

## SHOW OPEN

SATALIA: Alexander McCall-Smith has charmed millions of readers worldwide with his life-affirming books, including his best-known series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. A widely respected expert on medical law and bioethics, McCall-Smith has been honored with numerous awards for his writing, holds honorary doctorates from ten universities, and was named Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his services to literature. We talked with him about his beloved Botswana, his career--and about the power of bush tea... Here's our conversation with Alexander McCall Smith.

## INTERVIEW

SATALIA: Alexander McCall Smith welcome to the conversation.

MCCALL SMITH: Thank you very much indeed.

SATALIA: We are delighted that you made Penn State the fourteenth your last stop on your latest US book tour and in fact you'll uh be talking at the Rock Ethics Institute uh the talk is titled 'How are we to live our lives? An evening with Alexander McCall Smith.' And part of your answer is live your life with attention to detail. What do you mean by that?

MCCALL SMITH: Well I think that it it's very important to to look at the small things in life and to allow oneself time to contemplate uh the day to day minutiae of one's life because that um often is is where one's life is actually happening. That if we sit around and and wonder about the great big issues uh it's relatively rarely that we'll be called upon to make a decision about a great big issue. Most of us. In fact many of us don't have any great big issues at all. I I I uh and I think it's therefore useful to to look at uh the the small details of one one's life and contemplate this. The things like um uh attention to friends. Um attention to the detail of friendships that uh one has how we should treat our friends what we could do for our friends and so on I think that's where uh a great deal of of of morality so to speak can be done.

SATALIA: And that's exactly what Mma Ramotswe teaches us in in your No. 1 Ladies' detective series which has been translated at last count into 45 different languages sold more than 20 million copies is that what you think makes her so endearing so popular?

MCCALL SMITH: Well I think it's a little bit difficult for an author himself to to say exactly why uh people are reading his his books. Obviously all of us hope that that will happen but to to speculate on the the reasons why a a character uh resonates with uh readers can be a little bit difficult but having said that I would say yes that I I think that Mma Ramotswe is is somebody who um is very aware of of of other people. She's kind there's a kindness I think is one of the main characteristics that we we see in her. So I think she's the sort of uh person with whom people would like to sit down and have a cup of tea and have a talk and just mull over over issues and people like that because

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

modern world is is pretty frantic place really. And the idea of people able to sit down and talk about about the little things of life I think is quite useful.

SATALIA: Before becoming a writer you were a medical law professor and a respected expert on bioethics and in fact you were teaching medical law at Edinburgh University. Uh when you submitted um a children's book and an adult novel for a literary competition. The children's book actually won and and really that changed your life forever.

MCCALL SMITH: Well that's right yes. uh uh I think it's interesting that a lot of writers actually start by entering in some sort of competition. More than one would imagine. Uh and I did that and I very much hope that the that the novel itself the the main novel would win but it didn't and the manuscript that I 'd entered for for children in the children's category children's novel category was one of the winners and so I was very pleased with that. Uh and that set me off writing children's books.

SATALIA: You wrote 30 of them.

MCCALL SMITH: I did. I wrote quite quite a lot of them and I was asked to to write more after the first one was was published and I never imagined uh that I would actually be a writer of books for children it it hadn't been something that I had planned d in any way. In fact really so much of our lives are rather like that actually that uh one one ends up doing something by accident. So I started being a writer books for children by by accident. And uh I enjoyed that well enough but uh in in the mean mean time I had another career so I was doing that in my spare time and then gradually I I I began to write uh short stories for adults and and uh radio plays and things like that. And uh then I sat down and wrote the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and and that was the book that uh really-

SATALIA: Changed your life.

MCCALL SMITH: That really changed my my life.

SATALIA: That was 1998 and at the time you agreed to write eight books in the series. You're now up to thirteen.

