

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency Study Guide

**The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency by Alexander
McCall Smith**

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Plot Summary

This gently paced mystery novel, set in the African country of Botswana, has as its central character the self-sufficient, wise, and compassionate Precious Ramotswe. As the narrative explores the variety of circumstances that enabled her to start her agency and the agency's first cases, it also explores themes relating to the independence of women, African pride, and relationships between parents and children.

After summarizing how Mma Ramotswe inherited from her father both the means and the will to make an independent living, and how she used both to start the only detective agency in Botswana run by women, the narrative summarizes her first successful case - how she uncovered the true identity of a man posing as a client's father. The narrative then recounts Mma Ramotswe's past in greater detail - her father's youth and young adulthood working in the mines, the death of her mother, the running of the household by a cousin of her father's, and her marriage to a man who both got her pregnant and abused her. Narration also describes how, after the sudden departure of her husband and the death of her father, Mma Ramotswe bought herself a house, started The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, and hired the efficient Mma Grace Makutsi, recently graduated from secretarial college, to work as her assistant and receptionist.

The narrative then follows Mma Ramotswe through her investigation and resolution of several cases - a missing husband, the suspicious employee of an old friend, an over-protective father concerned about the behavior of his daughter, a stolen car, and a pair of fraudulent twin doctors. The case that preoccupies her most, however, is that of a missing boy who, she fears, is connected to the discovery of a human bone in the glove compartment of a van being serviced by her friend, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni.

Matekoni, it turns out, has feelings for Mma Ramotswe that go beyond friendship, feelings that lead him at times into doing things he doesn't want to do in order to help her. At one point, he asks her to marry him, but for Mma Ramotswe, memories of her abusive husband and her own drive for independence have led her to a rejection of marriage. She firmly, but kindly, rejects Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's proposal.

Interspersed with all these narrative elements are occasional commentaries on other aspects of Mma Ramotswe's life - her pride in being African, in her home, and in her success, the beauty of the land, and her determination to become a better investigator. This last she accomplishes through careful study of a guide to being a detective. There are also reflections on the death of her prematurely born child, and on her being "traditionally built" ... in other words, contentedly overweight.

Meanwhile, investigations of the source of the human bone eventually lead Mma Ramotswe to a confrontation with the wife of a witch doctor, who tells her the missing boy is working for her and in fact has all his fingers - bones, she says, can be purchased freely in other parts of Africa. She then takes Mma Ramotswe to the cattle ranch where her husband has put the boy to work. Mma Ramotswe hurries him into her

van, leaves the witch doctor's wife behind, and drives the boy back home for a reunion with his parents.

After the successful conclusion of the case of the missing boy, Mma Ramotswe asks for Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's help in repairing the engine of her dust-damaged van. After he's finished work, they sit together and drink tea while waiting for dinner to finish cooking, and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni again asks Mma Ramotswe to marry him. This time, she says yes.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This gently paced mystery novel, set in the African country of Botswana, has as its central character the self-sufficient, wise, and compassionate Precious Ramotswe. As the narrative explores the variety of circumstances that enabled her to start her agency and the agency's first cases, it also explores themes relating to the independence of women, African pride, and relationships between parents and children.

Chapter 1, "The Daddy" In this introductory chapter, narration describes how Precious Ramotswe (referred to as Mma Ramotswe) came to be the operator of the only woman-run detective agency in Botswana - her dying father, a self-made cattle rancher, left her all his goods and animals so she could start her own business and be independent. Narration comments, however, that he was surprised when she told him that that business was going to be a detective agency. Narration also describes Mma Ramotswe's work ethic (if she isn't able to get her clients what they want/need, she doesn't charge them), the minimal equipment with which she works (see "Quotes", p.3), her feeling called to her work (see "Quotes", p.4), and why her work has, to this point, been so successful (see "Quotes", p. 5). This chapter also includes a description of her first successful case. Her help is sought by Happy Bapetski, a successful woman whose life is invaded by a man claiming to be her long lost father but whom she suspects is an impostor. Disguised as a nurse, Mma Ramotswe pretends there is a medical emergency with Happy and that a great deal of her father's blood is needed to save her life. The "daddy" confesses that he is not Happy's real father, and Mma Ramotswe orders him to leave Happy's home, which he does. She then leaves a note for Happy, telling her that until she finds her real daddy, she can be "happy again".

Chapter 2, "All Those Years Ago" The chapter begins with a narrative comment on how life is full of memories, and with Mma Ramotswe's concern about her father's life story being recorded (see "Quotes", p 15). The rest of the chapter is written in first person narration, and is a brief telling of that story. Obed Ramotswe comments first on his old age, his impending death (because of dust from the mines in which he worked infecting his lungs) and about how he's come to peace with God (see "Quotes", p. 19). He then describes the hard work and unhealthy atmosphere in the mines, and how he eventually arose to a position of as much responsibility as the black workers were allowed by the white mine owners. He describes the intensity of his homesickness, of the rivalries and differences between the various African ethnicities, and how one such rivalry led to the murder of a miner by a group of Zulus, which Obed witnessed and which led to him quitting his job out of fear for his life. He then narrates his emotional return to Botswana, the resumption of life with his pretty wife and adored daughter (Precious), and the growth of his family's prosperity (he had been sending all his pay home and investing it in cattle). He comments sadly on the accidental death of his wife, and how his cousin came into the family to take care of Precious, how he offered assistance to one of his former white bosses, and how the boss gave him money to buy a new bull to replace



the one who just died. The chapter concludes with Obed commenting that while he never saw the man again, "he is always there, in my heart."

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

"The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency" is the first of a series of novels in which private detective Precious Ramotswe is the central character. Being the first, the narrative is, to a considerable extent, focused on exposition, or explaining why and how the narrative's central situation came into being - how Mma Ramotswe became who she is, how who she is led to the establishment of the agency, and how the success of the agency led to an increased sense of identity. In many ways, in fact, the mysteries Mma Ramotswe solves are of less overall importance to the narrative than their relationship to her life - in other words, the book isn't about the mysteries, but rather about a multi-faceted protagonist who happens to solve mysteries for a living. The point is not made to suggest that the mysteries are uninteresting or un-mysterious, but rather to indicate they are but one aspect of a life that, from the book's apparent thematic perspective, is an example of how compassion, patience and wisdom are, or at least can be, the foundations of a life of personal integrity and freedom.

This idea is developed not only through exploration of Mma Ramotswe's history, but through consideration of that history in the context of life in Africa. These considerations include commentary on the political history and integrity of Botswana, on relationships between blacks and whites (and, as described in this chapter, between blacks and blacks), and on the evolving perception and place of women in a mostly traditional, conservative society. This last is particularly relevant to the story of Mma Ramotswe, in that she frequently encounters resistance to and/or commentary on the fact that she is stepping outside the boundaries of what black African women have been traditionally expected to do and/or be. She is, in many ways, a role model, someone whose security, wisdom, and openness to both possibility and feeling can be seen as an example to both men and women.

All that said, this first section is also notable for several other elements. These include the interplay, developed throughout the narrative, between plot and theme, manifest here in the case of Happy Bapetski's false father juxtaposed with the narrative of Mma Ramotswe's (somewhat idealized?) father, a manifestation of the book's thematic focus on the relationship between parents and children (see "Themes). Other important elements include the engaging shift in narrative voice between Chapters 1 and 2 from third to first person (which can perhaps be seen as an authorial commentary on how black miners in Africa had, for decades, no "voice" at all), and the first manifestation of Mma Ramotswe's tendency towards lies and disguise. These, as she points out later to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni (Chapter 18), are all undertaken in the service of a greater good and are, as such, a clear manifestation of the one characteristic that unites Mma Ramotswe with other literary detectives - a profound sense of, and drive to realize, justice. The story of how this aspect of her character developed is told in the following chapter.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3, "Lessons about Boys and Goats" Returning to the third person point of view, narration describes Mma Ramotswe's early life. Obed's cousin, whose husband had left her because she couldn't bear children, moved into the family home, took good care of both Obed and the young Precious, and taught Precious to count and the basics of reading, as well as how to be watchful and observant. Narration also describes how the young Precious learned a great deal at Sunday School, about right and wrong (although stories of Jesus' miracles always struck her as suspicious) and about men. This last component of her education comes as the result of her admission to a strong-willed Sunday School teacher that one of the boys in the class was always showing her his "thing". The teacher comments on how ridiculously proud both boys and men are of their "thing", and arranges with Precious to teach the boy a lesson. The next time the boy shows Precious his "thing", he is humiliated by the teacher, and never does it again. Narration then describes how talented an artist the young Precious was, how she was selected to enter an art competition, how she won and how, when her prize was being presented, she was mortified to learn that the judges thought her picture was of cows, not of goats. She quietly confesses the truth to the government minister presenting the prize, who tells her just as quietly that he realized they were goats, announces publicly that the judges made a mistake in labeling the picture, but that the picture is still good enough to win the prize. He then congratulates Precious for being so truthful.

