

“All that is fine in the human condition”: Crafting Words, Creating Ma-Ramotswe

PINKIE MEKGWE AND ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH
IN CONVERSATION

ABSTRACT

Acclaimed Edinburgh-based author Alexander McCall Smith is a professor of Medical Law and a prolific fiction writer. He has written over fifty books. It is, however, with the fictional character Ma-Ramotswe that his name is most readily associated. Ma-Ramotswe is the protagonist in McCall Smith's *Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency* series, which comprises six novels to date. The seventh and last in the series, *Blue Shoes and Happiness*, is to be released in 2006. *The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency* series is widely read in thirty-two languages across the world. The novels are set in Botswana, where McCall Smith was previously in the Department of Law at the University of Botswana. The author retains a strong relationship with the country and its people. In July 2004, Alexander McCall Smith visited Gaborone, Botswana, to begin work on adapting *The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency* series into a film.

In this interview with Pinkie Mekingwe, McCall Smith talks about the importance of creating a character who represents “all that is fine in the human condition” in an era and geopolitical space where nihilism reigns. The author opens up on his life, work, awards, and future possibilities.

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PM: Alexander McCall Smith, thank you for making the time to speak to me.

AMS: Thank you very much indeed, Pinkie, for inviting me.

PM: You have often been described as someone who leads a double life as it were—as professor of Medical Law and prolific writer of over fifty books. Where and how do these two spheres meet?

AMS: Well, I suppose a lot of writers end up having double lives because writers have to earn their living when they start off—and they are often doing something else. I

think in fact that it is a good thing that writers do more than one thing because that means that the writer gets experience from another area of existence, so to speak. So, I had a separate career—I was a professor of Law at the University of Edinburgh and indeed I had also worked at the University of Botswana some years back in the Law Department and continue to have quite a close association with the university of Botswana. So that was my career. In the meantime, at night and at weekends, I was a writer, and I continue to do this. Now recently because of what has happened to my books—and my books, generally I suppose, have taken off over the last few years—I have had to make certain decisions about that, so I have taken a very long unpaid leave of absence from my day job, so to speak, and I am spending my time now being a writer.

PM: Your many books bear testimony to the varied aspects of your life, don't they? I mean, you've written such books as *The Forensic Aspects of Sleep*, *Criminal Law of Botswana*—those would be from your law background—and then there is *The Perfect Hamburger!* Children's books?

AMS: Yes, there's quite a variety of books I suppose, in the list of books which I've written. That book *The Criminal Law of Botswana* I wrote with my colleague and very dear friend, Professor Frimpong from the University of Botswana. I've often written books with people which I've very much enjoyed doing. *The Forensic Aspects of Sleep* is a peculiar book, and I wrote that with a number of other people. It is all about what happens when people have sleep disturbances and they become sleep walkers for example, and they may do something unfortunate while they are sleep walking—what are the legal implications of that?—there are also interesting legal questions surrounding the position of people who get excessively tired and then maybe operate machinery or drive or do something of that sort, and there may be accidents resulting from that which leads to legal questions. *The Perfect Hamburger* which you mention is not a recipe book; it's not a cookery book; it's not instructions how to make the perfect hamburger—I wouldn't know how to do that; in fact, I don't really like hamburgers—but I did write a book called *The Perfect Hamburger* which is a novel for children.

PM: I want to quiz you now on how you are able to wear various different thinking caps at the same time. Right now you are working on three different series at the same time. You are well known for the first of these, *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series (and we will go into the different series). Why write all three simultaneously, and how do you work that out?

AMS: Yes, I suppose I do rather like to do lots of different things at the same time. I find that a very attractive way of working as a writer—to have two or three books on the go at any one particular time, so that one might work on one book one week, and the next week on another book.

PM: And you don't lose your thread?

AMS: No . . . although I don't like to stop if the writing of one book is going very well. If it is, then I'll see it through. I don't like to chop and change too much. I think that if I said right, I am only going to work on this today, and I will work on another book the following day, then I could lose my thread, so I try to avoid that.

PM: You are right now in the middle of serializing a novel, *44 Scotland Street*, for a newspaper in Scotland. Tell us about that.

