Chapter 2 ~ ‘My Invented Country’ 40

‘Having been born and brought up in this region I obviously have a great attachment to it. There are things about it which are so fine and moving that I feel privileged to be able to write about them...I’m trying to get the spirit of place across.’

McCall Smith in Mandi Smallhorne, ‘The Heart of Africa’, p27

‘I think people in Botswana are pleased that my books paint a positive picture of their lives and portray the country as being very special.’

McCall Smith in Marcel Berlins, ‘Precious Ramotswe and me,’ p3

‘Although Africa has attracted the attention of non-African writers since the days of Herodotus, many Africans believe these writers largely misrepresented Africa...’ 41

In an exploration of this reciprocal, even symbiotic relationship, Jones and Palmer discuss the borrowing of both form and language from ‘the West’ by African writers, and the continuing use of Africa as an exotic back-drop by modern English and American writers. They draw a distinction between the perceptions of Africa from the diaspora which are ‘quite significant fresh views of it from afar – different from the European view because it is an ‘inside’ view from the ‘outside’, in a way that Waugh’s brutally cynical and detached view could not be.’

McCall Smith’s status is more complex because he is an ‘outsider / insider / outsider.’

Now writing from the West, he paradoxically follows in the restorative tradition of Achebe and Ngugi, affirming the picture of a positive pre- and post-colonial African history, culture and morality, in contrast to the disillusioned outpost of failed colonial ambition of Waugh and Greene. His writing is a tribute to Africa as a whole and Botswana in particular and is a conscious attempt to counter the image of the continent and its people as the continuing Heart of Darkness. He has employed four main strategies to build up a picture of an established and enduring society; the inclusion of real people and places; the narration of the nation by the inclusion of verifiable historical and social events; the writing of lyrical and evocative landscapes; and the privileging of the ‘old Botswana ways.’

Authenticity ~ people and places

McCall Smith writes based on personal experience of Africa over a substantial period of time. He is refreshingly clear about the connection between the books and their author.

‘...Although one may try to argue that one’s books and one’s life are quite separate, [as did Auden] this will tend not to wash, particularly among those who refute claims to the independence of the text.

40 The title of Isabel Allende’s reminiscence on her life in Chile
41 Jones and Palmer, ‘Insiders and Oursiders’, p1
So the author is not irrelevant or even dead (in the literary theory sense): he or she must still explain how the books came into existence and why.”

He observes, not originally he admits, that writing is often a response to pain and loss and that it was a stroke of writer’s good fortune, in the sense of experiencing that pain and loss, to have been brought up in the particular society that he was. He was also ‘fortunate that he was exposed to (the small town pettiness of colonial Bulawayo) only during childhood and that my adult life has been spent in Scotland, a more rational place by far.’ For the inspiration for these novels he turned to Botswana, which he had visited occasionally as a child and which he came to know more intimately when staying in Swaziland on sabbatical from the University of Edinburgh at the age of 30. In Swaziland, McCall Smith claimed, there was nothing to do, so in addition to writing his second successful children’s book about a hamburger, which is still in print, he became re-aquainted with a boyhood friend Howard Moffat, a doctor running a small hospital in Mochudi, a town to the north of Gabarone, later to become Mma Ramotswe’s birthplace.

Specialist characters within a realistic novel are identified by Schipper as ‘social types with characteristic behaviour, to represent a milieu, a type, a profession,’ who add to the authenticity created by the use of proper place names and historical events. Howard Moffat is a direct descendent of the Scottish missionary Robert Moffat, whose daughter Mary married David Livingstone so the colonial credentials are impeccable. He is translated into these novels as Dr Moffat, Mma Ramotswe’s ‘friend…who used to run the hospital out at Mochudi, had looked after her father and had always been prepared to listen to her when she was in difficulties.’ (MBG:42) He particularly helps when her fiancé Mr J.L.B.Matekoni suffers from depression and colludes with her plan to have him cared for by Mma Potokwani, the matron of the orphan farm. (MBG:131-133) She is another real-life character in a real-life establishment, on the author’s own admission thinly disguised by name only. Somewhat implausibly, Mma Ramotswe also lists some of the authors’ fellow academics at the University of Botswana, ‘unimaginably learned people…scholars like Professor Tlou, who had written a history of Botswana and a biography of Seretse Khama …or Dr Bojosi Otloghile who had written a book on the High Court of Botswana.’ (TG:176)

42 McCall Smith, ‘A portrait of the writer’, p1  
43 McCall Smith, ‘A portrait of the writer’, p2  
44 Schipper, writing about Sembene’s portrayal of ordinary people in Gods Bits of Wood in Beyond the Boundaries p147  
45 McCall Smith, ‘How I became a writer’, p3
McCall Smith even manages to appear himself at the Moffat’s house when Mrs Moffat is showing some old photographs to the No 1 lady detective, who asks,

“Who is this man standing behind them? This man who is looking at the camera?”

