

Sandy, but not gritty

Suspended Sentences

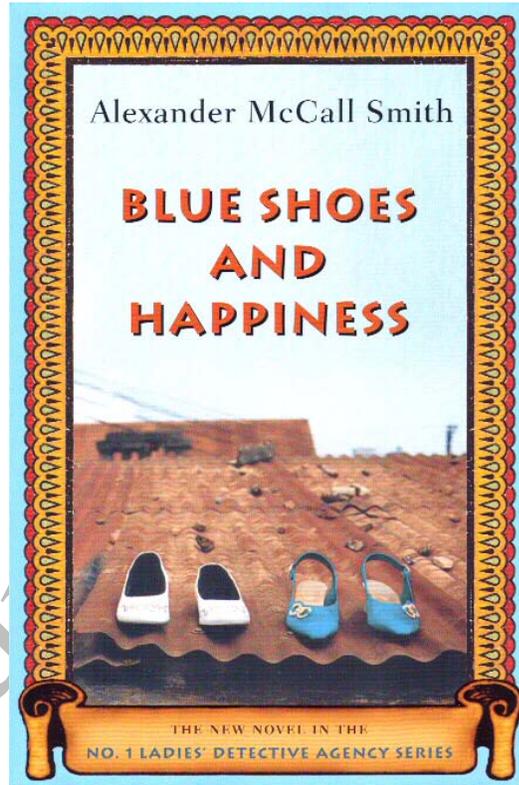
by Jim Napier

The genre of crime fiction is constantly evolving, and generally that is a good thing. Recently, however, police procedurals, forensic series, and stories involving sadistic serial killers seem to be particularly in vogue. Noticeably in short supply these days are “cozies” – stories with little or no violence, centering on an almost vanished world where respect for others and civilised behaviour is the norm. This is understandable, since a world in which everyone respected one another and acted accordingly would be markedly lacking in crime!

This week’s pick is the exception to this trend, and proves that squaring the circle is possible — that one can write about crime without profanity, gore, or even a murder. It is an engaging tale of life in a town in Botswana that, apart from its particularities of climate and people, might have been lifted intact from rural England, or the Canadian prairies, or perhaps mid-west America. In an increasingly homogeneous and violent world, it tantalizes the reader with a glimpse of a vanishing, and ironically more civilised, existence.

Alexander McCall Smith

Alexander McCall Smith (or Sandy, as he prefers to be called) is well qualified to write of things African. Born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), and educated in that country, he helped to establish Rhodesia’s first law faculty. Later he moved to Edinburgh, Scotland,



where he met his future wife, a Scottish doctor, and they raised two daughters. A prolific writer, he has authored over fifty books on such diverse topics as medical law, criminal law, and philosophy, as well as children’s stories and radio plays. Then, of course, there are his novels: now numbering well over a dozen, there are currently four million copies in print, available in thirty languages. His books have been widely praised in the pages of the *Globe and Mail*, the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and the *New York Times Book Review*.

Blue Shoes and Happiness,
(Knopf Canada/Random House 2006)

It has been said that there are two kinds of problems in life: those you cannot do much about, like the weather, and those you can. The latter are the staff of life for Precious Ramotswe and her No. 1 (and Botswana's only) Ladies' Detective Agency. Armed only with her common sense and a copy of "The Principles of Private Detection," she works her way through the town of Gaborone – a sort of large African version of Miss Marple, unearthing local wrongdoing, exposing their perpetrators, and in her own small way, balancing the scales of social justice.

In this, the 7th installment in the series, Mma Ramotswe is more than usually busy. Together with her partner, Grace Makutsi, she juggles a case involving peculiar blood-pressure readings at a local medical clinic with a game reserve where the workers have suddenly become fearful about something they won't talk about, and food stocks gone astray from a government college kitchen. Added to her burdens, Mma Ramotswe's husband, Mr. J. L. B. Mathekoni, runs the Thokweng Road Speedy Motors repair shop, where he struggles with two feckless apprentices; and as if that weren't enough, her partner, Grace, is having problems in her love life.

As she works her way through these conundra, Mma Ramotswe must also cope with a cobra in her office, and Grace's obsession with a pair of pointy-toed blue shoes. Not least, she must decide whether she wants to embark on a diet, or remain, as she sees it, "a Botswana woman of traditional build."

A homespun tale
in an exotic setting

Drawing on his extensive experience in sub-Saharan Africa, Sandy McCall Smith paints a convincing portrait of life among the jacaranda and acacia trees, set against the rich sunsets of the veld. It is a world of tiny beasts, such as cicadas and geckos, and rather larger beasts of a decidedly more human form. His protagonist, Mma Ramotswe, confronts the social implications of life around her: "Where would we be in a world without...shame?...That would be a recipe for selfishness. *Take one country, with all that country means, with its kind people, and their smiles, and their habit of helping one another; ignore all this; shake about; add modern ideas; bake until ruined.*"

If you haven't already guessed, Sandy McCall Smith is an unabashed romantic idealist, the Garrison Keillor of Africa. *Blue Shoes* is a homespun tale of everyday life transported to an exotic setting. A chatty, informal tale that will not be hurried, it skims across the minutiae of ordinary peoples' daily lives, meandering like a broad, muddy stream, until it reaches its destination. This is a book for armchair travelers who take satisfaction from immersing themselves in a gentler, more civilised world only faintly recollected by those of us in the urban jungle. If you appreciate gentle tales that proceed at a leisurely pace, you will enjoy *Blue Shoes and Happiness*. Gritty, it is not; by Sandy, it most assuredly is.

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