s, that kwela music distinguished itself with the sound of a penny whistle. One such penny whistler was Spokes Mashiane, not "Spokes Machobane" (McCall Smith 2003a: 52). The incorrect name smacks of old white man memory, not that of a young black Motswana woman. Similarly he spells Hugh Masekela, "Masikela" (McCall Smith 2003a: 52) and is unable to describe the music being played by Ramotswe's would-be fiancé, a trumpeter named Note Mokoti, beyond saying it is "sliding, slippery" music. Because McCall Smith's Precious lives in an apparently music-less world like a colonial keeping herself separate from the

music that is part of everyone's lives in Africa, one immediately associates her more with an old-fashioned Agatha Christie character than with a more modern detective. For most modern detectives, sound is integrated into lifestyle. Even P.D. James's Commander Adam Dalgliesh, who enjoys classical music, has a way of bringing his music into his life. But Precious Ramotswe is a creature unlike any other, and is hence a far cry from the sax-playing or rapping female amateur detectives who make their appearances in some of the modern whodunnits.²¹

Mma Ramotswe, besides standing apart from the black female detectives, is also eons apart from the white women who solve crimes in P.D. James's thrillers, and from those in Sarah Paretsky's, Sue Grafton's and Liza Cody's novels. To begin with, she doesn't have a flaw, besides being fat. She doesn't often drink: "The drink was strange and bitter; she did not like the taste of alcohol, but drinking was what you did in bars and she was concerned that she would seem out of place or too young and people would notice her" (McCall Smith 2003a: 48). She doesn't smoke, she definitely doesn't do drugs, she appears to have no interest in sex and she's a Daddy's Girl who natters away in a calm, composed way and never forgets her manners. There is something intrinsically conservative and Victorian in such a respectable, sensible heroine, especially since she thinks like an old, experienced person, rather than as a young one setting out on a new adventure. McCall Smith's sleuth reflects, for example, on the relationships between parents and their children and how these reproduce themselves in later relationships with sexual partners. Yet her first husband, to whom she got married at the age of 22, seemed like chalk to her Daddy's cheese, so it is a curious thought for her to have at all. She does get a healthy partner, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, at the end of her first set of adventures. He is similar in many ways to her late and adored father.

At face value, McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe series is merely another set of feel good novels riding the third wave of popular memory in Africa. Mma Ramotswe opens up press clippings, remembers bits of novels, quotes snippets of speeches and delivers reminders of historical figures. Political memory, in this sense, becomes tabled as event rather than as process as Mma Ramotswe's frequent reflections on Sir Seretse Khama and Mr Nelson Mandela attest. Political memory enters the narrative at specific times in order to punctuate particular points. It is spotlighted rather than backgrounded. And it remains part of the troubled *past*, not the "untroubled" present – if one overlooks Aids, unemployment and transnational hijackings – resided over by the narrator. Only in the dialogue, authorial interventions and asides can one see, if one manages to put humour and racy plot aside and concentrate very hard on subtext, that *everything is not what it seems on the surface*. Our jolly narrators in their happy worlds are merely engaging in some sort of performance – a comedy of manners, often – using fiction within fiction to suggest different moral outcomes. Thompson (1993: 2) reminds us that

Fictions of crime offer myths of modernity, of what it is like to live in a world dominated by the contradictory forces of renewal and disintegration, progress and destruction, possibility and impossibility. The capacity of crime fiction to evaluate different historical moments in the experience of modernity is not an accidental feature; it is a dominant convention of the genre.

The significance of postcolonial settings, particularly in McCall Smith, appears to be related to the way in which the postcolony reproduces the colony. Representation of postcolony as colony could thus be read as a critique of some of the structures of power that have remained intact from the time of colonialism till decades into independence. In the case of McCall Smith, they are patriarchy, the related excesses of women and child abuse, and corruption.

The female detectives, Mma Ramotswe and her secretary, later assistant detective, Mma Makutsi, reinforce the sense of order and decency prevailing in Botswana on a regular basis. But they are not so virtuous as to be without national and ethnic prejudices. For instance, in *Tears of the Giraffe* Mma Ramotswe is of the opinion that when people died, “good people, such as Mma Ramotswe’s father, Obed Ramotswe, were undoubtedly welcomed by God. The fate of the others was unclear, but they were sent to some terrible place – perhaps a bit like Nigeria” (McCall Smith 2003b: 5-6). Mma Ramotswe applied the same lack of approbation to Johannesburg where random killings by *tsotsis*, indiscriminate hijackings and violence, in Mma Ramotswe’s view, belied international crime statistics which stated that most victims actually knew their assailants and murderers (McCall Smith 2003b: 192) while Zulus are considered women-haters, noisy, and naturally belligerent (McCall Smith 2003a: 15ff, 24; 2003d: 44ff, 202). These prejudices of group culpability are extended to the outsider. Significantly, Mma Ramotswe and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni do not share the Botswana Government’s prejudice when it comes to the marginalisation of the Basarwa. In fact, they land up fostering two orphaned Basarwa children after Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had been bullied into taking them home by Mma Potokwane, the fearsome matron in charge of the Orphan Farm.

