



# Authorgraph No.162: Alexander McCall Smith

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**Alexander McCall Smith** interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**.

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The unruly blond hair is now grey but Alexander McCall Smith's eagerness, infectious enthusiasm and sheer professionalism remain unchanged. I first met Sandy (as he seems always to be known) in 1979 when he was a fledgling author with one small children's book to be published. He had a flourishing academic career but was also very keen to be a writer and, in the best traditions of scholarship, sure that he could learn how to do it better: he wanted to know exactly what changes I was proposing to **The White Hippo** and why, so he had come well-prepared with a sharply pointed pencil so that he could make notes. He was, of course, a quick learner, eager to pick up changes and the reasons for them.

Sandy found himself a children's writer largely by accident. He entered both the children's and the adult's categories of a short-story competition and while his adult story was unnoticed, his children's story won. He grew it a bit and turned it into **The White Hippo**, a pleasing book and its African setting gave it a bit of an edge over much else of what was around. **The Perfect Hamburger**, which followed and was published in 1984, was a far better book because Sandy had thought more sharply or more commercially about his audience. He thought of all the things that children like and put them in ? food, action and humour being the key ingredients. And, he got it right as proved by the fact that it has been in print ever since. He looked quite convincingly set to have a goodish run as the author of short novels ? the unfashionable end of the children's business ? at a time when children's books themselves were deeply out of fashion.

There was nothing in them that would have predicted to me, or it transpires to Sandy himself, that he would become the publishing sensation that he now is. After this children's book debut he kept up a trickle of titles and also turned his hand to adult books but on a relatively small scale included having some privately printed. It was hard to get noticed and when **The No.1 Ladies? Detective Agency** appeared in 1998 it was originally published by Polygon, a small, independent Edinburgh-based independent company. Sandy was perfectly happy; he had a modest view of his role and position. ?I always wanted to write but I thought of myself as the kind of person who'd have a small coterie of readers.?

How different things look now. The same Alexander McCall Smith is the author of several series of ?precinct novels? in which he closely observes the small and large interactions that take place within a group. (It is not surprising that he says how much he admires Barbara Pym's novels.) These include the now world-wide bestselling **The No.1 Ladies? Detective Agency** which was voted one of the International Books of the Year and the Millennium by **The Times Literary Supplement**, ?44 Scotland Street? which is both a newspaper strip and a series of novels, The ?Von Igelfeld? Novels and The ?Sunday Philosophy Club? series. He has won several awards as well as having been named British Book Awards Author of the Year in 2004 for his enormous contribution to the book business.

By any measure, Sandy's writing career has been extraordinary. Writing is something he has always taken very seriously, but then, he operates in many spheres achieving prodigiously in all of them. He helped to set up the law

school at the University of Botswana, he's been Professor of Jurisprudence at Edinburgh and an advisor to UNESCO and the British government on Bioethics as well as finding time to play in The Really Terrible Orchestra which he and his wife co-founded in Edinburgh where he now lives.

But, despite the demands of his adult novels and the rest of his work, Sandy has also kept on writing for children. He has had about 30 titles published, and he is as keen as he was in the beginning to get it right. He is passionate about the importance of good books for children. "Children's books are a very significant expression of culture. Their longevity means that they hold generations together and their particular characteristics reflect important aspects of our culture. British children's books remain as quirky now as they have ever done: that's a hallmark."

It is this somewhat amorphous quality, rather than any accurate sense of time or place which would convey specific cultural attitudes or details, that Sandy aims to achieve in his own books. "You can transcend time and place without depriving a book of being rooted in a culture. As a writer, one should aspire for as much timelessness as possible. Specifically, you shouldn't litter your books with contemporary references. They just jar. Using language to mark out a particular time can be effective so long as it doesn't clutter up a book. It can leak from the page and prevent us from empathising."

But there's another way in which Sandy believes that children's books are of cultural importance and that's in the power of how they are written. Because English has become particularly debased as a result of being the international language, he is especially keen to preserve it. "I feel very strongly about the importance of maintaining correct, grammatical English. It would be a pity if sloppy English were used in books."

Not many writers actually say that but, then, not many children's writers have also been a Professor of Jurisprudence for a decade and more, and these are things that really matter to Sandy. "I've been described as 'old-fashioned' because I write in sentences," he says with glee and through his trademark laugh. "But people take note of good writing. It has almost poetic impact."

To prove his point, he breaks into a brief quote from the Book of Common Prayer, just to give a flavour of its mellifluous use of language, "I mourn the passing of that language. I think children are capable of responding to it and so it should be preserved in children's books."