AMS: Well, that's an interesting story. Last year (July 2003) I was in the United States and I went to a party which was given by the American writer, Amy Tan. I was talking to someone at this gathering and they pointed out that another guest at the party, Armistead Maupin, had written a serial novel in the San Francisco Chronicle years back which was called *Tales of the City*, and this went on—I think it was a weekly instalment in his case—for a long time, then they would publish his books. And of course the idea of a serial novel being published in a newspaper has a reputable literary pedigree in that that's what Charles Dickens did

PM: That's right! With *Hard Times*

AMS: Definitely. Charles Dickens did it, I think Tolstoy also did it. Flaubert, who wrote *Madame Bovary*, also did that in France—and that almost landed him in prison—and I hope that is not going to happen to me

PM: Oh my! Especially that in *44 Scotland Street* you refer to real-life characters!

AMS: Oh yes, I do that But what happened is that when I got back, I was asked by one of the newspapers in the UK to write about my trip and I wrote the article, and mentioned in it the conversation about the man who had done a serial novel in the United States, and I said what a pity it was that newspapers did not publish serial novels anymore. That was read by the editor of *The Scotsman*, which is a big newspaper in Scotland, and he asked me to write it.

PM: And now it has taken off remarkably, attracting a large world-wide readership particularly over the internet. There is now talk of turning it into a television series, right?

AMS: That's right. The other day I was involved in a very interesting program of discussions here in Gaborone which the British Council had organized with The Botswana Writers' Association together with a number of publishers from Gaborone. And I said to the writers there that this is one of the best ways to attract interest in the reading of fiction: why not get one of the newspapers here to publish a serial novel by a Botswana writer. I think that would be a great thing to do, so I hope that happens.

PM: I hope it does happen. I think it will

AMS: I think you should write it!

PM: Actually, I will. Now that I have gone public about it, I will simply have to do it! But back to you: the other series you are working on is called *The Sunday Philosophy Club*. What I find interesting there is that once again the main character, as in your Ladies Detective series, is a woman, Isabel Dalhousie. Can you tell us about that?

AMS: Thank you, yes, *The Sunday Philosophy Club* is a new series of novels. It is about a woman who is a moral philosopher. She is very interested in the moral implications of what one does. She is always asking herself what the moral thing to do is, in different cases, and she gets involved in the mysteries and problems of other people. I've had great fun writing that, and I am contracted to write four of those, to start with.

PM: A woman, morals, mystery, an interest in other people: this sounds a bit like Ma-Ramotswa, the character at the centre of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency Series*.

In fact, it is this series, which has sold some five million copies so far, that you are most well known for.

AMS: That's right. I think there's no question that that series is what really got my career going as a writer. It has taken off across the world and has been translated into some thirty-one languages including Chinese, Catalan, Icelandic, Thai So Ma-Ramotswe is speaking to people all over the world, which is a great surprise to me, and I am delighted.

PM: She is speaking to the world about Botswana, and we are delighted about that. I will be asking you who Ma-Ramotswe is, but to ask first about the whole series to date, would you say that these are books that evoke traditional life in Botswana?

AMS: Maybe. To an extent. But I suppose also evoke other things as well. I am very interested in developing the characters in these books.

PM: Let us briefly go into these books to get a sense of the chronology, and trace the development of the characters because the characters do develop in rather interesting ways over time. To begin with, we meet Ma-Ramotswe in *The No. 1 Ladies Detective*. Her father, Obed, has just passed away and left her cattle. What does she do with her inheritance?

AMS: Well, he hopes, I think, that she will put the cattle to good use. He says to her that she might want to start a business and I think he had in mind a solid business, a butchery or something of that sort, and she says: "I know what I'll do, I'll start a detective agency." Poor Obed Ramotswe is pretty shocked by that, but unfortunately he is not long for this world, so she goes ahead—she starts a detective agency. She doesn't really know anything about being a detective, but she is a very intelligent, intuitive woman, and she feels, quite rightly, that she can tackle anything. So she gets a book called *The Principles of Private Detection* by Clovers Anderson, gets an office, and she is in business.

PM: Something that I find strongly evoked in that first one is the relationship, in particular the strong bond, between father and daughter. The love. Tell us why you chose to write about that.

AMS: Yes, that is a very important part of her story. I don't know why I particularly chose that. I suppose it's something that must interest me. Sometimes one sees a very strong bond between a father and daughter, a bond of affection and loyalty, I think that is something that I wanted to portray in literary terms, and it seems to me that this would be something which would add a depth to the characters. Precious Ramotswe is a very, very fine lady, I wanted her to represent all that is fine in the human condition. So this idea—where does this come from?—well, she had this wonderful father who was a very great man. He worked very hard and had a great eye for cattle. She says that he could build up a herd very well, and he did. He lived his life with honour and integrity. And that is something that I rather admire. You meet people like that. I wanted her to have him as her icon, the person whom she admires.

