

Writing is a conversation

Alexander McCall Smith speaks to Mary Hogarth about the No1 lady detective, cappuccinos and how to write a novel

Not many people know I make a very good cappuccino, play the bassoon badly in an amateur orchestra called The Really Terrible Orchestra and like to get up at 3am to write. Early in the morning is the best time for me to write. Rising at 5am means it is possible to pen 2000 or 3000 words a day. Sometimes I go back to bed after a few hours of writing. Then I start again.

Since retiring from my post as professor of law at Edinburgh University, I have devoted myself completely to writing. Penning four or sometimes five novels a year means a tight schedule to work to and breaks all the rules of publishing. It keeps me on my toes. As does an interest in human affairs and a fascination with people; such curiosity provides endless material for fiction.

Travel is frequently on the agenda – lots of book festivals and signings – which means that I have to battle to get the time to write. Being a big tea fan I never leave home without my trusty teapot and – just like many of my characters – always make time for tea.

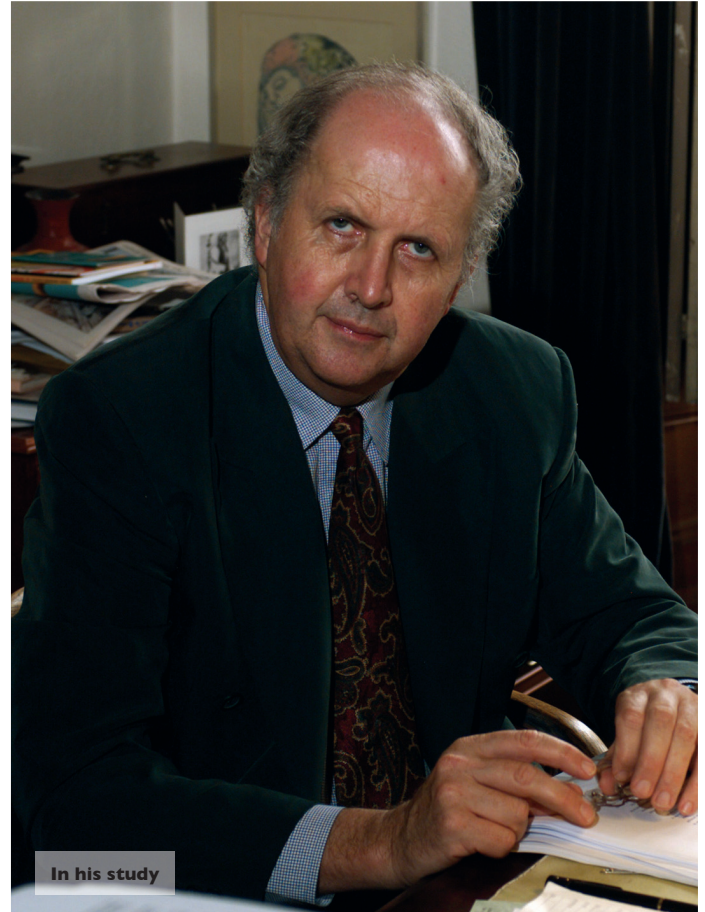
Writers must work where they can. Often I find myself writing in trains or airport lounges. I can

write in most situations, but my favourite place to work is in my study at home in Edinburgh, surrounded by books with music in the background. It's incredibly peaceful.

Where does my inspiration come from? One really shouldn't ask a writer that, or you might get the answer, which Woody Allen once gave: 'There's a man in China who sends them to me.' But if pressed I would say observation of human life. The idea of writing about a Botswana lady came to me many years ago when living for a year in Swaziland, spending some time over in Botswana.

On a walk through Mochudi, north of Gaborone, I met a woman who gave a chicken to the people with whom I was staying and I remember thinking at the time: This is a remarkable woman – I wonder what her life story is.

Although this never emerged, that meeting made me think that one day I would like to write about such a woman – resourceful, amusing and intelligent. Then, out of my subconscious, knocking on the door came Precious Ramotswe, proprietor of the No 1 Ladies' Detective



In his study

Photo: Graham Clark

Agency. I wrote a short story about her, and then discovered that I liked her and wanted to continue to record her life.

Mma Ramotswe, soon joined by her trusted assistant Mma Makutsi, has now been talking to me for more than 10 years. Set in Botswana, The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency has evolved into a series – each instalment eagerly awaited or so my fans tell me. Some of the books have also been televised. However, this wasn't the intention when I began the first book. I had no idea that years later I would be writing volume 12 of what was initially a one-off story.

My conversation with Mma Ramotswe has been so fascinating and I have been very happy to continue it.