In classic detective fiction mode, Mma Ramotswe does have misgivings about the representatives of official society – the police and Government Men. There is a natural suspicion of Government Men (capital letters intended by McCall Smith) and too successful businessmen who inevitably become party to a kind of criminality-creep. The inclusion of Government Men and too rich businessmen is typical of the postcolonial critique that third wave detective fiction targets. At one stage Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi discuss the ways in which progress is *not* read in terms of literacy, health care and employment but in terms of the number of luxury cars that have been obtained as a result of influence and new wealth:

"These Mercedes-Benz cars have not been a good thing for Africa. They are very fine cars, I believe, but all the ambitious people in Africa want one before they have earned it. That has made for big problems."

"The more Mercedes-Benzenes there are in a country," offered Mma Makutsi, "the worse that country is. If there is a country without any Mercedes-Benzenes, then that will be a good place. You can count on that." (McCall Smith 2003b: 124)

Mma Ramotswe is not there to complicate the lives of her clients, although the reader might sometimes regard it so. For instance, when she intuitively knows that a crocodile has nabbed her very first client's husband during an evangelical baptism in the local river, she shoots the creature herself and retrieves the man's watch without informing the police. Thus Gaboronites are left to wonder at the upended, slit-bellied crocodile resting on the riverbank the next morning (and the client is left to sort out her husband's business and estate without an official death certificate!).

Structurally, Mma Ramotswe's cases are presented as short stories interwoven with one "heart of darkness" tale that needs to be resolved by the end of each novel – the so-called Serpent in the modern African Eden. For instance, in the first book of the series, a finger of a child is found in the glove compartment of an influential person's car and Mma Ramotswe immediately makes a connection with a village child that has mysteriously disappeared – probably into the dry, marginal lands edging the Kalahari desert. The traditional *muti* murder feeds into notions of Africa's heart of darkness – witchcraft – a notion that Mma Ramotswe and her friend, soon to become fiancé, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, are equally horrified at and afraid of. Having traced the "supply-line" of the finger's origin, Mma Ramotswe is led by the witchdoctor's wife to a remote cattle outpost where the latter is confronted about the metacarpals of a child:

"There is a man in Gaborone who bought a bone from your husband," [Mma Ramotswe] said. "Where did you get that?"

The woman looked at her scornfully. "You can buy bones in Johannesburg. Did you not know that? They are not expensive." (McCall Smith 2003a: 218)

Thus, very deftly, Botswana and the majority of Batswana are rendered the victims and the originating darkness deflected to the bandit metropolis, Johannesburg. The guilt has been fixed. Outsiders, as in the classic detective fiction mode, are seen to import stereotypes of terrible crimes into a little haven.²² While almost 250,000 people live in Gaborone, it has very little of the alienation and teeming complexities associated with the metropoli of South Africa and Nigeria and it has none of the unknowable about it – a precondition for the metropolis in most hard boiled detective fiction. The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series does not fall into this paradigm – it is not a literary response to the crisis of the teeming metropolis nor does it try and make sense of the orders and value systems and different community codes of conduct that are

severely violated in the hard-boiled detective fiction genre. Mma Ramotswe's cases are mostly the complications attendant upon everyday life. Her clients are not caught up within a milieu of criminality. She is simply called upon to act in resolving the temporary disturbances in the lives of her clients – clients who are depicted as solid, conservative (read decent) burghers. These might be extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people but if there is guilt, it can be fixed. McCall Smith and the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency series straddle two literary continents: a white world redolent with crime fiction conventions and characters and the African third wave popular fiction world where there is a concern to reformulate a healthy community.