PM: And Ma-Ramotswe, his daughter, is precious to him. Understandably then, Obed is upset when Ma-Ramotswe's marriage goes sour. At the end of the first book then, we have come to know a woman with a gentleman for a father (she keeps saying that) who nonetheless "leaves" her for the next world; she gets less than a good man for a husband, and thus ends up alone. With these departures though, she does

not buckle under. Rather, she sets up a detective agency and is all set to take on the problems of others—and this is the point at which we move on to the next book, *Tears of the Giraffe*.

AMS: I must point out that originally I had thought that I would only write one book—it started off as a short story, it became a book, and then I discovered suddenly that I was writing a whole series of books. In the second book, *Tears of the Giraffe*, we see a development in her professional life. She is asked by an American woman who had lived briefly in Botswana to find out what happened to her son who disappeared many years before. This woman has come back and wants to know the truth. Ma-Ramotswe is able to find out what happened in this sad event. The second book is about forgiveness, and about setting the past to rest—because I think that is something that we all face in our lives. We face problems of forgiveness: at what point do we forgive those who've wronged us, for example; at what point do we say that the past is the past and that we need to move on from that past? And it is very important in the development of Ma-Ramotswe's character that we see this strain of forgiveness. She often says, "I am a forgiving lady, and I don't see any sense in punishing people too much for what has happened," and that is what I develop in the second book.

PM: Effectively, then, the detective agency becomes a vehicle for interactions between people from all walks of life, with different issues, issues to be pondered over, issues to be resolved, issues that confront humanity and are the essence of life itself. And we are invited always by Ma-Ramotswe to join her in her bush-tea as we take brief pauses through the journey of life. Let's move on to the next book in the series, *Morality for Beautiful Girls*. What is this one about?

AMS: In this third book, we see some further developments in her career. She is approached by a man who organizes beauty competitions

PM: And we know all about beauty competitions—they are a big thing in Botswana!

AMS: That's right, and I have always been rather interested in reading reports about what has happened at beauty competitions, and that is very interesting

PM: So this is something very strong within the culture of which you write

AMS: Yes, but the beauty competition also provides us with the chance to develop a little mystery in that the person organizing the competition wants to make sure that a very good lady wins it, because he does not want any of the ladies being convicted with criminal offences after they win the beauty competition. So he wants to "fix" it and make sure of that—so Ma-Makutsi, Grace Makutsi, who is Ma-Ramotswe's assistant and is a very important character in these books—comes in and she finds out which one of the finalists is the nicest one.

PM: Morality in question! The fourth book in this series is entitled *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*. What an idea!

AMS: Yes! The idea there again is the idea of Ma-Makutsi. She has had quite a hard life. She has had to struggle a bit, and she really worked very hard at secretarial college—she got 97% and we hear a lot about that! It's one of the jokes in the books: 97%—she's very proud of that. She's a very fine person. She feels that she needs to earn a little bit more money because Ma-Ramotswe can't really pay her a very good wage because the detective agency does not make that much money.

PM: Particularly because Ma-Ramotswe in her empathy and generosity does not always charge her clients.

AMS: You are right. She doesn't always collect the fees, she does not charge as much as she should. She is a very generous lady. But Ma-Makutsi has been working at the same time in the garage which is associated with the detective agency, that's Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni's "Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors." She's been working as assistant manager there as well as being assistant detective. She suddenly realizes that many men can't type! And many men are too ashamed to say they can't type. And they are too ashamed to go to a class where there will be women who will do better at the typing than they will. And so she thinks: she will set up a typing school just for men, where men can learn just among other men, so there will be no women who will laugh at them when they can't type very well.

PM: Very interesting. We should mention at this stage that J. L. B. Matekoni and Ma-Ramotswe have gotten engaged, but we do not know when they will get married. Still, their lives have physically merged at this stage, they work from the same building because Matekoni got sick in *Morality for Beautiful Girls*. Let us briefly go back to that episode of sickness.

AMS: Yes, that was a curious thing. In the third book, suddenly Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni suddenly became depressed. And I hadn't planned that. I hadn't planned that that would happen in the book. He suddenly behaved in a depressed way. And of course depressive illness as you know is a very common illness—it affects many people, there are many families that will be affected by this, and it is of course very treatable.