Similarly another series, 44 Scotland Street, appears in daily episodes in *The Scotsman* newspaper before being published in

book form. It is great fun writing about the characters in Scotland Street. Readers write to me with suggestions for the stories. The Corduroy Mansions series also made its debut as a daily online serial with the *Daily Telegraph*, and the narrative just develops as I go along.

Even during childhood I loved to tell stories. Aged eight I sent my full first manuscript to a publisher, although I can't even remember what it was about, but they wrote back with a very encouraging letter. Without that I would probably have given up.

Like many writers, my novels evolve from a few ideas. I jot down ideas in notebooks, and by the time I actually start to write a book I have a very good idea of what I am going to write about, and how the plot will develop.

The hardest part of a novel is

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Playing the bassoon

Photo: Chris Watt

Alexander McCall Smith cont

that first chapter. Once it's done, the book should flow quite well.

I am fortunate in having ideas and being able to construct tales quite easily. All the books are constructed in my mind, probably somewhere in my subconscious, and come out fully formed on to the page. As a result, I rarely redraft. Often I won't know what path a character is going to take until the evidence appears there before me.

Characters have to be consistent in their traits and actions yet I don't find it difficult to remember key aspects of the characters' personalities. For the most part they are like good friends. In Scotland Street, for example, it would be hard to forget Irene's or Bertie's character traits.

Good listening and observational abilities are among the skills a fiction writer needs. They

learning curve. I always urge people to move on to the next manuscript. Rather than fret over why the first manuscript is not getting anywhere, move on to the next. Each subsequent attempt should be better.

A novice planning to start a novel should begin on a small scale, perhaps first writing up the idea in the form of a short story, which can then be developed into a book. The best way for novices to get published is with patience and persistence.

My first exploits into writing began with non-fiction and academic texts typed out on a typewriter. That first break into fiction came via an agent who helped me find a publisher for my first novel, *The White Hippo*, a children's book published in 1980. The euphoria of getting my first book published hasn't yet been trumped. It is such an important moment – it never feels so exciting and fulfilling as it does that first time.

Having an agent is essential for anyone who is serious about getting published. Remember this can become the closest and most important relationship in your business life. Finding one is not easy, but start with getting hold of a copy of *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* and select an agent to approach – make sure you choose the right person who specialises in your particular genre. Also I think it is sometimes useful to have a mentor, or someone that one can use as a sounding board.

Another crucial factor is wide reading. Writers must study the work of others. Who do I read? I have always been a great admirer of the Indian writer RK Narayan, and I have also been greatly influenced by the work of the poet WH Auden. *The Collected Shorter Poems of WH Auden* accompanies



Photo: Graham Clark

Getting an agent is crucial

Keep yourself in the background. Let your characters do the thinking and talking

are crucial, as is the ability to put aside one's ego. It is really important that one keeps oneself in the background. Let your characters do the thinking and talking. Many people who might otherwise be able to write perfectly well ruin everything by allowing themselves to creep into their writing.

It is important to remember that there are many mistakes to be made in the early stages of a writing career. Writing is a

me on most of my journeys. His words are a constant source of inspiration.

Many writers also find the support of members of a local writing group useful.

In today's society it is increasingly important to have a strong online presence – you could even write your first story in blog form. The use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter can help writers to communicate with their readers. But remember, if your work is strong enough then the writing should be able to speak for itself.

I am currently working on the next book in the Isabel Dalhousie series, *The Forgotten Affairs of Youth*, and – at the same time – on

the next 44 Scotland Street series, *Bertie Sings the Blues*, which is appearing in daily instalments in *The Scotsman*. It will be published in book form in the summer.

For those *Writers' Forum* readers who don't have access to the paper, I will leave you with a short extract:

The question of birth order

Elspeth Harmony's triplets arrived in the order that was to dog them for the rest of their lives: first, second and third. They could not do otherwise, of course, but this was to determine so much for the three boys: emotional development, confidence, academic achievement, marriage, and ultimately – with that extraordinary synchronicity that nature can sometimes muster – the leaving of this world. Had the hospital not noted their order of appearance, and recorded it on the tiny bracelets fixed round the ankle of each by a nurse, then it would have been chance, rather than seniority, that governed how they fared in relation to one another. But these bracelets were put on, and the die, so to speak, was cast.

• *A Conspiracy of Friends* by Alexander McCall Smith, the third book in the Corduroy Mansions series, will be published in May. The prequel *Precious and the Monkeys* will be published in July, and *Bertie Plays the Blues*, the latest in the Scotland Street series, will be published in August, all by Polygon.