MCCALL SMITH: That's right yes yes. So uh I I'm about to start the the the thirteenth so we we've got the twelfth book published in that series. Yes uh I hadn't anticipated that uh that that would happen because uh I originally wrote about Mma Ramotswe in a short story a short short story and uh I thought that that would be be it but I rather liked the characters so I I wrote a full novel about her. And again I thought that uh that would be the end of that that you know that that would be the extent of my literary conversation with her and uh-

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

SATALIA: But but you said to quit it would be like walking out in the middle of a conversation.

MCCALL SMITH: I think that's right uh so I agreed to do the sequel and then made it a trilogy and then a quartet and a quintet and and so on. And now I feel that I I want to continue um having my annual conversation with Mma Ramotswe and her friends um I think for sometime more. So there's still plenty to say about her uh as long as the readers are happy to continue to read them then I'm quite happy to continue to write them.

SATALIA: You mentioned letters earlier and you get fan mail every day which incidentally you answer. You answer every letter you get.

MCCALL SMITH: I try to. Um. It it can be quite difficult and I suppose particularly when I'm away I have an assistant who who will deal with with these and explain that I'm away and so people do get an answer if they don't get one from me they get one from the uh assistant. But we get wonderful letters and the letters are often very very moving actually. That's one of the things that I I really appreciate about this this job. That uh people write in a very moving way and may say that Mma Ramotswe uh has helped them in some difficult uh time of their life uh which is-

SATALIA: People wrote these on their deathbed.

MCCALL SMITH: Yes. Yes that's one of the the interesting things that I I get letters from people who say that uh they perhaps read the book with a dying parent and or spouse and um they they will then write to me and and say what what it meant for them and and that's uh that's a very moving thing for for for me and people say write to me and say that the uh example of Mma Ramotswe and Mma Ramotswe a character is a friend for them uh has helped them in in uh uh some sort of personal sorrow or difficulty. Uh I get a lot of people saying that they they read the books when they were example having chemotherapy or something of that that sort and I'm always very touched by that it's it's very important for me.

SATALIA: It seems to me that the that the law professor and the writer are intimately intertwined and I'm wondering uh where does the law professor end and the writer begin? For you?

MCCALL SMITH: Well I I've more or less sort of ended the law professor.

SATALIA: You've ended it but in your stories people are righting wrongs and they're using their heads and their hearts and uh in solving daily problems.

MCCALL SMITH: I I suppose that there is an influence. I I'm often asked to identify what precisely the influence is and I find that quite difficult. Um I think other people might be rather better at identifying that than than I. But uh I suppose there are certain concerns

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

that one would have if one's a law professor you're very interested in human action in various contexts uh and I was certainly when I was a law professor I was very interested in the in the status of human action what people meant when they acted and what they what they meant when they spoke as well and that's the sort of thing that lawyers actually are very interested and so that fits quite naturally I think with the business of being a novelist and I think that it is compatible. People often regard the law as being a little bit dry but it isn't really it's an intensely human discipline and there's something in the law for everybody really.

SATALIA: And one of the things about your characters is that there's a lot of forgiveness that if there if the intent wasn't there to do a bad deed the characters in your books forgive them.

MCCALL SMITH: Well yes I'm I'm very interested in forgiveness. I think that forgiveness is something which uh which we really need to try to keep uh before us because uh at the moment uh I think that many of our societies are somewhat retributive and and actually want to point the finger of blame at people we're very interested in blaming people uh for misfortunate's and if something goes wrong there there' immediately uh a cry that the the person who calls the damage or calls the wrong to come into existence should be identified and indeed punished so the the curious uh retributive uh feel to to things which goes hand in hand I think with the the thought of consumerism um we're we're regarded as customers of the world r clients of the world and that we're entitled to have everything satisfied and if it isn't satisfied then we blame people. And that I think actually rather demotes uh forgiveness which is a central value. Um and of course in the past um many societies uh had uh religious systems which actually stress forgiveness and indeed uh this is still the still the case but I suppose as the the role of religion um has been marginalized in in in the west of certainly not um uh not not exactly promoted uh one wonders whether children are really receiving this sort of advice that you must forgive people. And I think in a way they they probably aren't and of course without forgiveness uh it's very difficult for things to go forward because if we if we don't forgive people who's wronged us then we clutter our lives uh with all sorts of unfinished uh business. I mean take the the long running um historical issues that pain the world. A lot of that is is is to do with lack of of forgiveness. And with keeping history alive uh in in in in order to to make people um antipathetic to one another.