Chapter 4, "Living with the Cousin and the Cousin's Husband" Narration describes how, at sixteen years old, the restless and impatient Precious left home and moved in with the Cousin and the Cousin's Husband, working in the Husband's business as a clerk. She does the job very well, to the resentment of other clerks who work much less effectively, and her diligence helps the Husband catch an employee stealing money from the company. This, narration comments, was Mma Ramotswe's first case. After living with the cousin for some years, Precious falls in love with jazz musician Note Mokoti, who seduces her, abuses her, and asks her to marry him. Obed, worried about his daughter and mistrustful of Mokoti, tells Precious the choice to marry is hers - no longer will he follow the old ways and decide for his daughter who is to be her husband. Precious, in spite of her concerns about Mokoti, agrees to marry him (see "Quotes", p. 54), knowing she is pregnant. After the wedding, Precious and her new husband move to a new home in Gaborone, where Mokoti becomes more and more involved with his circle of musician friends and Precious becomes more and more isolated. One night, when he comes home drunk, a conversation about how much he's had to drink leads Precious to accidentally reveal that she is pregnant, which in turn leads Mokoti to angrily claim the child isn't his and to beat her. After being treated by a doctor (who resignedly suspects that she will be like the other women he sees and go back to her man), Precious returns home to find that Mokoti has moved out. She moves home, takes care of her father until he dies shortly after she turns thirty four. "That was the point," narration comments, "at which Precious Ramotswe, now parentless, veteran of a



nightmare marriage, and mother, for a brief and lovely five days, became the first lady private detective in Botswana."

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

These two chapters continue the exploration and definition of the character of Mma Ramotswe, in doing so manifesting the book's core thematic interest in issues of identity in general, of women's identity in particular, and of Mma Ramotswe's identity specifically. What's particularly interesting about this section, and indeed about the novel, is that Mma Ramotswe is not portrayed as as iconic or idealized in her sense of self, but rather as flawed and subject to surges of feeling. In other words, she is portrayed as wounded, and as having the wisdom to learn from her wounds and experiences (wisdom, it seems, she inherited and/or learned from her father). What's also interesting about this section, and about the book as a whole, is that while the narrative and its central character tend to be somewhat negative in their views of men, it is also relatively even handed - for every selfish man like Note Mokoti, there is a compassionate man like Mr. J.B.L. Matekoni. For every foolish boy like the Sunday School flasher, there is the wise and perceptive Minister. For every cynical doctor, there is the respectful Husband of the Cousin. In other words, there is the sense that while the narrative is, in many ways, honest about the dark side of life in general and of life in Africa in particular, it is simultaneously hopeful and demonstrative that that dark side can be both met and transcended. This is not to say that the novel is in any way preachy or moralistic - on the contrary, its honesty is relaxed and simple, rarely heavy handed, and balanced with entertainment value (i.e. the mysteries).

In terms of the specifics of Mma Ramotswe's sense of identity, there are narrative reflections on her sense of justice (developed in her Sunday School understandings of right and wrong), her sense of truth (developed in the story of the painting) and her capacity for emotional empathy (developed through the story of her marriage). The end of Chapter 4 also includes the first glimpse of one of the defining aspects of Mma Ramotswe's identity, her experience of motherhood. The narrative's exploration of this experience is one of its most effective elements, in that the depth of feeling associated with her losing her child, and the repercussions of that loss, are understated and communicated with powerfully evocative subtlety that simultaneously develops a sense of personal mystery. In other words, in the same way as Mma Ramotswe puts together the pieces resolving the mysteries her clients bring to her, so readers can put together the pieces resolving the mystery of her child that the author brings to them.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5 "What You Need to Open a Detective Agency" Narration describes how Precious (now referred to as Mma Ramotswe) started her agency. She talks with a patronizing lawyer who handled her father's will (in which she makes him realize that "a woman sees more than a man sees"), and her purchase of both a house and a derelict business to use as her office. She also hires a secretary, Mma Grace Makutsi, a widow recently graduated with excellent grades from business college. The first day of being open for business, Mma Ramotswe is convinced that the whole idea is a failure, and at one point goes out to buy some perfume. Shortly after she leaves, however, Mma Makutsi runs after her with news of a client - Mma Malatsi, who wants the agency to find her missing husband. At first convinced that there is another woman or debt involved, Mma Ramotswe is surprised by Mma Malatsi's conviction that neither is the case, but that it's possible her husband has gone off with the Christian church he has recently become involved with. Mma Ramotswe does some digging, tracks down the particular church in question, and discovers that Malatsi had disappeared while being baptized in a local river. After urging the church's minister to forgive himself, Mma Ramotswe investigates further and, late that night, discovers that a crocodile inhabits the area of the river where Malatsi disappeared. She shoots it dead (narration revealing that her father had trained her to shoot), cuts open its belly, and discovers some of Malatsi's possessions, one of which is a watch that Mma Malatsi identifies as her husband's. Relieved that her husband's fate has been revealed, Mma Malatsi asks Mma Ramotswe if she had ever been married. Mma Ramotswe confesses that she was, but that she's happier she no longer is. Mma Malatsi comments, in response to a question from Mma Ramotswe, that she is somewhat sad about her husband, but that she also has lots to do.

Chapter 6, "Boy" Narration shifts point of view to that of a young boy described as being mentally slower and physically smaller than other boys his age after an accident when he was little. One night the boy wanders deeply into the bush in pursuit of a snake, and realizes as it's getting dark that it's time for him to get home. As he lingers for a moment by the side of the road, a truck pulls up beside him, and two men (one older, one younger) offer him a ride. In the truck, however, the boy becomes uneasy. The older man tells him a story - how a strange calf coming to a cattle herd, how the herders pay so much attention to the calf that some of the other cattle disappear, and how the cattle owner becomes so angry that he beats the boys and kills the calf. As it's dying, the older man says, the calf tells boys that he is the reincarnated spirit of the owner's brother. The boys tell the cattle owner, who is sad for the rest of his life because he has killed his family. As the story concludes, the boy realizes that he is being kidnapped and struggles to get away. The men stop the truck and restrain him.



Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

In this section, the narrative again develops and resolves a mystery within a relatively short period of time - specifically, within a single chapter. This functions on a couple of levels. First, and perhaps most simply, it engages the reader in an entertaining little intrigue. Second, it develops the character of Mma Ramotswe, defining her compassion, wisdom, and instincts. Third, and perhaps more metaphorically, the brevity of this mini-narrative can be seen as a reiteration of the previously discussed idea that the book is, in some way, a suggestion that for Mma Ramotswe, her work as a detective is only one aspect of her life. In contrast, however, there is the introduction in Chapter 6 of a mystery that carries on throughout the narrative, that of the missing boy. The juxtaposition of the two sorts of mysteries can, in fact, be seen as a further reiteration of the idea of a multi-faceted life. Some mysteries, some events, some situations are ongoing ... others are resolved relatively easily. On another level, however, the introduction of the mystery about the boy is simply good storytelling, concluding on a note of suspense that draws the reader further into the story.

Meanwhile, the story told to the boy by the kidnappers can be seen as a manifestation of a key component of Mma Ramotswe's perspective on life and work - the idea that very rarely is anything what it seems, that beneath the surface there is always at least the potential for deeper meaning and/or relevance. This idea is also developed in the mystery of the missing husband, in which Mma Ramotswe's natural instinct to look beneath the surface of things leads her to the truth. It might not be going too far to suggest, in fact, that her actions in getting to the truth of what happened to the husband is a metaphoric representation of what she does for a living in general, and what she does in the chapters that follow to resolve the various mysteries that come her way. In the same way as she cuts through the crocodile to discover the watch, she "cuts through" the lies and misrepresentations of those she investigates to discover the truth of who they are and what they're doing. It's important to note, however, that that truth often goes beyond even the criminal activity and into its emotional context - for an example, see her reaction to the story of the fraudulent employee in Chapter 16.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7, "Mma Makutsi Deals with the Mail" Mma Ramotswe studies a manual on detection, and comes to realize that in sorting through the information at hand, being diligent and trusting her hunches (specifically about the presence of the crocodile), there was nothing she could have done better in the Malatsi case. She dictates a report and a bill to Mma Makutsi, who types them out and prepares them for mailing. In the meantime, the Agency receives very little post of its own, with one exception - a letter from a man in another district who asks for Mma Ramotswe's help in finding his eleven year old son, missing for two months. Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi discuss the case and realize there isn't much they can do for the man, and Mma Makutsi prepares a letter to be sent to the man saying so. That night at home, Mma Ramotswe (who, narration comments, likes cooking) stews some pumpkin and reflects on the day, worrying in particular about the man with the missing son and about the boy, thinking that in this particular situation makes her so sad, she should even be in the detective business. Her contemplations also lead her to wonder about Mma Malatsi's unemotional reaction to her husband's apparent death, and starts to wonder if she (Mma Malatsi) actually had something to do with it. But then she (Mma Ramotswe) realizes it's time to stop thinking so much and get down to business - specifically, her dinner (see "Quotes", p. 85).