PM: I find it interesting that you give depression to a male rather than a female character, and yet depression is often associated with women—perhaps because associated with weakness—are you saying here that a good man—and Matekoni is a good man—can say, "I have a weakness" when they realize it, and solicit the help of loved ones?

AMS: That is right. I mean, I don't really set out deliberately to say that. But maybe that is what it says—it does make the point that depressive illness can strike absolutely anybody and it strikes in this case a very fine man, a very good mechanic, who you'd think would be perfectly okay—and I am happy to say that he gets fixed up and by the end of the book he has recovered.

PM: J.L. B. Matekoni himself is someone who fixes things, "the best mechanic in Botswana." He is also a character who develops. Let's take a closer look at him.

AMS: He's quite a quiet man. He's a very good man and he's rather taken advantage of by people. In particular, there's a matron at an orphanage who is—

PM: Ma-Potokwane!

AMS: Ma-Potokwane is very good at getting Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni to fix things for her. They've got an old pump at this orphanage that keeps breaking down and rather than get a new one, she phones him and says, "Please come and help us." He goes out there, and she knows that he has a weakness for fruit cake, and so she makes him a big fruit cake, and she says, "By the way, there's something I'd like you to do," and he goes off and fixes the pump yet again! And in one of the books—I forget which one it

is—eventually he says, “I’ve had enough of this pump, I am not going to fix it again. You’ve got to get a new pump!”

PM: In *The Kalahari Typing School*, then, Ma-Makutsi is at the center and we get to see her character develop. She is a hard-working, very enthusiastic woman—sometimes rather too much so because she sounds so enthusiastic that she often startles people when she answers the phone! And now we move on to the fifth in the series, *The Full Cupboard of Life*. What’s going on here? Why are these two (Ma-Ramotswe and J.L.B. Matekoni) still not married?

AMS: Well, you may well ask! Ma-Ramotswe is getting a little bit impatient because people are saying to her, “You’ve been engaged for a very long time, when is the wedding going to be?” So she is a little bit concerned about this. But there is an important development in the marriage department in this book, and it involves a certain amount of “assistance” from Ma-Potokwane who’s very good at forcing people to do things!

PM: She gets things moving . . .

AMS: Oh yes, she makes a strong fruit cake for Mr. Matekoni and I think that probably helps to get the marriage going, so to speak.

PM: And on the work front, Ma-Ramotswe is dealing with a wealthy woman who has several suitors and she is trying to figure out whether they have good intentions or are merely after her money. Once again morals in question?

AMS: That’s right. What I like to do in my books—and not just in this series but in the Scottish series as well—I do find these moral issues interesting. And in this case I suppose it’s a question of sincerity of motive that she is interested in checking up on. Ma-Ramotswe does find out who the best suitor is, but the problem with giving people advice is people don’t take it!

PM: And Ma-Ramotswe gives a lot of advice generally. In fact, she seems to do more advising than detecting actually. I find it interesting too that it seems that it is good old common sense that often wins through in these books. Now taking into account how she learnt about the business, it would seem to me that the message being relayed here—and I know you’ve already said you don’t deliberately set out to deliver specific messages—is that education in itself does not necessarily equip one for life if it isn’t accompanied by basic common sense?

AMS: I think that’s right. Education is tremendously important and one would never doubt that. But at the same time we must remind ourselves that there are people who may not have had the benefits of a tertiary education, for example, but who are very clever and resourceful for people, and Ma-Ramotswe is somebody in that category. She wasn’t fortunate enough to have a tertiary education, but she is a very intelligent, clever woman. In the first book, she outwits people who have had much more education than she has because she is so intelligent and intuitive. She’s a clever lady.

PM: In these books, you focus primarily on the sunny side of life. The sixth book is even entitled *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies*. Problems are hinted at, in the whole series, and yet people seem always to overcome, and cheer, warmth—empathy—seem to be the order of the day.

AMS: I think that it is important to be optimistic. I don't really have much time for a nihilistic, denying philosophy of life. I don't see why one should go through life feeling that all is bleakness and that there are no possibilities. I think that it is important to believe that one can make a lot of life; that one can get a certain satisfaction from life. So I suppose I am a bit of a utopian novelist. I am not a social realist novel, I am not really concerned with describing things always as they are; rather I look at how they might be.