SATALIA: And it seems to me that in many ways you do more good in the world through your books than you probably could have done as law professor.

MCCALL SMITH: Well that's very kind of you to say that. I don't know whether I do much good in the world but I'd say that I'm talking to more people uh today than I than I did when I was a a law professor and [inaudible] as law professor I was uh wrestling with some of these issues or certainly interested in some of these issues and indeed writing about some of these issues. Uh I think you're you're right and not many people paid any attention whereas uh now I suppose I I'm engaged in a in a conversation really with many millions of people. And that's I enjoy that and uh if I can make a point without

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

being didactic or without trying to preach to people because I certainly don't want to preach to people but if I can get Mma Ramotswe to make a point about forgiveness for example she says she's a forgiving lady. he doesn't want to punish people she wants to forgive them. If I can get people to think about that then then that's fine by me.

SATALIA: A lot of your books really are a conversations because the the books that started off as serial novels published first in in the *Scotsman* newspaper and and in uh the the uh newspaper in London or in the UK they you invited readers to uh provide input and they did and in fact many of their ideas ended up in your stories.

MCCALL SMITH: Yes. I I I like that very much indeed. I very much enjoy writing these serial novels in the way in which nineteenth century writers as you know-

SATALIA: Charles Dickens.

MCCALL SMITH: Charles Dickens is an example but a lot of the writers at that that time uh regarded the serial form of publication as being the normal form of publication. So uh I like that and I I do enjoy people writing in with suggestions or or or telling me if I meet them at a readers event uh that's great fun. And uh if if the ideas are alright um I would say well thank you very much I'll I'll try and put that into the plot and people really often quite tickled by that they think that's a very good idea. Now sometimes I can't use their ideas of people writing in perhaps in a rather vindictive way if they don't like a character they might say let's punish so and so let's have something deeply unfortunate happen to that particular character. One person suggested that one of my characters uh should be run over by a steamroller and I had to say that that really wasn't wasn't something that I thought that I could do.

SATALIA: Of all the characters that you've created is there one that speaks to you before you go to sleep speaks to you when you wake up in the morning and is most in your mind your alter ego?

MCCALL SMITH: That's a very interesting question because uh I've created rather a lot of characters with with all these different series and so I have um a whole string of people uh from whom I could choose um and you'd expect that I might perhaps even more have more than one character who stays with me all the time. I I didn't think there's one who's with me constantly. There's there's one who uh I think uh is often there and who acts as a sort of advisor or indeed a censor or one might even say occasionally the spoiler of the fun and that's Mma Ramotswe because if I feel that I'm going to say something uncharitable or do something uncharitable or something that uh uh really I shouldn't do Mma Ramotswe 's voice comes to me and I think oh should I be doing that? What would Mma Ramotswe say? So occasionally she just upbraids me for being too selfish or whatever whatever the flaw or vice that I'm showing happens to be. Mma Ramotswe 's there on my shoulder. But that I suppose happens if you create a character who who's really rather nice. She's going to she's going to advise you in that way.

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

SATALIA: Well speaking of Mma Ramotswe the HBO uh television series features in that role uh uh a wonderful vocalist by the name of Jill Scott and the producers of the series spent two years searching for her. Is she in your mind the person you had kind of envisioned?