Chapter 8, "A Conversation with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni" Mma Ramotswe visits her friend, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, the owner and operator of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors. They discuss the high price of doing business, with Mma Ramotswe revealing that in her first month of operation, the Agency posted a loss, and Matekoni suggesting that to build her reputation, she needs a big case for a wealthy, successful client - like, he adds, Mr. Patel. As they watch Matekoni's careless young assistants, they also discuss Mma Ramotswe's concerns about the missing boy, who they believe to have been kidnapped and murdered to aid in witchcraft (see "Quotes", p. 91). Matekoni suggests that the reason the father wrote for Mma Ramotswe's help is that the police are too scared of witchcraft to look for the missing boy. That night at home, Mma Ramotswe is awakened from sleep by a sound from outside, and discovers that someone (who has called her name) is outside in the dark watching her. She slowly backs into the house and locks the door. The time, according to the blinking light on her cooker, is 3:04.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

There are several points to note about these two brief chapters. First is the reference to the detective manual Mma Ramotswe consults, and its support for her sense of self as manifest in the work she is doing. Here, the narrative makes the metaphoric suggestion (albeit not so subtly) of the importance of striking a balance between following one's instinct and using one's intelligence. The second important point is the development of



the missing boy plot, which takes place on two fronts (that of the letter and of the reference to witchcraft) and is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the description of the boy in the letter doesn't quite fit, exactly, with the description of the boy kidnapped in the previous chapter, creating the sense that there may in fact be more than one missing boy. The second point to note about the letter is the way it serves as another facet of the novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between parents and children - specifically, the way the father evidently cares for the missing boy has clear (deliberate?) echoes of the care Mma Ramotswe's father showed her.

The third point to note about this section is Mma Ramotswe's contemplation of her feelings, and her worry that they may get in the way of her doing her job. As it develops, the narrative makes the opposite point - that it is her feelings, specifically her sense of compassion and her instincts, that enable her to do her job exceptionally well, with a genuine, broadly defined sense of human justice and reality than a more strictly legal perspective on the concept. A fourth important point is the reference to Mr. Patel, which foreshadows the case he brings her in the following chapter. Another element of foreshadowing is the very presence of Mr. J.B.L. Matekoni, whose appearance foreshadows the increasing role he plays in both the life and work of Mma Ramotswe (for consideration of the use of his initials and other forms of character address/identification in the book, see "Style - Language and Meaning").

Finally, there is the description of Mma Ramotswe waking from sleep at the end of the section. This is the first of several occasions in the narrative in which a sense of suspense, of something bad and/or mysterious, of foreshadowing is triggered in the narration but in fact never leads anywhere. In other words, nowhere in the narrative is this particular incident/encounter developed further - nowhere is it explained who might have been watching, or that she was imagining things. This can be seen as an example of a common component in many mystery novels, the narrative technique known as the "red herring", or false clue. A red herring is a moment/element/device planted by the author to distract the reader's attention, to make him/her feel as though the story/mystery is going in one direction, but is in fact headed in another. In most narratives the true nature of the red herring is eventually explained - in this narrative, however, the nature of this and other red herrings never is. The author may be making the suggestion that in the narrative, as in life, some things are never explained or resolved.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9, "The Boyfriend" The chapter begins with a lengthy description of the Patel family - how the father made a fortune in business and trade, how his oldest son became a dentist and changed his name, how his twin daughters married well, and how he built a large, extravagant home for his entire family. Narration then describes Mma Ramotswe's preparations for a meeting with Mr. Paliwalar Patel, her arrival at his security-guarded estate, and her surprise to see he is shorter than her and has an artificial leg. In his private study, Patel tells Mma Ramotswe that he is concerned about his youngest daughter, Nandira, whom he thinks is spending time with boys. Mma Ramotswe, in spite of believing that young women should be trusted to determine their own lives, agrees to follow Nandira and find out what's going on, her conversation with Mr. Patel having triggered painful memories of her baby's death (see "Quotes", p. 104). Her first attempt ends in failure - Nandira disappears, and Mma Ramotswe is forced to report to the irritated Mr. Patel that she has no news. He, however, does - he has found a note left for Nandira by someone named Jack. The next day, Mma Ramotswe tracks Nandira to a shopping center where, after being distracted by a book on poisonous snakes (which contains a story that makes her wonder how Mr. Patel lost his leg), Mma Ramotswe again loses track of Nandira. This time, however, she is able to find out where she went - to the nearby cinema, to purchase a ticket for that evening's showing. Mma Ramotswe also attends that showing, and is surprised when Nandira asks to sit with her, and then reveals that she (Nandira) knows that Mma Ramotswe has been following her. Reluctantly, Mma Ramotswe explains why, and Nandira, who feels she can trust her, reveals that she has been spending time away from home to make her father believe she has a boyfriend. Jack, she reveals, is someone she made up. She then asks Mma Ramotswe to try to convince Mr. Patel to be less controlling, and Mma Ramotswe agrees to try. The next day, after hearing the story, Mr. Patel is inclined to reject Mma Ramotswe's efforts, but changes his mind when she tells him that if he doesn't give Nandira some room to live her life, she WILL have a boyfriend sooner rather than later. Mr. Patel realizes she's right and calls her a wise woman. Narration reveals that a few months later, Mma Ramotswe is happy to see Nandira again, this time in the company of a young man ... introduced as Jack.

Chapter 10, "Mma Ramotswe Thinks About the Land while Driving her Tiny White Van to Francistown". In this very short chapter, narration describes Mma Ramotswe's thoughts as she drives along the edges of the Kalahari desert - her awareness of its potential dangers (including sand traps and lions) and her memories of visiting the desert, lush with green after the rainy season, with a friend when she was younger. She recalls waking up in the middle of the night and standing outside under the stars (see "Quotes", p. 124) and then going back to bed. The chapter closes with narration returning to the present, and commenting on Mma Ramotswe's imagining that one day she'll go back to "those empty spaces, those wide grasslands that broke and broke the heart."



Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The Patel case functions on a pair of levels. First, and as previously discussed, it functions in the same way as the other self-contained, one chapter mysteries in the narrative - engaging the audience in an entertaining diversion of an intrigue. Second, it explores the narrative's thematic interest in the relationship between parents and children, clearly contrasting one aspect of fatherhood (the controlling Mr. Patel) with another (the previously glimpsed nurturing side evident in Mma Ramotswe's father and the father of the missing boy). For further consideration of this aspect of the chapter and of the novel, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the parallels and contrasts ...". Third, it manifests the novel's secondary thematic focus on the independence of, and potential for independence of, women - not only does Nandira struggle for independence, but Mma Ramotswe demonstrates her independence of thought (not to mention wisdom and compassion) in confronting Mr. Patel with the truth about his daughter. Fourth, it again portrays Mma Ramotswe as human, with the capacity for distraction and failure that she both realizes and acts to transcend.

Meanwhile, in its exploration of/commentary on the landscape, the narrative again places Mma Ramotswe's life and experience within a larger context, suggesting that her sense of identity is as much tied in with the geographic place in which she lives her life as it is to the spiritual/emotional place from which she acts. There is also the more metaphorical sense that the wildness and dangers of the surrounding land represent the wildness and dangers of the human spirit with which Mma Ramotswe, in her work and in her life, struggles. In other words, Mma Ramotswe can be seen as something of an oasis of truth and integrity within the hot, dry, dangerous landscape of human greed and desperation. This metaphor is further developed in the reference to the green lushness that emerges from the desert in the rainy season - again, the metaphorical sense here is that Mma Ramotswe, in her wisdom and compassion, is as life affirming, as humanity affirming, as the rain is affirming of newness, growth and beauty.



Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 11, "Big Car Guilt" In the days following the successful resolution of the Patel case, Mma Ramotswe feels a twinge of guilt at accepting her substantial fee, and contemplates the differences between people's consciences (see "Quotes", p 125). These thoughts continue as the result of her conversation with a new client, Mma Pekwane, who is convinced that her husband has taken possession of a stolen car. After comparing notes with Mma Pekwane about how men tend to think women are foolish, Mma Ramotswe agrees to do as Mma Pekwane asks - return the car to its rightful owner. Mma Ramotswe consults Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni on how to identify a stolen car, and he reluctantly helps her identify the Pekwane's vehicle (see "Quotes", p. 128) and have it returned to its owner. Meanwhile, when her husband discovers it missing, Mma Pekwane suggests they call the police. When her husband refuses to do so, Mma Pekwane realizes she was right.

Chapter 12, "Mma Ramotswe's House in Zebra Drive" This brief chapter consists of a detailed description of Mma Ramotswe's home and how she takes care of it. Particular attention is paid to the portrait of her father sitting on the mantelpiece, in which he smiles even though, as Mma Ramotswe remembers, he was in pain. Narration describes how she likes to imagine him expressing pride in what she's accomplished, but comments that she doesn't indulge in such imaginings too often or too long, partly because they end in tears and partly because the past is passed. The chapter concludes with descriptions of her kitchen, of how it's kept clean by her maid Rose, and of Rose's life - her relative poverty, her four children by four fathers, the illness of one of them, and how she always sang.