“That is somebody who comes to stay with us from time to time,” said Mrs Moffat,

“He writes books.” Mma Ramotswe examined the photograph more closely.

“It seems he is looking at me” she said, “He is smiling at me.”

“Yes ”, said Mrs Moffat “Maybe he is.”  

(MBG:171)

McCall Smith confessed that he wanted to record the fact that he had sat in the garden and played Scrabble with Dr Moffat’s mother and that he wanted to meet Mma Ramotswe! 46

In addition to writing in his friends and acquaintances and appearing surreptitiously himself, McCall Smith, the medical lawyer, has some fun with in /outsider jokes about the professions, engaging the reader by colluding with universal stereotypes of lawyers, while sustaining the protagonist’s respectful view of the medical profession.

‘She did not like lawyers…these people were utterly slippery, even if they had a law degree to write after their names…Doctors were another matter altogether, and Mma Ramotswe had always been impressed by them. She admired, in particular their sense of the confidential … you never found this among lawyers, who were boastful people, on the whole, always prepared to tell a story at the expense of a client.’

(No 1:168.170.192-3)

McCall Smith’s Botswana is a highly specific geographical setting, filled with genuine place names and local detail. Gabarone, where ‘Radio Botswana broadcast the sound of the cow bells at six’, (No1:130) where Mma Ramotswe goes to live with a cousin at the age of 16, appears in convincing detail throughout the books in descriptions which include economic and social history.

‘In the beginning, which in Gabarone really means thirty years ago, there were very few factories… Gabarone had grown, changing out of all recognition. When she first went there as a little girl there had been little more than several rings of houses about the Mall and the few government offices…but it was quite small really…Then little by little things had changed. Somebody built a furniture workshop which produced sturdy living room chairs…Now there was even a truck factory…assembling ten trucks a month to send up as far as the Congo; and all of this started from nothing.’

(No1:150 -151)

46 Smallhorne, ‘The Heart of Africa’, p27
‘That awful Francistown Road’ (No1:162) is clearly identified and local journeys are clear enough to be traced on a map.

‘Mma Ramotswe drove her tiny white van . . . past the Kalahari Breweries, past the Dry Lands Research Station and out on the road that led north.’ (No1:121)

There are international journeys too; ‘When they did not stop in Lobatse, Mma Ramotswe began to worry . . . Yes! Dr Komoti was going over the border she was sure of it. He was going to Mafikeng.’ (No1:204) The books are so full of real landmarks that there is now a No 1 Literary Tour of Gabarone and Mochudi, starting at Kgale Hill.47 Mma Ramotswe’s house is affectionately described, again with some social background:

‘built in 1968 when the town inch ed out from the shops and the Government Buildings. It was on a corner site which was not always a good thing, as people would sometimes stand on that corner, and spit into her garden, or throw their rubbish over her fence . . . The yard was a large one, almost two thirds of an acre, and it was well endowed with trees and shrubs . . . At the front of the house was a verandah which was her favourite place . . . behind the verandah was the living room, the largest room in the house, with its big window that gave out onto what had once been a lawn . . . the kitchen was cheerful. The cement floor sealed and polished with red paint . . .’

(No1:131-3)

The detail of:

‘her special china, her Queen Elizabeth teacup and her commemoration plate with the picture of Sir Seretse Khama, President, Kgosi of the Bangwato people, Statesman. He smiled at her from the plate . . . as did the Queen for she loved Botswana too . . .’

contrives to include more verifiable historical figures, defines her as a patriot and a royalist and demonstrate the modesty of her material possessions even as a relatively affluent woman.

Authority ~ Narrating the Nation

There are regular doses of historical and political detail about the birth of Botswana.