MCCALL SMITH: Well the very interesting uh aspect that I think uh Jill Scott is a wonderful Mma Ramotswe and she did it beautifully and I really really liked her performance and I was absolutely happy with it as indeed I was uh with the performance of the other uh actors. Um but the interesting thing is that I never see uh the faces of my characters which is a rather unusual thing and I suspect that most authors do see faces of my characters but I I don't. So I actually really don't know what Mma Ramotswe looks like other than that she's traditionally built which means she's quite a large lady and that there's a smile which appears a great deal. Uh that was the only preconception I had about the physical appearance of Mma Ramotswe so when I visited the film set when they were making the initial Anthony Minghella movie uh about it the one that uh kicked off the HBO series um I had this meeting with uh Jill Scott. And everybody was very excited about it and there was great uh popping of flashbulbs and so on and um people said well now is that is she what you expected that sort of thing. Uh I said well of course yes it's absolutely fine because I had no I had no conception. Um I think that the important thing was that the the smile and the sunny disposition um had to be there so she had to be somebody at whom one would look and say that's a nice person. And I think one does that with uh Jill Scott and she did it really really um beautifully uh and of course she's from uh she's from Philadelphia. Um her uh her starting point and uh well done her. 'Cause she hadn't been to Africa before uh she made those films and she mastered the accent and the body language absolutely beautifully. Really really a tremendous performance.

SATALIA: And of course this was all filmed in Botswana. Um what is about Botswana that so captivated you and so captivated everyone who's been involved in this project. I read that when the series was being filmed you cried the director cried.

MCCALL SMITH: Well yes. Uh on that um what actually reduced me to tears I mean there are many occasions on which authors will be reduced to tears by movies of their books for the wrong reasons. Um my my tears were tears of of gratitude uh and and very warm emotion. Uh what had actually happened was that there was a very moving scene that uh Anthony Minghella had uh had filmed and uh I visited him on the set one day and he said I want to show you the uh advance version of this and he he got his computer and turned it on and it was a wonderful scene in the film where uh a little boy has been kidnapped and is restored to his father uh a teacher and the father looks across a bit of dusty ground and sees Mma Ramotswe 's tiny white van come up and this little boy gets out and there's a moment of recognition on the father's point when he sees the boy and my goodness me it's moving so I just I just burst out crying and uh Minghella patted me on the shoulder and said that he'd done exactly that as well. And then I learned that uh at the funeral scene uh the funeral of Edward Ramotswe the late

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

Edward Ramotswe Mma Ramotswe's uh father that wonderful man um the funeral scene everybody on the set um cried the electricians cried the cameraman cried the carpenters cried the extras cried everything everything was uh a matter of tears and the TIME journalist was there covering that and he said that he started to cry and after the 12th or 13th take he could bear it no more and had to leave. So that that was all very positive because it showed that it was a film that was that was genuine uh and that was very moving and of course it was a film that was uh filled with love and one would say the same about the series that uh that followed.

SATALIA: Speaking of Minghella he he died not long after making that film.

MCCALL SMITH: that's right it was extremely tragic because it was the last of of one of the greatest uh British film directors an absolutely wonderful man and uh he died alas on the day of the showing the premier in London which was which was a very uh cruel thing and uh he was a a marvelous director. Um-

SATALIA: *The English Patient*.

MCCALL SMITH: Yes.

SATALIA: *The Talented uh Mr. Ripley*.

MCCALL SMITH: Oh the *Talented Mr. Ripley* I'm a great admirer of Patricia Highsmith and I think that he realized that book so beautifully in that that film the textures of it the Italian scenes the music of course very good acting. It was really a wonderful wonderful film. No he's he's much regretted.

SATALIA: How did he come to even know about your or to take on the project of of the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*?

MCCALL SMITH: Well I sold the film rights uh some years ago uh to a company based in Johannesburg in South Africa run by Amy Moore who very much believed in the this film and this project uh and I think that she drew it to the attention uh Anthony Minghella or got him to read the uh to read the books and I think when when he read the books uh then he thought that this might be uh for him and so he he worked on it with Richard Curtis who did uh *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and so I knew it was in very good hands because I don't think that that particular team could make a bad bad film if they tried. They were so so good so I had great confidence because I knew that Minghella was actually um uh appreciating the ethos of the books and also respected the country he he went and visited the country and tried to get an understanding of its its customs and its feel and it's it's a remarkable country Botswana. It's a it's a very admirable country and uh Anthony Minghella picked that up and uh he was much appreciated by them because it was very important uh for the people of Botswana because this was the first time their country was being shown-

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

SATALIA: In a positive light.