Chapter 13, "Why Don't You Marry Me?" Narration comments on Mma Ramotswe's happiness with her life (her house, her agency, her friendship with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni), how that happiness is so different from the unhappiness she went through with Note Mokoti, and how she hurt her father by disregarding his concerns about marrying him. These reflections lead into a conversation between Mma Ramotswe and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, who compare notes about the mistakes they've made in their lives and are each surprised that the other feels they've made many. After briefly touching on Mma Ramotswe's marriage, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni surprises her by asking her to marry him. She says she is grateful, but also says she cannot and will not ever marry again - although if she did, she adds, she would marry him. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni falls silent. "It had cost him all his energy to make his declaration of love," narration comments, "and he had no more words for the time being."

Chapter 14, "Handsome Man" Alice Busang comes to Mma Ramotswe convinced that her husband is spending time with other women and asking her to find proof. After a moment of shared feeling about the unreliability of men, Mma Ramotswe takes the case. After making herself more attractive and studying a photograph of Alice's



handsome husband, she meets him at a bar. He responds to her flirting, telling her (in response to a direct question) that he is not married, and eventually coming home with her. After a few more drinks, she rejects his advances, but talks him into having a photograph taken with her. A few days later, when she is presented with evidence that her husband is unfaithful (evidence, Mma Ramotswe believes and says, is the best sort of evidence), Alice Busang accuses Mma Ramotswe of stealing her husband and flies into a rage. Mma Ramotswe realizes that in this case, she's going to have to waive her fee.

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

Here again in this section, the narrative places Mma Ramotswe's work solving mysteries within the larger context of her life. Among the aspects of that life explored in these four chapters is the brief reference to the life and ways of the cleaning lady (reflective, on some level, of Mma Ramotswe's desire for, and manifestation of, happiness in her life), and the various aspects of her relationship with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. Here there are a couple of important points, with his reluctance to get involved manifesting, at least to some degree, the traditional attitude of African men towards African women - that they are essentially sex objects and/or the servants for men ... a perspective, it's important to note, echoed in the attitude and actions of Alice Busang's husband. It's important to note, however, that the narrative again paints its male characters with a variety of emotional colors, in this case contrasting the shallowness of the husband and Matekoni's own reluctance with a portrait of the depth and range of Matekoni's feelings and humanity (i.e. the reference to his loss of words). Meanwhile, his unsuccessful proposal here foreshadows his more successful one at the book's conclusion.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Mma Ramotswe's larger life explored in this section is the the chapter-long description of her home, and the specific narrative attention paid to the photograph of her father. Here again, the narrative creates an effective sense of balance in the life of the character, the impression that while she honors the past, she is too sensible and realistic to focus on anything but the present. It's interesting to note, however, that for the all-too human Mma Ramotswe, that balance is not always present in all the aspects of her life. Her refusal of Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's proposal of marriage, for example, illustrates how the relationship aspects of her past have not yet found their balanced place of presence.

Finally, the passing reference to Mma Ramotswe's contemplation of how she disappointed her father is another facet of the narrative's thematic consideration of the relationships between parents and children.



Chapters 15, 16

Chapters 15, 16 Summary

Chapter 15, "Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's Discovery" In the aftermath of the Busang case, Mma Ramotswe has a conversation with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, in which she notices that he's not really paying attention to her. Wondering whether he's thinking about sex (see "Quotes", p. 147), she asks what he's thinking about. He tells her about being called out to take care of a broken down van and his accidental discovery of a bag of ritual materials ("medicine") in the glove compartment. As he opens the bag and shows Mma Ramotswe its contents, narration implies that what they are looking at are human remains. Mma Ramotswe fights down nausea and asks for the contents so she can find out whether they are indeed what she and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni believe them to be. Narration comments that Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is worried that she is putting herself in danger by getting involved with "medicine", worry that increases when he reveals, after being asked directly by Mma Ramotswe, who the van belonged to - one of the most powerful, mysteriously influential men in Botswana, Mr. Charlie Gotso.

Chapter 16, "The Cutting of Fingers and Snakes" After a description of how Botswana's capital, Gaborone, grew from essentially nothing into a successful industrial community, narration describes Mma Ramotswe's visit to one of the city's busy and successful businessmen, her old friend Hector Lepodise. He asks her to investigate the case of a former employee who is suing him for damages, claiming that Lepodise's industrial irresponsibility that caused him (the employee) to have an injury that cost him a finger. Mma Ramotswe tries to get her friend to settle the lawsuit out of court, but Lepodise insists on challenging it - he has always had, he says, a bad feeling about this particular employee and believes that if the man is not stopped now, he will go on to defraud someone else. He also, almost in passing, asks Mma Ramotswe to marry him. She refuses politely, again saying she is done with marriage. That night, unable to sleep, she wonders how she is going to proceed with the case - but while drinking a cup of tea, has an idea, and the next morning discovers, through conversations with various insurance companies, that Lepodise's former employee made at least one identical claim. She then drives to Mahalapye, where the employee's lawyer has his office, to confront both lawyer and client with what she has discovered. Her trip, however, is interrupted by an encounter with a cobra (which, she discovers, has crawled into her van) and with a passerby, who helps her kill it. At the meeting, when initially faced with the lawyer's over confidence, Mma Ramotswe takes great pleasure in presenting him with the evidence of the employee's fraud. When she sees how upset the lawyer is, however, she reconsiders her pleasure (see "Quotes", p. 170). Later, however, when the employee is confronted with the truth, Mma Ramotswe goes back to her original opinion when she sees the lawyer taking credit for discovering the fraud. Meanwhile, as the employee is being threatened with legal action, Mma Ramotswe believes him when he says he only did what he did to get money for his family, and bullies him into never committing such fraud again. She concludes the meeting with a warning to both men to never



underestimate her or any other woman, commenting that on the way to the meeting that afternoon, she cut a cobra in two.

Chapters 15, 16 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the suspense-triggering introduction of the medicine bag, its contents, and the relationship of both to the somewhat gangster-like Charlie Gotso. There is a strong sense of larger, more significant wrongdoing here - up to now, the mysteries solved by Mma Ramotswe have seemed small scale, relatively minor (although admittedly important to the individuals involved). Here, both she and Mr. J.B.L. Matekoni seem to realize that this particular mystery is of a significantly larger scope, or at least has the potential to be so. The reader also gets that sense, and is drawn almost irresistibly into the remainder of the narrative. Meanwhile, the discovery of the medicine bag is also an important element in the narrative's consideration of the culture of Africa in general, and of Botswana in particular. Yes, Mma Ramotswe is making clear inroads into the culture's traditional perspectives on women and female behavior, and yes the narrative clearly (if only occasionally) comments on the political advances made by the government of Botswana. The discovery of the medicine bag, however, and the characters' contemplation of its implications suggests that traditional ways of thinking, dangerous (on many levels) as they are, are never too far from the surface.

Meanwhile, the transition between chapters marks and illustrates one of the most interesting technical / stylistic aspects of the novel - specifically, interrupt what might be reasonably described as the main narrative with a redirection into another self-contained, "pocket" mystery. Up to this point, these one-chapter intrigues came across almost as afterthoughts, entertaining but low-stakes pit stops along the narrative way. From this point on, however, these mini-mysteries heighten the novel's sense of suspense, increasing curiosity in the reader to know when the narrative is going to return to consideration of the medicine bag and resolve the many questions its discovery raised.

Other important aspects of this so-called "pocket mystery" include its value as a piece of foreshadowing, with the fact that the employee cut off a finger foreshadowing the discovery in later chapters that among the items found in the medicine bag was a human finger-bone. Then there is the return of Mma Ramotswe's insights and instincts (which trigger her idea about the fraud) and the fact that they are both complimented by hard work (the research into the insurance agencies), again a portrayal of balance and the necessity for/value of it. There is also a reiteration of Mma Ramotswe's capacity for wisdom and compassion, evident in her understanding of the situation of the fraudulent employee, and another animal based, metaphoric description of Mma Ramotswe's work. Specifically, the destruction of the cobra can, like the cutting up of the crocodile, be seen as a symbolic representation of how she "cuts through" danger (such as that posed by Charlie Gotso) to get to the truth. In that context, the assistance of the passing stranger can be seen as a metaphoric echo of that offered by Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni

throughout the narrative, with both circumstances suggesting that while independence is well and good, the appropriate assistance of others can be of substantial benefit.



Chapters 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Summary

Chapter 17, "The Third Metacarpal" Following the conclusion of the Lepodise case, Mma Ramotswe returns her attention to the objects found in Charlie Gotso's van. She takes them to the office of a neighbor, pathologist Dr. Gulubane and, after a disagreeable encounter with a disrespectful nurse, asks him for information about their origin. He identifies one object as the bone of a child's finger, the third metacarpal, and tells her that because there is still a bit of relatively fresh flesh on it, it cannot have been removed from the child too long ago. He also suggests that the child (whom he estimates to be about eight or nine) might still be alive. That night, over dinner, Mma Ramotswe tells the increasingly uneasy Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni what she found out, and formulates a plan to safely find out what, and how much, the powerful Charlie Gotso knows. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is to pretend that the windshield of the van has been broken, and when Gotso or someone representing him comes to see what happened, he (Matekoni) is to notice whether the glove compartment is inspected. If it is, and if it is noticed that the medicine bag is missing, he is to suggest that Gotso hire Mma Ramotswe to find it. That night, as Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni leaves, narration comments that Dr. Gulubane is standing at his open window, "almost as if he was watching her".