Notes

1. See for instance the Nigerian, Dan Fulani's Pius Shale 005 who thwarts drug smugglers and coup plotters while Unity Dow's Amantle Bokaa investigates a ritual killing and exposes the villains to the entire village.
2. Consider, for instance, Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, an intellectual, classical music lover and stickler for grammatically correct evidence reports and P.D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, a deeply private person and acclaimed poet.
3. McCall Smith was born and raised in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) before he studied medicine in Scotland. He worked in Swaziland before a 12 year stint in Botswana where he established the Faculty of Law at the University of Botswana in Gaborone (Magwood 2004: 19).
4. McCall Smith delights in literary parody. In *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* (2003) there is a charming play on Yeats' poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole" and in *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs* (2003) an entire chapter plays around with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.
5. In his poem, "Detective Story" (1933-1938), W.H. Auden writes: "(...) and when the truth / The truth about our happiness comes out, / How much it owed to blackmail and / philandering. // What follows is habitual. All goes to plan: / The feud between the local common sense / And intuition, that exasperating amateur / Who's always on the spot by chance before us."
6. So too, when Britain pushed for the amateur status of sportsmen, they were thinking principally of gentlemen who did not need to make money out of their athletic prowess.
7. It is clear that Polygon, McCall Smith's publishers, anticipated a one-off print run of 3000 copies – copies intended for readers of McCall Smith's numerous other novels of which notably is the Von Igelfeld Trilogy. Known as *The 2½ Pillars of Wisdom* (2004), the trilogy incorporates the titles: *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs*, and *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances*.
8. Examples of detective fiction about corruption for instance are, South African Deon Meyer's *Dead at Daybreak* (2000), Nigerian Dan Fulani's *No Condition is Permanent* (1981), *Flight 800* (1983) and *The Power of Corruption* (1983).
9. Off-hand we can think of far more despots and dictators that have also been British-educated.
10. Kenneth Good and Ian Taylor (2005: 21) have recently commented however, that Botswana is no model for Africa in that there are so many limitations in its liberal democracy, revealed especially during the last elections that *The Economist* so roundly applauds. Good and Taylor point out that the "ruling dominant party was the only one that was properly resourced" and what is particularly worrying is the "impending handover to Ian Khama. The actions of Ian Khama are autocratic and prone to order-giving, rather than debate and argument, the stuff of democracy".
11. For example, in the first book of the series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Mma Ramotswe is obliged to shoot a man-eating crocodile by the light of a torch and in another case a cobra manages to inveigle itself into the engine of her little van.
12. In fact, there are two literary tours. One offers a tour around the urban places and spaces featured in the series while the other includes the edges of the Kalahari desert and a nature reserve (Robinson 2005).
13. Emily Bearn (2004: 13) noted in an interview with him that McCall Smith "is also a transparently decent man, with a philosophy that is easy to follow. At its simplest, he appears guided by an

instinctive and fierce revulsion to anything ugly or unpleasant". In the same interview, McCall Smith remarked: "I think I understand the nature of the world we live in. Most people are good. Most people are essentially kind and decent" (Bearn 2004: 13). To a certain extent then, McCall Smith ensures that instead of following the detective's aptitudes at solving mysteries, we are detecting the writer.

14. According to Transparency International's Index of world corruption Botswana is the 24th least corrupt country in the world (see Transparency International 2004).
15. Pamela Thomas-Graham's Nikki Chase books are *A Darker Shade of Crimson* (1999), *Blue Blood* (2000) and *Orange Crushed* (2004).
16. *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (1998), *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000) and *Morality for Beautiful Girls* (2001). Since then *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (2002), *The Full Cupboard of Life* (2003), *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies* (2004) and *Blue Shoes and Happiness* (2006) have also appeared.
17. Interestingly, quite often, outsiders, foreigners, or people who have some mental incapacitation are the ones who create the disturbances in the villages Miss Marple frequents.
18. Another creation of Christie's is the retired officer of the Belgian Sûreté, Hercule Poirot. While he is far from an amateur investigator, his retired status allows him to think outside the perceived parameters and limitations of the professionals.
19. See comments by Note Mokoti to Precious Ramotswa in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (McCall Smith 2003a: 48).
20. Personal recollection of Andersson who grew up in Botswana.
21. Examples of sax-playing detectives include Kate Baeier in Gillian Slovo's *Morbid Symptoms* (1984), *Death by Analysis* (1986), *Death Comes Staccato* (1987), *Catnap* (1994) and *Close Call* (1995) and Charlotte Carter's part-time sleuth Nanette Hayes in *Rhode Island Red* (1997), *Coq au Vin* (1999), *Drumsticks* (2000) and *Rooster's Riff* (2001). "Sometime" sleuths who negotiate solutions to crime through rap include the cool (male) Maceo Redfield in Nichelle D. Tramble's *The Dying Ground* (2001) and Abby Moeketsi in Muff Andersson's *Bite of the Banshee* (2003).
22. Inevitably, one is reminded too, of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith's farm novels.

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