‘Princess Marina . . . watched as the Union Jack was hauled down in the stadium on that windy night in 1966 and the Bechuanaland Protectorate ceased to exist . . . (No1:150)

Sir Seretse Khama, ‘. . . a good man, who invented Botswana and made it a good place,’ is a particular hero of Mma Ramotswe. (No1:33) Her father Obed, recalls earlier times when

‘the British ran our country, to protect us from the Boers (or that is what they said) . . . with a Commissioner down in Mafikeng . . . who the chiefs all obeyed . . . but some of them were clever . . . and said Yes, yes I will do that, and all the time did the other thing or just pretended to do something.’ (No1:18)

Thus McCall Smith contrives to relate a seductively simple version of the history of the Bechuanaland Protectorate as if from the inside, which could be within the knowledge of the speaker, to poke fun at the outsiders and the impossibility of their situation, and educate his readers by giving just enough information to be convincing. As one critic comments, ‘What is most remarkable about … this virtual encounter with Botswana is the compassion with which McCall Smith describes the country, the manner in which he has managed to recreate the everyday events of community life in a way that makes their difference, their cultural specifics, completely familiar.’

Obed Ramotswe’s view for instance, and possibly the author’s, is that doing nothing is a good system of governance, as people ‘do not want to do things all the time and want to be left alone to look after their cattle.’ Other authenticating events of importance to the Batswana, are included, such as the drought of 1964, when ‘the government, its heart heavy, had instructed people to start slaughtering their cattle. That was the worst thing for anybody to have to do, and the suffering had cut deep.’ (MBG: 163) ‘The boy with an African heart’ (TG: 25-34) was taking part in an experiment in developmental agriculture, perhaps recalling Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*, itself a tribute to the projects of Patrick van Rensburg in Botswana. By these means McCall Smith blurs and exploits the boundary between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, between history and literature.

There is space here to refer to only a few of the key theorists in the major discourse around this interrelationship. White claimed that the supposedly rigid separation stems from the nineteenth century when ‘it became conventional to identify ‘truth’ with ‘fact’ and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth.’ He argued that the writing of history is as much a process of mediation as the writing of fiction and one is not more valid or ‘true’ than the other. Bakhtin defined the difference by saying that the historian ‘insists on a homology between the sequence of their own telling, the form they impose to create a coherent narrative explanation and the sequence of what they tell – ‘telling it how it is.’ The novelist dramatises the gaps between what is told and the telling of it.’ Bennett argued that the effect of any ‘dualistic ontology is to privilege history as literature’s source and its ultimate referent.’ He argued that ‘there can be no general solution to the question of the relations between literature and history because there is no general problem to be addressed.’ He suggested bypassing the effects of the literature / history couplet altogether so that ‘there are no longer relations between different types of being to be fathomed.’

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48 Plaatje developed this insider history comprehensively in *Mhudi*
49 Bartlett, ‘A woman who…’, p1
50 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp 122-3
51 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p xxvii
52 Bennett, *Outside Literature*, pp 42-3, 46 and 74
In their mediation of events or issues, this is what accomplished and knowledgeable writers manage to achieve for their characters and for us the reader. ‘I made it up’ chuckled Mma Ramotswe, ‘but that doesn’t stop it being true!’ (TG:133) Such writers can and do choose their mode, and Achebe, who moves easily between ‘fictional’ and ‘factual’ modes, as well as synthesising the two, argued convincingly for the value of imaginative literature as a means of conveying ideas, imagining solutions and offering ‘… a better, stronger and more memorable insight … than all the sermons and editorials we have heard and read…’ 53 This is strongly echoed by Max du Preez, who describes his newfound passion for ‘history as storytelling,’ having ‘come to realise what damage some teachers and academics and most ideologues and ethnic nationalists have inflicted on ‘history’. The history I was taught at school was a boring pack of lies.’54

McCall Smith, as the joint author of the Criminal Law of Botswana and other technical works, can also choose his writing mode. In the Botswana novels he can be seen to continue in the tradition of The Novelist as Teacher and might well agree with Achebe that:

‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels…did no more than teach my readers that the past was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.’ 55

The contradiction and the irony is that he is doing this from the perspective of an outsider for outsiders, rather than as an insider for insiders, and that the country he honours is, along with the other countries of Africa, a European colonial construct.