Chapter 18, "A Lot of Lies" The next day, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni has an opportunity to put the plan into action when he is visited by a man representing Charlie Gotso. Everything goes exactly as Mma Ramotswe predicted - the man looks in the glove compartment and notices that the bag is missing. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni recommends that Mma Ramotswe be consulted, and the man agrees. Later, after the man has gone, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni reflects on how unhappy he is about having to tell lies, on how easily manipulated he is by Mma Ramotswe, and how he plans to stand up to her. After he reports what happened, he protests being asked to lie, but Mma Ramotswe doesn't let him finish, saying telling lies in a good cause is all right, and that murder (which may have been what happened to the original owner of the finger bone) is much worse. And then she smiles, and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's anger evaporates (see "Quotes", p. 187).

Chapter 19, "Mr. Charlie Gotso, BA" Narration briefly describes the arrogance and power with which Charlie Gotso treats his wife, whom he remembers when he is visited by Mma Ramotswe. She, in turn, is described as not having a good feeling about Gotso, but responds to his sexist comments calmly. She tells him the medicine bag was given to her by the two boys who stole it, refusing to tell him their names (even when he demands them) and saying that keeping their names secret was the price she paid for getting the bag. She returns the bag, and Gotso tells her it's not his. Further conversation reveals that Mma Ramotswe recognizes it as a medicine bag, and that she is prepared to get Gotso the sort of information he can use to make his operations more successful if he helps her find the "witch doctor" who made the bag. Gotso agrees, giving her a map to where she can find the "witch doctor" and saying that if she mentions his name, she will get a discount on his (the witch doctor's) fees.



Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

The narrative of these three chapters is defined by the book's longest single stretch of development of a single mystery. Narrative momentum and a sense of suspense both build through these three chapters, raising the personal and professional stakes for both Mma Ramotswe and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni and deepening the reader's investment in whatever truth the resolution of this mystery might bring.

Along the way, several of the book's previously established motifs, images, or ideas return. These include the value and relative importance of lying (employed, as Mma Ramotswe suggests, in the service of a greater good), and the conflict between Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's tradition-oriented views and the new ways espoused and practiced by Mma Ramotswe. There is also a manifestation of the "red herring" principle. Specifically, while the reader is being led to believe that the cut-off finger belongs to the boy that went missing in earlier chapters, the truth is that the boy's hands are, in fact, intact. In other words, with all this attention on magic and witch doctoring, the reader is being led to believe that something awful has happened to the boy, a narrative line which ultimately serves to trigger a sense of catharsis and release when the boy is eventually found to be just fine. The red herring principle also applies to the reference at the end of Chapter 17 to the apparently watchful Dr. Gulubane. This, like the reference to the mysterious presence that wakes Mma Ramotswe at the end of Chapter 8, creates a question in the reader's mind that is never actually answered. In other words, it is a red herring that, unlike the missing finger red herring, is never entirely explained.

Finally, it's important to consider the emotional context of the conversations between Mma Ramotswe and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, and the sense that he is getting over his resistances (defined by both personality and culture) to who she is, why she does what she does, and how she does it. This sense is perhaps most evident in their conversation about lies, in which his love and respect for her both grow, in turn triggering increased desire for her. This, itself in turn, enables him to bypass his disappointment at having his first proposal of marriage rejected and eventually ask a second time at the novel's conclusion.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Chapter 20, "Medical Matters" Before she can pursue the Gotso case any further, Mma Ramotswe has a few other clients to take care of, including her old friend Dr. Maketsi, who comes to her with concerns about one of his doctors. Maketsi tells her that the young Dr. Komoti has been behaving inconsistently - at times professional, responsible and knowledgeable, at other times confused, incompetent and slow. Maketsi confides that he's worried Komoti is using drugs, and asks Mma Ramotswe to both find out what's wrong and remain quiet about what she finds. Mma Ramotswe agrees to help and, in recognition of Maketsi's service to her dying father, says she will charge no fee.

Information obtained from Maketsi enables Mma Ramotswe to follow Komoti, and as she does so, she discovers that he leads a very quiet life ... that is, until he unexpectedly makes a trip to Mafeking in neighboring South Africa. Her attempt to follow him ends in failure when she realizes she has forgotten her passport, and she resigns herself to another week of fruitlessly watching his house. The morning after his trip, however, she spots him in a shopping center and realizes, due to the hours of the border, that his stay in Mafeking was unbelievably brief. The following weekend she follows him again, and after putting a sexist security guard at the border into his place, follows Komoti to his home in Mafeking. There she makes her way into the overgrown yard to see if she can see him in the house, but is discovered. As she is pretending to be the daughter of an employee of the house's former owner, she is shocked to discover that Komoti has a twin brother! After discovering that Komoti also has a clinic in Mafeking and after pretending to visit what she says is the fondly remembered garden, Mma Ramotswe visits Komoti's clinic. There she pretends to be a former employee and discovers, through talking to the clinic's nurse, that the two Komoti twins take turns working in the clinic and that, in the nurse's opinion, one is competent while the work of the other is so bad that it seems as though he's never been to medical school.

Back home, Mma Ramotswe tells the worried Dr. Maketsi about the twin Komotis, suggesting they have set themselves up in two jobs in order to double their income. Maketsi frets about what will happen to his hospital if there is a prosecution, but Mma Ramotswe reassures him with the suggestion that they report the fraud to the police in Mafeking and let them worry about the repercussions. Maketsi compliments her on her skill and wisdom, and she, in turn, smiles warmly back (see "Quotes", p. 221).

Chapter 20 Analysis

Here again, the narrative capitalizes and builds on its growing sense of suspense by departing from the main narrative at a point where reader interest is at its highest. In other words, by suddenly and completely shifting the reader's attention to another "pocket mystery", the narrative increases the reader's need to find out the truth at the



core of the main narrative. On another level, however, the narrative of the twins can be seen as metaphorical foreshadowing of the truth about that main narrative which, as the following chapter reveals, is itself defined by the discovery of the difference between the real and the impostor. In other words, the simultaneous existence of the real missing child (fingers intact) and the misleading bone parallels that of the real Dr. Komoti (medical skills intact) and his misleading brother.

Meanwhile, several aspects of Mma Ramotswe's work practices again manifest in her investigation of the two Komotis. These include her ability to disguise both herself and the truth of her purpose, her capacity for miscalculation and failure, and her capacity for being in the right place at the right time. Perhaps most importantly, there is her entwined sense of compassion and justice - in this case, her compassion for the position of Dr. Maketsi entwined with her determination to see the Komotis punished for their fraud.



Chapters 21, 22

Chapters 21, 22 Summary

Chapter 21, "The Witch Doctor's Wife" Mma Ramotswe drives her little white van down a poorly maintained road, following the map provided by Charlie Gotso. Eventually she arrives at a run-down farmstead and, fighting down nervousness at the thought of facing a medicine man, she gets out of the van and calls out. She is greeted by Mma Notshi, the medicine man's wife, who explains that her husband is away. Mma Ramotswe says she works for the police and has come to warn her that her husband is about to be arrested for the murder of the missing teacher's son, and that she (Mma Notshi) will be arrested as well, for helping in the killing. Mma Notshi says she had nothing to do with the boy's death and then, to Mma Ramotswe's surprise, reveals that the boy is alive, working with her husband's cattle. Mma Ramotswe drives with Mma Notshi to where the cattle are being kept, their conversation hostile and minimal, although she (Mma Ramotswe) does learn that the bone found in the medicine bag was not that of the boy, and that such bones are readily available for purchase in Johannesburg. When the women arrive at the cattle post, Mma Ramotswe calls the boy to her, sees he's been whipped, confirms that he is in fact the missing boy, and hurries him into her van, following him (in spite of the cries from Mma Notshi to wait) and racing away. After a brief, safe, overnight stop by a dry riverbed, Mma Ramotswe takes the boy to the school where his teacher-father works, and watches their happy, tearful reunion. Narration describes how she becomes tearful herself, "remembering the minute hand that had grasped her own, so briefly, while it tried to hold on to a strange world that was slipping away so quickly", and reflecting on why she does what she does (see "Quotes", p. 230).

Chapter 22, "Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni" Following her return from the cattle post, Mma Ramotswe's little white van, now filled with dust from the roads, stops working. She calls Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, intending to leave a message with the receptionist, but instead gets Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni himself, who agrees to come out and look at the van. When she expresses her fear that it is too broken to repair, he tells her that anything can be fixed. Narration, meanwhile, comments on how lonely he is. After spending her usual Saturday morning shopping and catching up on the news, in the afternoon Mma Ramotswe welcomes Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni (wearing clean, ironed jeans) with tea. As he works on the van, she takes him more tea and prepares dinner. That evening, after he has repaired the van, they sit quietly on the verandah, listening to the sounds of the evening. As Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni contemplates how much she means to him (see "Quotes", p. 234), Mma Ramotswe thanks him for his honesty and work. He comments on how happy he is to spend time with her, and asks her to marry him. "I am just Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni," he says. "That's all, but please marry me and make me happy." Mma Ramotswe says yes.