PM: And yet you don't necessarily present us with a perfect world: Ma-Ramotswe's first marriage is a disaster; her father dies; Ma-Makutsi struggles; she also has a sick brother to look after. But overall, you do paint a rather idyllic picture of Botswana. Considering that this is a society that is currently struggling with HIV/AIDS, why is the affliction so absent in the books?

AMS: In the books I do refer to it, but I don't go on about and I don't think one wants to refer to it in literature all the time because I think people just want to get on with their lives. Particularly as an outsider, I don't think it's for me to spend too much time on that particular issue.

PM: Talking about being an outsider, you were born in Zimbabwe, have lived in Botswana, and are now based in Scotland. And yet Botswana is the setting of the whole *No. 1 Ladies Detective Series*. Why base most of your writing on Botswana? What is the special connection there?

AMS: It's accidental really. I lived here briefly many years ago and I visit Botswana every year. I suppose I became very interested in this country and I admire the country a great deal. I think this is a remarkable country which has achieved a great deal—we all know that—and I think that it is a special place. I wanted to tell a readership in Western Europe and North America who might not really know that. I wanted them to know, and I think they are getting that message through Ma-Ramotswe.

PM: Botswana comes through as a character in its own right in these novels.

AMS: Botswana comes through as being the hero, yes. In a sense that's fine. I admire people who are proud of their country, this applies not only in Botswana, this applies anywhere. I think that if one can be proud of one's country, that's a great thing. And I celebrate that. Ma-Ramotswe says that she is a patriot and that she is proud of her country. And that's quite moving, I think. Pride in one's country—affection for anything—can be poignant and moving. And I bring that out, I think, in these books.

PM: That and sadness amongst the cars of Botswana!—the subject of the first chapter of the fifth book, *The Full Cupboard of Life*. Tell us about that.

AMS: Yes, that's the title of the first chapter. It comes from Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni's reflections on how his two apprentices aren't very good. And he's even seen one of them use a hammer on an engine—and that's a great sin if you're a mechanic—and he says, "I really don't know what's going to happen when these two young men go out and set themselves up as mechanics: there'll be a great sadness amongst the cars of Botswana!"

PM: J. L. B. Matekoni's interested in the work ethic of the young apprentices while Ma-Ramotswe keeps a tab on their moral issues then? Girls, cleanliness . . .

AMS: I am having fun with the apprentices, really. Mr. J. L. B Matekoni provides proper protection for the hands but they go and touch things in the office when they haven't wiped the grease off their hands, and that makes Ma-Ramotswa and especially Ma-Makutsi quite cross. There's a terrible scene in the sixth book, *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies*, in which the elder apprentice, Charlie, uses a new tea-pot that Ma-Makutsi has, to put diesel in, and she absolutely flies off the handle!

PM: And we know how important tea—bush-tea specifically—is to these women.

AMS: I must tell you something about that bush-tea. There was an article in the press in the UK—since the publication of these books, sales of red bush-tea—rooibos tea—have gone up by 70%.

PM: Interesting! Let's turn now to the craft of writing itself. You write prolifically, and you write very well. What prepared you?

AMS: That is very kind of you. I suppose what really prepared me for that was having been a voracious reader as a child. I think children who read a great deal often develop the ability to write. Writing is something that—you yourself know as a writer—you really feel you have to do. It is a creative urge. Where that comes from is anybody's guess. Most writers, I think, are trying to make sense of the world. They might have a sense of loss and separation somewhere, there may be some personal psychological factor which is producing this, but it's strong, and it has to come out.

PM: It has to come out. Some people talk about it as something that just has to be born. You travel a lot, speaking at conferences, literary events, charity events, raising money especially for children in Africa (such as those in Zimbabwe) so there's some direct financial benefit for the continent that you write about. Do these activities and your extensive travels especially, influence your writing?

AMS: It probably does because I set my books and my stories all over the place, so I suppose I'm a fairly international writer. I also find that the travel introduces me to people—I see people whom I might otherwise not see, so I find that very productive. But one thing that travelling does—and I think I should probably travel more—is it takes up time and I have to battle now for my writing time, because my time now is controlled by other people.

PM: Everybody knows that writing requires a certain level of discipline, for some people even a "special" environment. What is your writing regime?