His inclusion of specific people and events in creating the ‘spirit of place’ is re-enforced by the confidence his characters have in the governance, integrity and current prosperity of Botswana. This is set out unequivocally by Mma Ramotswe:

‘A good woman in a good country… she loved her country, Botswana, which is a place of peace, and she loved Africa, for all its trials…’(No1:2)

This was a view shared with her late ‘daddy’ Obed who confirmed:

‘I love our country and I am proud to be a Motswana. There’s no other country in Africa that can hold its head up as we can. We have no political prisoners, and never have had any. We have democracy. We have been careful. The Bank of Botswana is full of money from our diamonds. We owe nothing.’ (No1:18)

‘Botswana had never sunk into debt as had happened in so many other countries in Africa…every cent, every thebe, had been accounted for; none had gone into the pockets of politicians.’ (MBG:26)

53 Achebe, ‘The Truth of Fiction’ in Hopes and Impediments, p143
54 du Preez, Of Warriors, Lovers and Prophets, pix
55 Achebe, ‘The Novelist as Teacher’ in Morning Yet on Creation Day, p72
This view can largely be substantiated. The Botswana Government promotes the country as
*The Gem of Africa*, where ‘all changes in power since independence (though the same party
the BDP has in fact been in power) have been peaceful and democratic …with extensive and
peaceful political freedom.’ They boast ‘a vibrant and growing economy, with most income
from diamonds, vehicle manufacturing, beef exports and tourism… with the government
continuing to run at a regular budgetary surplus.’56  Even the CIA is prepared to say ‘Four
decades of uninterrupted civilian leadership, progressive social policies and significant capital
investment have created one of the most dynamic economies in Africa.’ 57  Due to the huge
current exposure of his novels McCall Smith has thus now allied with capitalist technology, in
the guise of his publishers, to promulgate the virtues of Botswana and to play the writer’s
critical role in the narration and creation of a nation.58  His picture of Botswana is however
apparently not based on any research, but purely on his own memory, experience, knowledge
and imagination. He famously writes 4000 words a day, and ‘simply sits down at his desk and
lets rip. And if he does have a broad idea of what is going to happen he is as open to surprises
as his readers. “Yesterday a new character came in wholly uninvited,” he explained to an
incredulous fellow author known to research meticulously for years, going on to relate how he
writes in a near trance-like state so the new character arrived on his bicycle in the story,
complete with his own personal history.’59

*Authenticity ~ Landscapes*

McCall Smith further creates ‘the spirit of place’ by his evocative, lyrical, impressionistic
landscapes, which, as all his book covers tell us ‘leave one as if standing in the Botswanan
landscape.’ 60  Here he passionately declares his own love for the land in Africa in a synthesis
of pastoral and anti-pastoral, of black African people being at one with a harsh landscape that
is rare in white Southern African Literature. 61  He does this through the eyes of the insider, for
Mma Ramotswe often reflects on the special beauty of this land and her place in it.

‘This was a dry land…Just a short distance to the west lay the Kalahari, a hinterland
of ochre that stretched off, for unimaginable miles to the singing emptiness of the
Namib…To live with this great dry interior, brown and hard, was the lot of the
Batswana, and it was this that made them cautious, and careful in their husbandry…

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56 *Gem of Africa, Botswana at a Glance*, Government website
57 *World Factbook*, CIA website
58 Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* identified this role for the that the writer and McCall Smith,
as seen from the comment to Berlins, considers himself an unofficial ambassador for Botswana.
59 Dibdin, ‘A New Year Conversation’ p1
60 Daniels, *Review of No1 Ladies, UK Sunday Telegraph*, no date reference available
61 Coetzee considered the South African pastoral tradition ‘blind to the colour black.’
*White Writing* pp 5 – 7
the lions were there still, on these wide landscapes…she had felt the utter loneliness of a place without people. This was Botswana distilled; the essence of her country…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 call it their own…she thought that one day she might go back into the Kalahari, into those empty spaces, those wide grasslands that broke and broke the heart.’ (No1:121-123)

Descriptions of the landscape in the changing seasons permeate the novels and like his domestic scenes are economic as well as evocative. McCall Smith has said that he does not paint an in-depth picture, but focuses on an accurate detail within a general setting and relies on that for his creation of the ambience. A case in point is his description of Dr Moffat’s study where ‘on the desk were a stethoscope and a sphygmomanometer, with its rubber bulb hanging over the edge;’ this also cleverly includes the authenticating historical detail that ‘on the wall, an old engraving of Kuruman Mission in the mid nineteenth century’, since it was Robert Moffat, the doctor’s forebear, who founded the Kuruman Mission. (MBG:132)

When Mma Makutsi investigates the integrity of a rural beauty queen, she visits a home that could be seen to acknowledge Head’s highly detailed descriptions of the traditional huts of Serowe in Village of the Rain Wind.