Chapters 21, 22 Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 21, and capitalizing on what is probably, by this point, a driving curiosity in the reader, the narrative jumps right into the mystery of the medicine bag, taking the reader into a climactic revelation of truth. The description of the roughness of the road and sense of danger alive in the nearby desert metaphorically illuminate and emphasize the awareness, in both the reader and Mma Ramotswe, of the situation's potential perils. For her part, Mma Ramotswe courageously confronts her fears, driven by her determination to realize justice, and once again employs disguise (in the form of lies) in order to get at the truth. A component of that truth (Mma Notshi's revelation of the true nature of the finger) is, in all likelihood, as much of a surprise and relief to the reader as it does to Mma Ramotswe, making the escape from the cattle post feel, in contrast, like something of a let-down, or an anti-climax. In other words, there is the sense that ultimately, it is a little too easy. While the impact of the moment would, in all likelihood, be increased by a higher sense of stakes and danger, it's important to remember that this book seems clearly intended to be perceived as a different sort of mystery novel, in that violence and confrontation are apparently of less concern to the author than exploring larger thematic human truths. When it comes to the ease of Mma Ramotswe's escape, the truth evoked is that which motivates Mma Ramotswe's actions - specifically, her determination that another parent should not suffer the same loss of a child as she did. In other words, the narrative climax is also the thematic climax, specifically of the novel's consideration of the power and depth of the relationship between parents and children.

This idea, that the book as a whole is interested in more than simply unraveling a mystery, is reinforced by the fact that it ends not with the resolution of its suspense narrative but with developments in the relationship between Mma Ramotswe and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. While it could be argued that there is no clear, explicitly defined reason for Mma Ramotswe to have changed her mind, it could also be argued that her rescue of the boy is just such a reason, particularly when juxtaposed with the simplicity and honesty of Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's proposal. Mma Ramotswe respects him and cares for him, and has already said if she ever married again, it would be him. Why not, her reasoning might go, make both of them happy in the same way as she made the father of that missing boy happy, and unite two people who care for each other and can make EACH OTHER happy? Here again, with its ongoing consideration of the larger human picture, the idea is reinforced that the book is, in fact, an exploration of the life and experience of a realized, multi-faceted human being who happens to solve mysteries, rather than a (somewhat reductively categorized) "mystery novel".



Characters

Precious Ramotswe

Mma Ramotswe is the novel's central character, a well-rounded individual in every sense of the word - she takes quiet pride in being "traditionally built" - that is to say, fat. Interestingly, she is also quite non-traditional, in that she is quite independent, making her own way without relying on, and/or submitting to the will of, men. This is not to say that she rejects men altogether - she enjoys the friendship of some, often calls on them for assistance, and when necessary is compassionate towards them when they are in trouble. At the same time, she has no illusions about how selfish, childish, and irresponsible they can be, even those she considers her friends. Ultimately, her sensitivity to both aspects of the male character can be seen as a manifestation of two of her core characteristics, traits that makes her both an effective detective and an engaging character - her capacity for compassion and perspective, and her commitment to truth and justice. Both these aspects of her identity (which, as the narrative makes very clear, are connected to, and/or arise from, the difficulties she's experienced in her own life) lead her to care deeply for people in general and for the troubled people who come to her for help in particular. There is the sense that the intensity of here caring leads her to do whatever is necessary to resolve the conflicts in which friends and clients find themselves. She is not above telling the occasional lie in the service of getting to a greater truth, but her fundamental honesty with herself and with others, about herself and about the world, makes her an investigatory force to be reckoned with, as well as a good friend and, in more technical terms, a very engaging protagonist.

Obed Ramotswe

Rra Ramotswe is Precious's adored and respected father, a forward thinking miner-turned-cattle rancher from whom Mma Ramotswe inherited not only the money that made it possible for her to achieve her independence, but also her wisdom, her capacity for compassion and hard work, and her sense of perspective. Rra Ramotswe's presence is constantly in his daughter's life, for reasons that are clearly defined in the narrative's extended first person narration of his experiences (see Chapter 2), in repeated references to Mma Ramotswe's recollections of him, and in the reference to his photograph on her mantelpiece (see Chapter 12). Without actually saying so, the narrative suggests that the various men in Mma Ramotswe's life are all judged according to guidelines established by Rra Ramotswe's ways and attitudes - the more a man is like her father, the more Mma Ramotswe is inclined to respect and/or care for him.



Obed's Cousin

Obed's unnamed cousin moves in with him and the young Precious following the early death of Obed's wife. She is treated with respect by Obed and with affection by Precious, who is grateful to her for both her unconditional support, her warmth, and her teachings, all of which, it seems, contribute to the shaping of Mma Ramotswe's desire and in the direction of her eventual career.

Note Mokoti

Mokoti is Mma Ramotswe's husband, a sexy and exciting jazz musician who charms and dazzles her, then marries her, impregnates her, beats her, and leaves her. In the same way as Obed Ramotswe is Mma Ramotswe's model for a good man, Mokoti is her model for a bad man, with almost every man she encounters considered and/or judged by where they fall on the continuum of manliness between the two.

Grace Makutsi

Mma Makutsi, both recently widowed and a recent graduate from secretarial college, is hired by Mma Ramotswe to work as a secretary/assistant in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. Efficient and quiet, she plays a relatively minor role in this first book of the series, but plays an increasingly important role in later books.

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni (whose first names are never identified, and who is referred to by initials and last name throughout) is a successful businessman, the owner and operator of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors. A widower, he cares very much for Mma Ramotswe, in spite of a conservative streak that makes him question, at times, both the work she does and his willingness to assist her. His attempts to suggest other ways for her to behave, however, are met with Mma Ramotswe's characteristic blend of blunt honesty and compassion, with the result that even as she challenges and changes him, he comes to care for her all the more. Like Grace Makutsi, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni plays an increasingly important role in later books in this series.

Happy Bapetsi, Mma Malatsi, Mma Pekwane, Alice Busang

These characters are all clients of Mma Ramotswe's and the agency. All are women, and all have trouble with the men in their lives, trouble that in all cases involves a certain sense of irresponsibility. Even in the case of Mma Malatsi, whose husband's irresponsibility turns out to be the result of his death, her visit to Mma Ramotswe's



agency is prompted by his unexplained absence, which both client and detective initially relate to their painfully earned experience of men's childishness and/or selfishness.

Hector Lepodise, Dr. Maketsi

The agency's two male clients are both old family friends, and as such have earned Mma Ramotswe's respect and compassion, partly because of their loyalty to her father and partly because they share characteristics with him. Their initial resistance to her independence, tempered by a general good heartedness and open mindedness, becomes transformed when they see the work and compassion she's capable of.

The Two Dr. Komotis

The case of fraudulent identical twins, one a doctor and one an impostor, is one of the most challenging encountered by Mma Ramotswe. Her investigations lead her into situations that, more than most of those associated with her other cases, call on her to think quickly on her feet.

Mr. Patel, Nandira Patel

The book's thematic focus on the relationship between parents and children is played out in the relationship between the traditional, conservative Mr. Patel and his daughter Nandira. For further consideration of this relationship and its parallels/contrasts with that of Mma Ramotswe and her father, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the parallels and contrasts ..."

The Missing Boy

The disappearance of this never-named boy, described in narration as being eleven years old and mentally somewhat under-developed, is the central event in the narrative's main mystery. Mma Ramotswe's investigation of the disappearance, her tracing of the boy's whereabouts, and her actions in reuniting the boy with his distraught father are effectively shaped in terms of both plotting (i.e. in shaping events of a narrative to create suspense and momentum) and character. Specifically, developments in both the investigation and the resolution of the boy's plotline are tied to aspects of Mma Ramotswe's identity and motivations).

Charlie Gotso

Gotso is something of a shadowy figure in the narrative, portrayed (mostly through the opinions of other characters) as politically and financially powerful, a Mafia-like figure in the background of much of what goes on in Botswana. This sense of power and influence is highlighted and/or illuminated by the fact that he is spoken of more than he



actually appears, with the way in which he's spoken of reinforcing his reputation even further. His only appearance (in Chapter 18) gives the impression that the ways in which people view him (primarily with fear) are quite justified, in that he seems both ruthless and self-interested ... but not smart enough or tricky enough to evade the manipulations Mma Ramotswe puts him through to get to the truth of her investigation.

Mma Notshi

This is the wife of the so-called "witch doctor" that Mma Ramotswe believes is connected to the disappearance of the missing boy. Sent to her by Gotso, Mma Ramotswe manipulates Mma Notshi into revealing the truth of the boy's whereabouts. Along the way, Mma Notshi gives Mma Ramotswe information that she both wanted and didn't want - that the boy is both alive and whole, but that bones such as that which Mma Ramotswe believed belonged to the boy are readily available. In other words, bones are taken from children all the time. In that sense, Mma Notshi can be seen as representing, on some level, humanity's capacity for, and casual acceptance of, evil (see "Topics for Discussion - In what way are Mma Notshi ...")