AMS: That's a very interesting question, Pinkie, the environment in particular, that's very intriguing. I think a lot of writers are almost obsessive about their particular environment, some of them say I must sit by the window, or I must have yellow paper, or whatever it is, certain music must be playing, or something like that. I don't mind too much about that as long as I'm not in an environment which is aesthetically unappealing. So I could never write in a modern motel room, which is a terrible disaster area for the soul. I like to write in simple, preferably quiet surroundings. I also tend to like writing in the morning, although I can write at other times, I rather enjoy getting up early-ish in the morning and working for three or four hours on something.

PM: You are a multiple award-winning writer, having scooped three awards within the first half of 2004 in addition to all your earlier awards. Tell us about the awards and what they mean to you.

AMS: I've been very fortunate in that I've received "author of the year" award in British Book Awards. I was absolutely delighted when that happened. I also got British Book Sellers "author of the year" as well as Waterstone's "author of the year" awards. I feel blessed, and I feel that people have been very generous to me.

PM: You have been very generous, as a writer, to have touched so many people in such gentle ways, emphasizing the good over the bad, nudging readers perhaps to go back to some "good old solid traditional ways," as Ma-Ramotswe would say.

AMS: She does, you see, she says that she admires the old Botswana ways and often tut-tuts a bit about some modern behaviour. She is, though, selective in the old values that she likes.

PM: Oh yes, she says she is modern as well.

AMS: She is a bit of a feminist, Ma-Ramotswe. She won't be pushed around by men and she manages to outwit many men as well.

PM: Why are all your central characters these strong women?

AMS: Oh, I don't know. You'd have to ask a psychologist or a psychiatrist to have a long talk with me. I don't know why.

PM: That would take us, I suspect, back to your childhood, your upbringing. Would you say any of your childhood experiences has gone towards shaping the kind of writer you have become?

AMS: Probably. I think every writer is affected by childhood because childhood decides what sort of person you're going to be, although sometimes people who've had a bad childhood can overcome and become the sort of person they want to be. I had the great privilege of spending my boyhood in Zimbabwe. We lived in Bulawayo, and I think that gave me the affection for Africa, obviously, although I have lived most of my life—certainly most of my adult life—in Scotland with one or two times away here in Gaborone, and at some point spent time in Swaziland. So that would explain my interest in this part of Africa, and why perhaps I am writing these books.

PM: Please tell us about your family.

AMS: I am married to Elizabeth, who is a doctor in Edinburgh. She is a General Practitioner in a practice with five other doctors, close to where we live. We've got two daughters, Lucy—who is twenty—and Emily, who is seventeen. In the past I've brought both my two daughters to see Botswana. Lucy is at the University of Cambridge reading for a degree in English. She is a very good jazz trombonist. Emily plays the trumpet—she's just finished school and wants to study medicine.

PM: I know you also play in an orchestra. Do you do this with your family, then?

AMS: Yes we do, and the orchestra is called "the really terrible orchestra." It is very bad!

PM: Sounds like another novel in the making . . . maybe even a whole series?

AMS: Yes, indeed. You've got no idea how bad we are. We are really, really, weak: four weak musicians who can't play their instruments very well. I play the bassoon, but I really don't play the whole bassoon because I find the top notes just too difficult, so

I stop when we get to difficult bits. My wife plays the e-flat horn, and we have great fun, but we make a terrible, terrible, noise—it's just awful!

PM: You're a professor of medical law; your wife is in medicine, you are in law. How did the two of you meet?

AMS: We met first at university in Scotland, a long time ago. We met again later on, and decided we'd get married.

PM: Clearly, you like music. Is listening to, and making music, your way of relaxing?

AMS: I do like listening to music. And I often will listen to music while I'm writing. Interestingly enough, I find that does help me quite a bit—and I've got very wide tastes in music. For relaxation, though, on a Saturday afternoon I'll go and lie down and sleep.

PM: If the house were to burn down and you had just yourself, a book, and something else to save from the house, what book would it be, and what would the something else be?

AMS: The family and the cat are out of the house, are they not?

PM: Absolutely! You'll see them afterwards.

AMS: My goodness me! One book: A collection of the poems of W. H. Auden, a poet I admire very greatly, and I have the first edition Auden's *Collected Poems*. I think I would also take my bass saxophone. I have a saxophone which is very unusual and rare. It is a big instrument, so heavy that you can't hold it around your neck. It has a stand with wheels, so I'd have to try and get that out of the house in time, though that might be quite difficult because it's so heavy!

PM: Alexander McCall Smith, thank you very much.

AMS: Thank you Pinkie, it has been my absolute pleasure.