‘They arrived at plot 2456, at the gate of the neat, mud-brown little house with its outhouse for the chickens and, unusually, two traditional grain bins at the back. The chicken food would be kept there, she thought; the sorghum grain that would be scattered each morning on the neatly swept yard, to be pecked at by the hungry birds on their release from the coop. It was obvious to Mma Makutsi that an older woman lived here, as only an older woman would take the trouble to keep the yard in such a traditional and careful way.’ (MBG:206)

The detail is tiny and is actually mostly about chickens, but the echoing of the word ‘traditional’ helps convince the reader of the authenticity of the homestead.

No1 Ladies begins with a subversive reference to Out of Africa. The reader who recognises this is immediately transported to the African savannah within the colonial tradition of adventure, romance, tragedy and Blixen’s seminal African storytelling, but with a humorous edge that creates an ironic distance. Whether the reader recognises the reference or not, the author within two paragraphs undercuts any grand colonial expectations when he conveys the modesty and urban nature of Mma Ramotswe’s enterprise: ‘…assets: a tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone and an old typewriter.’

62 McCall Smith, Question and Answer session, Johannesburg, 2004.
He then returns to a more lyrical Africa and with the same economy of style as Paton in the opening paragraphs of *Cry the Beloved Country*, accurately conveys the character of the landscape:

‘…the wide edges of the Kalahari…the dusty road, the roofs of the town under a cover of trees and scrub bush; on the horizon, in a blue shimmer of heat, the hills, like improbable overgrown termite mounds.’

There is an intricate and convincing detail about the acacia tree, ‘the great white thorns, a warning; the olive grey leaves, by contrast, so delicate.’ Like Paton he uses the common name and the call of a bird, to give an authentic local detail. His chosen bird is a common one, the lourie, not rare like Paton’s titihoya, but easily understood along with the acacia tree, dust, hills in the distance and shimmering heat as signs for Africa by a Western audience familiar with nature and travel documentaries or Kenyan novels. *(No1:1-2)*

**Authenticity ~ The Old Ways**

McCall Smith’s fourth major strategy for the creation of tradition and authenticity is in the honouring of ‘the old Botswana ways’ by both insiders and outsiders. Mrs Curtin, the American mother of the missing boy ‘with an African Heart’,

‘came to Africa twelve years ago. I was forty-three and Africa meant nothing to me…a hotchpotch of images of big game and savannah and Kilimanjaro rising out of the cloud…famines and civil wars and pot-bellied half naked children staring at the camera, sunk in hopelessness.’

Having spelt out the Western stereotype of Africa so often seen on television the author then challenges it as Mrs Curtin continues with her respect for a culture of manners:

‘I had never been happier in my life. We had found a country where the people treated one another well, with respect, and there were values other than the grab, grab, grab which prevails back home…’ *(TG:25.27)*

Nkosi argued that:

‘the question of a usable tradition still lies at the heart of the problem of South African literature, since the writer is engaged in a contest the nature of which gravely limits his ability to make use of the indigenous tradition. In other parts of Africa the conditions of independence have enabled the writer to turn back to the past in a more leisurely exploration of his pre-colonial heritage.’ *(No1:4)*

McCall Smith draws greatly on the usable tradition of Botswana, and the instances of the African characters, especially Mma Ramotswe, honouring old ways are too numerous to mention. Her name itself is used as evidence of structure and formality.

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63 Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p79 and Castrillon, *Invention or Reflection?* pp27and 74
‘Everybody called her Mma Ramotswe, although if people wanted to be formal they would have addressed as Mme Mma Ramotswe, rather than Precious Ramotswe, a name which very few people employed.’ (No 1: 2)

This formality is even greater in the case of her fiancé Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, whose name is endlessly repeated but whose actual forenames we never discover. African greeting rituals are also stressed. ‘Thank you,’ said Mma Ramotswe, ‘now after you have greeted Mma Makutsi in the traditional way, please, then we shall begin.’ (MBG: 216) This allegedly ‘traditional’ formality may prove ‘exotic’, and attractive to a ‘Western’ readership accustomed to familiarity in forms of address. Mma Ramotswe travels to a prosperous farm to investigate a case of poisoning with some trepidation, since to go to a house under false pretences was:

‘a breach of the fundamental principles of hospitality…she curtseyed to the old woman. This pleased her hostess, who saw that here was a woman who understood the old ways …’ (MBG: 144 –146)