Objects/Places

Africa

The long standing economic, political, and racial instability of Africa is an important underpinning for several of the book's narrative and thematic developments.

Botswana

One of the most recent, and the most stable, democracies in Africa, Botswana is portrayed as something of a quiet haven of peace and relative prosperity in the mostly unsettled, troubled continent.

Gaborone

Gaborone is the capital of Botswana, portrayed as a mirror of the country as a whole with relative peace (politically and socially) and prosperity (although with an undercurrent of unease, manifest in the character and presence of people like Charlie Gotso - see "Characters"). Gaborone is the city where The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency is established.

Mochudi

A small city in the Botswana countryside, Mochudi is where Mma Ramotswe was born and raised, and acquired most of her initial insight into humanity, its ways, and how to both observe and understand them.

The Kalahari Desert

One of the largest expanses of desert in Africa, the Kalahari borders Gaborone, its dangers and dryness metaphorically representing the always lingering threat of suffering in the lives of the inhabitants of Botswana and Gaborone in general, and Mma Ramotswe's clients in particular.

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

This is the agency established by Mma Ramotswe in Gaborone after the death of her father, the only agency run by a lady detective in the entire country.



Mma Ramotswe's House

This is the home purchased by Mma Ramotswe with some of the money left to her by her father. Small but welcoming and comfortable, the house is a place where Mma Ramotswe can leave the pressures and concerns of her job behind, and take refuge in the quiet day-to-day simplicities she values. A photograph of her beloved, influential father is on prominent display, reinforcing the idea that he continues to play an important role in her life even after his death. The house also has a garden and veranda, the setting for several important conversations (including Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's successful proposal of marriage).

Mma Ramotswe's Little White Van

One of the Detective Agency's primary assets, the van (also purchased with Obed Ramotswe's legacy) is an important tool in many of Mma Ramotswe's investigations. Mechanical difficulties with the van, eventually repaired by Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, are the catalyst for the conversation that eventually results in his engagement to Mma Ramotswe.

Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors

This is Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's business, a moderately successful garage and car repair operation.

The Medicine Bag

While repairing a van owned by Charlie Gotso (see "Characters"), Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni discovers a small bag in the glove compartment, the contents of which (including what turns out to be a fragment of bone from a child's finger) appear to be used as "muti", or magic. Investigating the bag and its contents leads Mma Ramotswe to the resolution of one of her most important cases, the disappearance of a missing boy (see "Characters - The Missing Boy").



Themes

Parents and Children

This is the narrative's primary thematic consideration, developed through and/or manifesting on two main levels. The first is that of plot or narrative, in that most of the events in the book's main plots (the "establishment of the agency" plot and the "missing boy" plot) and at least one of its sub-plots (the Patel case) are defined by close relationships between biological parents and children. It could be argued that some of the other secondary plots are also defined by parent/child relationships, but in a more metaphorical way. Specifically, Mma Ramotswe becomes involved in the Hector Lepodise and Dr. Maketsi mysteries at least partly because the men requesting her help are, in some ways, father figures to her and because she feels a degree of loyalty to them. On the other side of the coin, her involvement in the Happy Bapetsi case (in which Mma Ramotswe exposes a false father) itself manifests the theme on two different levels - the longing for a positive father figure (and the actions such longing leads people to take), and how the father figure can become corruptive/corrupted and manipulative/manipulated.

The second level on which this theme manifests is that of character - specifically, in the way the identities of individuals are shaped and/or defined by the parent/child relationship. The most notable, and predominant, aspect of this is the way Mma Ramotswe's entire life is defined by her father's compassionate, understanding, and firm commitment to her. He makes her well being a priority, an attitude that in action triggers her own commitment to the well being of others. This, in turn, is the book's primary thematic contention, that any successful relationship (professional, personal, romantic) is, or at least should be, defined by the sort of open-hearted compassion practiced by a truly sensitive, nurturing parent towards his/her child.

Women's Independence and Dignity

Throughout the narrative characters, many relationships and plot are defined, to greater or lesser degrees, by consideration of women's identity - specifically, the tension between traditional views of the place of women (as dependent upon, and/or subservient to, men) and the movement of women away from those traditions. There are varying degrees of such movement. These range from Mma Ramotswe's ground-breaking determination to establish her own agency (a somewhat larger scale claim to independence and autonomy) to the visits made to her by female clients who, essentially, seek more respect from the men in their lives than they might otherwise have received. There are also varying degrees of tension triggered by these movements, again ranging from the confrontational, dismissive treatment Mma Ramotswe often receives from men in authority (both legal, such as the lawyer handling the case of Hector Lepodise's employee, and illicit, such as Charlie Gotso) to the more quiet and personal. The primary manifestation of this last sort of tension is in Mma



Ramotswe's relationship with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, whose affection for her is, at first, colored by exasperation that she won't behave in the way women traditionally do and/or have but eventually becomes deepened by respect, loyalty, and admiration. This last point is particularly notable, in that it is the second of two important manifestations of male support for female independence. The first is evidenced in how Mma Ramotswe's father consistently and reliably invests himself, his care and his money in his daughter's well being and individualized sense of self.

African Pride

While the novel's primary narrative focus is on mystery (both multi-chapter and single chapter), and while its primary thematic focus is on the relationship between parents and children, there are several occasions when reference is made to African identity and pride - specifically, black identity and pride. Glancing comments on Africa's history of racial tension (between blacks and whites), of ethnic tension (between different tribes of blacks) and of widespread economic inequalities (between races, countries, and communities) form a broadly based context of national and social identity within which Mma Ramotswe's strivings can be seen as having more expansive resonance and meaning. Specifically, her struggles for independence, autonomy and respect can be seen not only as a woman's struggle and not only as a struggle for the disadvantaged (i.e. children) but metaphorically as a race's struggle, a country's struggle, and even the struggle of an entire continent. In other words, in the blend of tradition and innovation that is both the character and story of Mma Ramotswe and her detective agency, the book develops a gently persistent narrative and thematic commentary on the potential within a country and a people to aspire to what a simple, single woman (in that culture, the unlikeliest of role models) achieves. In Mma Ramotswe's evolving confidence and autonomy, tempered with compassion and wisdom born of suffering, the novel seems to be suggesting that there are lessons for all Botswana, perhaps all Africa ... perhaps even for all disadvantaged everywhere. Meanwhile, for consideration of another manifestation of this theme, see "Style - Point of View".

Style

Point of View

The narrative unfolds primarily from the third person, past tense point of view, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of its central character, detective Precious Ramotswe. This particular point of view (the "limited" perspective) is often used in mystery novels (of which this book is a variation), drawing the reader into the mystery by placing him/her in a similar position to the detective. In other words, the reader discovers what the detective discovers as s/he discovers it. That said, there are also occasions when the narrative describes Mma Ramotswe's actions without letting the reader in on what she's doing, or why. A vivid example of this can be found in Chapter 5, when it's not entirely clear what Mma Ramotswe plans to do with the dog but is clearly up to SOMETHING. This variation on the technique, which might be described as keeping the detective's secrets, is also common to many mystery novels, particularly those written by Agatha Christie (the renowned British mystery writer whose work is referenced by Mma Ramotswe as an example of how women can know a lot about mystery).

It's important to note, however, that on one occasion, the narrative detours from its central perspective, associated with Mma Ramotswe, and for a chapter (Chapter 2) shifts into the first person point of view of her father, Obed Ramotswe. While Obed's story is certainly more interestingly told in first person than it would be if someone else (i.e. Mma Ramotswe or a narrator) was telling it, it is somewhat disconcerting and almost distracting, until one considers the larger thematic picture. As the narrative itself suggests, the stories of men like Obed Ramotswe tend to be forgotten, lost in other African stories. It may be that the shift into first person narrative, into an African man telling his story in his own voice, is a variation on the book's thematic consideration of African pride and identity (see "Themes - African Pride").

Setting

(Botswana) and continent (Africa). Meaning associated with each/all of these settings is defined, to a significant degree, by the relationship between tradition and innovation - specifically, by the connection between setting and tradition, and how innovation (such as, for example, Mma Ramotswe's independence) simultaneously challenges, and is defined by, both. At the same time, there is also a connection between setting (i.e. physical context) and the book's social, political, and economic contexts, as referred to in "Themes - African Pride).

All that said, while the novel's setting, and the attention to detail with which that setting is portrayed, add an undeniable sense of uniqueness and intrigue to the story, there is also the sense that ultimately it's irrelevant, that the issues at the core of the book's thematic and narrative considerations are actually universal. In other words, Mma



Ramotwe's struggle for independence, as a woman and as a human being, is common to cultures and traditions all over the world. This is also true of her commitment to justice and to human dignity, and of the conflict that Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni feels between what he expects/needs from his beloved and how his beloved truly is. It's also true of the situation of the unnamed boy (who, like crowds of children everywhere, disappear without a trace) and even of the mysterious, edgy, dodgy aspects of Charlie Gotso, a type familiar to anyone anywhere with an experience of someone who manipulates power behind the scenes. In other words, setting in this book is simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, absolutely essential (to the book's uniqueness) and completely irrelevant (to the book's universal contemplations of fundamental human experiences).