MCCALL SMITH: On film to a world audience so a great deal was at stake uh for them and I I think it's a wonderful thing that um Anthony Minghella and HBO and the BBC did in um uh going along with the positive interpretation uh of the country that I had in the books.

SATALIA: And you're considered the patron saint of of Botswana.

MCCALL SMITH: No no no no.

SATALIA: You may not know that but you you've put it on the map for many Americans who who have only seen Africa portrayed as a as a tragic continent and not this wonderful spiritual alive place like Botswana that we see in your series.

MCCALL SMITH: Well that that that's very interesting thank you for that because I I think that it is a great pity that the portrayal of sub-Saharan Africa uh tends to be so negative. Now you can understand the reasons why there's a lot of negative reporting because there are a lot of negative things happening and obviously the media has to report on the harsh face of our times and it does that when it comes to Africa but it tends then not to uh talk about anything else and so we've become so accustomed to seeing the bad news from Africa that uh we we don't realize that there's a lot o good news uh as well and I think that's one sided and uh and unfair I mean it would be as if one portrayed this country by looking at the problems of a very deprived or violent uh in a city area I mean that's not the whole story it's part of the story but it's not the whole story and so the same thing applies um in Africa and Africa is full of um resourceful um people um leading leading these really very good lives uh with great generosity of spirit and ingenuity and uh I think that's that's a story which uh deserves to be told rather than the story of everything that's wrong.

SATALIA: You dedicate this thirteenth book in your series uh the *Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party* to Dr. Max Essex who is with the uh he's a Harvard law professor uh the Harvard uh AIDS institute tell me a little bit about the work he's doing.

MCCALL SMITH: yes Max on in fact isn't a law professor he's he's a his background is veterinary medicine he's a scientist. And uh he's a very great man. Um the Harvard AIDS initiative uh is a wonderful project uh that um Harvard University has uh undertaken um in um Africa and Particularly in Botswana and Max Essex who is one of the towering figures in uh AIDS research and indeed made some very important early discoveries in relation to HIV way back when it was first being being studied um he has direct this project and made a major difference uh to the lives of people.

SATALIA: It's no longer a death sentence in Botswana.

Conversations from Penn State  
Episode 308: Alexander McCall-Smith  
Transcript

MCCALL SMITH: Well it it isn't because um they Botswana has ahs always fortunately been able to afford the um antiretroviral drugs and and so there is money for health there because it's got a reasonable income it's middle income country because of the diamonds but it's just the the the tremendous work that uh that he has done and in deed the United States has been really good in in helping with the AIDS uh pandemic and in Botswana the United States has done more than anybody else which is uh something that I think we need to need to remember. And so I dedicated this book to to Max uh because uh I just admired what he's done all sorts of interesting work and he's he's he of course is one of the people working on uh on a possible vaccine so uh more power to his elbow and he's much appreciated in in Botswana. They're very very much uh appreciative of what what he and uh and a Harvard and indeed the United States have done.

SATALIA: Alexander McCall Smith thank you for being good company in person and in print. Thanks so much for talking with us.

MCCALL SMITH: Thank you very much indeed I've enjoyed that. Thank you.

**SHOW CLOSE**

SATALIA: I hope you enjoyed our conversation with Alexander McCall-Smith. Comcast subscribers can watch this program anytime on Penn State On Demand. Find out how through our website: [conversations-dot-psu-dot-edu](http://conversations-dot-psu-dot-edu), where you'll also find an excerpt from McCall-Smith's latest book, *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*. I'm Patty Satalia. We hope you'll join us for our next "Conversation from Penn State!"

**END OF SHOW**