A simple question about whether Mma Ramotswe comes from Gabarone, ‘… was a polite way of finding out where allegiances lay…this woman with her high status in tribal society would be interested in these matters.’ (MBG: 144 –146) By such devices the author builds up the picture of a society in which people are known and can be placed and located, with accepted forms of address, norms of behaviour and established traditions stretching back in time. He is here enacting Hobsbawm’s definition of ‘invented tradition’ as:

‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implied continuity with the past,’ and includes traditions which appear or claim to be old but are often quite recent in origin. 64

Ranger in his fascinating examination of this invention of tradition in colonial Africa, analyses the complex and organic interplay of indigenous and imported traditions that took place in the colonial encounter. Not only were invented traditions such as military uniforms, British style public schools, and celebrations of events such as the coronation, imported from Europe and locally re-incarnated to re-inforce the position of the small population of inexperienced British administrators, but ‘their own respect for tradition disposed them to look with favour upon what they took to be traditional in Africa. They set about to codify and promulgate these traditions, thereby transforming flexible custom into hard prescription.’

A prime example of this reverse invented tradition is the Boy Scout Movement, perceived as quintessentially English, but devised by Baden Powell from the codes and skills of the Matabele, and since re exported all over the world. 65

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64 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, p 1
65 Ibid., pp 211 – 259, especially pp 212 and 226
McCall Smith, in his invented country, continually privileges the alleged ‘old ways’ of Botswana, the manners, greetings and courtesies, as an example to the less gracious West. ‘The American woman took the basket politely, in the proper Botswana way of receiving a gift – with both hands. How rude people were who took a gift with one hand, as if snatching it from the donor. She knew better.’(TG:217)

He acknowledges in the novels that not all people honour the old ways, but there is no doubt where his approval lies. Hobsbawm claims convincingly that ‘custom cannot afford to be invariant, because even in traditional societies life is not so.’ 66 Adaptation to changing circumstances, rather than automatic adherence to what might be seen as tradition, is paradoxically the strength of traditional society. Mma Ramotswe, when faced with puzzling modern circumstances such as husbands wanting to be present at the birth of their child, falls back unquestioningly on the old Botswana morality as ‘simply being right’, (MBG:75) and in his mission to convey the universal value of courtesy and manners McCall Smith may be similarly guilty.

Isabel Allende, an expatriate novelist writing about her native Chile, realises that: ‘having lived outside the country for so long, I tend to exaggerate the virtues of our national character and forget the disagreeable aspects… I have constructed an idea of my country the way you fit together a jigsaw puzzle, by selecting pieces that fit my design and ignoring the others.’ 67

McCall Smith likewise has a stated reluctance to write the dark side of his own or his invented country. The Botswana novels have been compared with ‘the bleak soul searing affairs of Coetzee and Malan’ and greeted as ‘something new out of Africa…a feel good series resonating with optimism, good deeds, traditional values and general niceness.’ 68 The author himself says, ‘I know there’s a place for the bleak side, but there is also a role for fiction which draws attention to the positive side of Africa and her people.’ 69 He has ‘publicly denounced Scottish miserabilism, with its literary tradition of drug induced wretchedness and body strewn industrial landscapes,’ 70 and is at the fore of a more optimistic movement with his view that most people ‘are fundamentally decent and benevolent.’71

66 Hobsbawm and Ranger, Invention of Tradition, p2
67 Allende, My Invented Country p178
68 Boynton, ‘A Writer’s Life’, p1
69 Smallhorne,‘The Heart of Africa’, p28
70 Scott, ‘Publishers cash in…’ p1, quoting the author in interview in South Africa
71 Fettes, ‘A Gentleman and a Scholar’, p2
Anthony Minghella, the director of the forthcoming Mama Ramotswe television films, ‘…was enchanted by the character of Precious Ramotswe, and the sly humour of McCall Smith’s writing, his deft evocation of a culture.’ 72 As we shall see in Chapter 4 it is nothing new for writers of detective fiction to invent a society for their hero to operate in and McCall Smith has created a seductive portrait of Botswana. He has based this portrait on personal experience and the incorporation of historical, political and economic facts, but little in-depth research. Though readers who know Botswana say they recognise it clearly, it is still an idealised re-invention privileging the positive achievements of that country. It contains minimal references to and significant silences about the prevalence of HIV / AIDS, women and child abuse, and prejudice against internal and external difference. There being little violence, no sex, no profanity and no murder in these novels, these issues are raised gently through the individual stories of ‘ordinary people’ and through the device of the Detective Agency, both of which I shall now go on to examine.

72 Minghella, quoted on all the book covers of the series.