Language and Meaning

The most interesting aspect of the novel's use of language is its incorporation of various cultural and/or ethnic elements. These include everything from its references to ways of life and conversation to the use of the terms "Mma" and "Rra" (similar in intent and connotation to "ma'am" and "sir"). These combine with the use setting referred to above to define a unique, definite sense of identity and place that helps draw the reader into the narrative. Again, however, and as discussed in terms of setting, there is the sense that the book's use of language highlights the universality of story, situation and relationship at work in the novel - in other words, the problems and lives of these culturally specific characters have clear, affecting and effective resonances with the all-too-human problems and lives of people everywhere.

Another important element of language is the subtlety with which it's often used to evoke intense emotional situations. This is particularly true in terms of descriptions of Mma Ramotwe's experiences with her husband and child, with the violence associated with the former and the sorrow associated with the latter. Both are portrayed with a simple, haunting power made all the more effective and moving by the elegance of the language, its lack of melodrama and/or self-consciousness (see "Quotes, p. 54, 90 and 104). This enables the reader to realize a sense of profound empathy with Mma Ramotwe, with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni (whose lonely, longing frustration is written about in a similar fashion), and even with the schoolteacher father of the missing boy, whose relieved happiness at the reunion with his son is all the more effective because it's described so understatedly.

Structure

The book's overall structure is, in a word, unpredictable. The narratives of (many? most?) traditional mystery novels are anchored by a single plot, with the detective confronted with a single situation or circumstance that requires resolution that ultimately grows more and more complex as the detective sorts through clues and circumstances to get to the single truth. In this case, however, while a dominant narrative line does emerge (the disappearance of the young boy), there are also several smaller mysteries to be solved, referred to elsewhere in this analysis as "pocket mysteries". In other

words, it almost seems as though the book is a collection of short stories as much as it is an exploration of a single mystery.

The book's unpredictability also manifests in several shifts of both subject matter and narrative tone away from mysteries altogether. Diversions into contemplations of the non-mysterious past (Chapter 2), the landscape (Chapter 10), home and relationship (Chapters 12 and 13) all show up at points in the narrative that may at first glance seem random but which, upon closer consideration and as the narrative progresses, can be seen as very carefully placed in order to build narrative suspense and momentum. Note that while there are diversions into other mysteries, there are no non-mystery diversions in the book's final third, as narrative tension is building towards resolution of the "missing boy" plot.

Ultimately, the book's structural unpredictability is notable for two main reasons. The first is as an evocation and/or manifestation of a certain, culturally embedded ease and/or informality and/or lack of structure in Botswana's daily life. The second is as an effective and entertaining way (particularly in combination with of drawing the reader into a an apparently traditional narrative that proves to be as non-traditional as its intriguing central character.



Quotes

"Detective agencies rely on human intuition and intelligence, both of which Mma Ramotswe had in abundance. No inventory would ever include those, of course." p. 3

"I love all the people whom God made, but I especially know how to love the people who live in this place. They are my people, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to help them to solve the mysteries in their lives. That is what I am called to do." Mma Ramotswe, p. 4

"People in Botswana liked to talk, she discovered, and the mere mention of the fact that she was a private detective would let loose a positive outpouring of information on all sorts of subjects. It flattered people, she concluded, to be approached by a private detective, and this effectively loosened their tongues." p. 7

"...who am I? I am Precious Ramotswe, citizen of Botswana, daughter of Obed Ramotswe who died because he had been a miner and could no longer breathe. His life was unrecorded; who is there to write down the lives of ordinary people?" p. 15

"... God was here anyway, before the missionaries came. We called him by a different name, then, and he did not live over at the Jews' place; he lived here in Africa, in the rocks, in the sky, in places where we knew he lived to be. When you died, you went somewhere else, and God would have been there too, but you would not be able to get specially close to him. Why would he want that?" p. 19

"The problem, of course, was that people did not seem to understand the difference between right and wrong. They needed to be reminded about this, because if you left it to them to work it out for themselves, they would never bother. They would just find out what was best for them, and then they would call that the right thing. That's how most people thought." p. 35

"Thin, wretched cattle had thin, wretched owners. Listless cattle ... had owners whose lives lacked focus. And dishonest people, he maintained, had dishonest cattle - cattle which would cheat other cattle of food or which would try to insinuate themselves into the herds of others." p. 49

"He was not a good man, she could tell that, but she might change him. And, when all was said and done, there remained those dark moments of contact, those pleasures he snatched from her, which were addictive ... she liked what he did to her, the humiliation, the urgency. She wanted to be with him, wanted him to possess her." p. 54

"In the final analysis, that was what solved these big problems of life. You could think and think and get nowhere, but you still had to eat your pumpkin. That brought you down to earth. That gave you a reason for going on. Pumpkin." p. 85



"...for a brief moment she remembered that awful afternoon in Mochudi, at the hospital, when the nurse had come up to her ... to lose a child, like that, was something that could end one's world. One could never get back to how it was before. The stars went out. The moon disappeared. The birds became silent." p. 90

"... no matter how much everybody would like to think of other innocent explanations as to what had happened to a missing boy ... the most likely thing was [that] ... the boy had been taken by a witch doctor and killed for medicine. Right there, in Botswana, in the late twentieth century, under that proud flag, in the midst of all that made Botswana a modern country, this thing had happened, this heart of darkness had thumped out like a drum." p. 91

"And she thought of that moment when, not even supported by Note ... she had laid the tiny body of their premature baby, so fragile, so light, into the earth and had looked up at the sky and wanted to say something to God, but couldn't because her throat was blocked with sobs and no words, nothing, would come." p. 104

"I am just a tiny person in Africa, but there is a place for me, and for everybody, to sit down on this earth and touch it and call it their own." p. 124

"It was curious how some people had a highly developed sense of guilt, she thought while others had none. Some people would agonize over minor slips or mistakes ... while others would feel quite unmoved by their own gross acts of betrayal or dishonesty." p. 125

"Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni ... did not like stolen cars. He preferred to have nothing to do with them, but this was a request from Mma Ramotswe, and so there was only one answer to give." p. 128

"Why did love - and sex - complicate life so much? It would be far simpler for us not to have to worry about them. Sex played no part in her life now and she found that a great relief. She did not have to worry how she looked; what people thought of her. How terrible to be a man, and to have sex on one's mind all the time, as men are supposed to do." p. 147

"How sorry she felt for white people ... always dashing around and worrying themselves over things that were going to happen anyway ... every so often you met a white person who understood, who realized how things really were; but these people were few and far between and the other white people often treated them with suspicion." p. 162

"She did not like lawyers, but he was trying to earn a living, like everybody else, and perhaps she was being too hard on him. He might well have been supporting elderly parents, for all she knew." p. 170

"... he thought: I am lucky. She is smiling at me. There is nobody to love me in this world. Here is somebody who likes me and smiles at me. And she's right about murder. It's far worse than lies." p. 187



"Mma Ramotswe did not want Africa to change. She did not want her people to become like everybody else, soulless, selfish, forgetful of what it means to be an African, or, worse still, ashamed of Africa." p. 215

"You can go through life and make new friends every year - every month practically - but there was never any substitute for those friendships of childhood that survive into adult years. Those are the ones in which we are bound to one another with hoops of steel." p. 221

"There was so much suffering in Africa that it was tempting just to shrug your shoulders and walk away. But you can't do that, she thought. You just can't." p. 230

"He looked at her in the darkness, at this woman who was everything to him - mother, Africa, wisdom, understanding, good things to eat, pumpkins, chicken, the smell of sweet cattle breath, the white sky across the endless, endless bush, and the giraffe that cried, giving its tears for women to daub on their baskets; O Botswana, my country, my place." p. 234



Topics for Discussion

Obtain, view, and discuss the television adaptation of this book. Note the similarities and differences between the two narratives. In what ways does the adaptation capture the unique flavor and atmosphere of the book? Of what value, either negative or positive, are the changes made between the two narratives?

Discuss the parallels and contrasts between the relationship between the Ramotswe father and daughter (Obed and Precious) and the Patel father and daughter (Paliwalar and Nandira). In what ways do these parallels and contrasts illuminate the book's thematic exploration of the parent/child relationship?

One of the most intriguing aspects of the novel is its commentary on what might be described as basic human truths. Consider, for example, the quotes from pages 85, 124, 147, 221, and/or 230. In what ways do these comments reflect your experiences and/or beliefs?

In what ways are Mma Notshi and her beliefs, as manifest in her casual commentary about the source of the human finger, direct contrasts to those of Mma Ramotswe?

Do you agree or disagree with Mma Ramotswe's contention that sometimes it's necessary to tell lies in pursuit of a greater truth/a greater good? Why or why not?

Debate the concept of "a greater good". What might be defined as a greater good? Who decides what a greater truth is? Are some truths greater than others? Why or why not? To what extent is the idea of "a greater good" defined by personal context and/or belief?

Discuss your reaction to the book's structure. Do you find the frequent diversions and multiple mysteries engaging or distracting? Why or why not?