But these rather abstract, overview statements about Sandy's writing are only part of the picture. They provide a hinterland but Sandy is not foolish enough to think they can be thrown in undigested. He has also thought a lot about what might make his books attractive to contemporary and future readers. As might be expected from everything else about him, it was more a science or academic exercise than an art. "When I wrote my early books I thought, 'What would interest and excite them?' I'm not ashamed of that. I think children should be excited by what they read. That's what keeps them going. I like plot and I like humour and so do they."

He drew partly on his own experience but he's also done his work touring schools and finding out what children like and he's happy to tap into that, but he still thinks the author has a role in taking the children beyond where they are and what they know. "I don't think child-centred education makes a great deal of sense. We must help children to discover," he says with gleeful zeal. "You have to have confidence in what you want to say in the story. Then the public can say yes, we want to read it. It's about passion."

At the same time, he was quick to learn from a master of the genre and says that his immediate inspiration for **The White Hippo** and **The Perfect Hamburger** came from Roald Dahl whose short stories he loved and whom he came to admire as a children's writer by reading his books aloud to his nephews and nieces. "All of Dahl's books involve curiosity and excitement and Dahl manages to convey it all in a particularly intimate voice especially in **Danny, the Champion of the World**." While Sandy would never claim to have matched Dahl's knack for storytelling to children, he has certainly tried to emulate Dahl's enjoyment of the quirky and empowerment of children, much of which is delivered through the collusive style of storytelling.

Born in Zimbabwe and educated there and later in Scotland, Sandy was also influenced by his childhood reading which

included titles familiar to anyone of his generation such as the 'Just William' books, 'Jennings' and Rudyard Kipling, especially 'Rikki-Tikki-Tavi' which he read and re-read before moving onto authors such as Agatha Christie and Nevil Shute and 'the respectable bits of D H Lawrence'. At home, his reading staple was Arthur Mee's 24 volume **Children's Encyclopaedia** which included 'large chunks of poetry slotted in between articles on steam trains and underground caves'. Both inspired him with a familiarity and love for poetry. This was confirmed at school where poetry was a staple ingredient: Sandy learned 20 lines of poetry a day and, just to prove it, can still readily break into chunks of 'Hiawatha' or 'The Night Mail'. He'd like children today to have access to that but also knows that it is not the fashion of the time.

Sandy draws on all of this as inspiration for his children's books and it is fuelling his enthusiasm. 'I want to write more for children. I want to keep my series going because I think series are useful as a way of hooking readers into an adventure and boys especially seem to like the familiarity. The 'Akimbo' books also have the added advantage of giving readers a lot of information about conservation and the natural world.' Perhaps not surprisingly given his status as an adult author, he also has bigger ambitions for his children's books. 'My next book will be a 40,000 word novel for 9+. The great thing is that I now have the opportunity to write what I like without worrying about whether it will fit into a series.'

Given Sandy's track record, I'm sure no one will worry about the series but, knowing him, one good book could also breed some delightful 'companions' for readers of all ages to enjoy.

**Julia Eccleshare** is the children's books editor of the **Guardian** and co-director of CLPE.

Photo of Alexander McCall Smith by Graham Clark.

## The Books

(published by Bloomsbury unless otherwise indicated)

**Akimbo and the Snakes**, ill. Peter Bailey, 0 7475 8610 1, £7.99 hbk (as featured on our cover)

**Akimbo and the Crocodile Man** (1 4052 1813 4), **Akimbo and the Elephants** (1 4052 1811 8) and **Akimbo and the Lions** (1 4052 1812 6), ill. Peter Bailey, Egmont, £3.99 each pbk

**The Banana Machine** (0 7475 8052 9), **The Joke Machine** (0 7475 8050 2) and **The Muscle Machine** (0 7475 8051 0), ill. Ian Bilbey, £3.99 each pbk

**The Bubblegum Tree** (0 7475 8053 7), **The Doughnut Ring** (0 7475 8056 1), **The Popcorn Pirates** (0 7475 8054 5) and **The Spaghetti Tangle** (0 7475 8055 3), ill. Ian Bilbey, £3.99 each pbk

**Folk Tales from Africa: The Girl Who Married a Lion**, ill. Naomi Holwill, Canongate, 1 84195 729 1, £4.99 pbk

**The Perfect Hamburger**, ill. Laszlo Acs, Puffin, 0 14 031670 1, £3.99 pbk

**Teacher Trouble** (0 7475 8039 1) and **Calculator Annie** (0 7475 8040 5), ill. Ian Bilbey, £3.99 each pbk

*Harriet Bean:*

**The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean** (0 7475 8047 2), **Harriet Bean and the League of Cheats** (0 7475 8045 6) and **The Cowgirl Aunts of Harriet Bean** (0 7475 8044 8), ill. Ian Bilbey, £4.99 each pbk

*Max and Maddy:*

**The Chocolate Money Mystery** (0 7475 8049 9) and **The Bursting Balloons Mystery** (0 7475 8048 0), ill. Ian

Bilbey, £3.99 each pbk



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