

Sleuthing at a relaxed pace

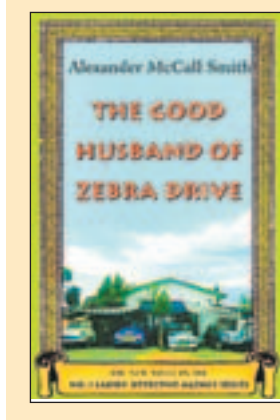
'Good Husband' latest instalment in 'No. 1 Ladies' Detective' series

THE GOOD HUSBAND OF ZEBRA DRIVE
by Alexander McCall Smith
(Knopf, 213 pages, \$29.95 hardcover)

By CATHERINE THOMPSON

Lizards are still skittering through Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's vegetable patch, sun birds still grace the branches of the mopipi tree and Precious Ramotswe still sips countless cups of red bush tea while doling out her delicious combination of wisdom, humour and understanding of human nature in this eighth instalment of Alexander McCall Smith's bestselling series, "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency."

Fans of the series — and they are legion, with the books having sold 14 million copies in 39 languages worldwide — have been eagerly awaiting the chance to revisit the detective agency



Alexander McCall Smith was born Aug. 24, 1948 in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He now resides in Scotland. In addition to his 'No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency' books, he writes the Sunday Philosophy Club series, set in Edinburgh, about a sleuth named Isabel Dalhousie. Smith has also written three comical books about Professor Dr. Moritz-Maria von Igelfeld, a German expert on Portuguese irregular verbs, plus at least 14 works of fiction for children.



grassland and starkly beautiful landscapes of acacias and thorn trees are described in spare, simple terms and McCall displays an obvious affection for the people of Botswana, a tiny landlocked country of three million just north of South Africa.

This book may be the best yet in the series.

The simple mysteries that the detective agency is called on to investigate — a wayward husband, pilfering from a company's supply cupboard, and an unexpected series of deaths at a hospital — are folded into the domestic foibles and adventures of the main characters.

The pace is as gentle — and as pleasant — as an evening stroll, with deceptively simple language and plots that are interlaced with Smith's easy-going humour and a pervasive sense of humble decency and the inherent goodness of most human beings.

• *The Record*

in Gaborone, capital of Botswana.

McCall Smith, a professor emeritus of medical law at the University of Edinburgh and the author of dozens of books from children's stories to textbooks on ethics and the law, was born in Africa, in what is now Zimbabwe. He helped establish the law faculty at the University of Botswana, and regu-

larly returns there.

As always, Botswana is as much a character in the books as the somewhat peppery Mma Makutsi, Mma Ramotswe's assistant, or as Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, possibly the best mechanic in Botswana, or as his two feckless apprentices.

Its clear vaulting sky, sweeping

Four small books about four very big books

PLATO'S REPUBLIC: A BIOGRAPHY
by Simon Blackburn
(181 pages, \$22.95)

THE QUR'AN: A BIOGRAPHY
by Bruce Lawrence
(231 pages, \$22.95)

ON THE WEALTH OF NATIONS
by P.J. O'Rourke
(242 pages, \$24.95)

MARX'S DAS KAPITAL: A BIOGRAPHY
by Francis Wheen
(130 pages, \$22.95)

All published by Douglas & McIntyre in its **Books That Shook the World** series. Another title in the series, **The Bible: A Biography**, by Karen Armstrong, will be published this fall.

By ALEX GOOD

Several years ago, "aliteracy" became a bit of a buzz word to describe a new social trend. The aliterate were people who were able to read, but who simply chose not to. Reading took too much time, or was otherwise not worth the effort.

Always ready to exploit a niche, publishers responded with tiny books constituting an aliterate revolution. Classics began appearing in abridged form and door-stopper biographies shrank to a series of "brief lives." It was literature for the aliterate, fast food for bluffers, the canon for dummies.

There may have been benefits to this development. Edited versions or samplers of long works such as Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" might stimulate readers to look for more. And a lot of books, especially modern academic biographies, could stand to be put on a diet. The risk being run was the loss of context, and the drift toward a curt superficiality.

In the same vein, a series of "Books That Shook the World" was recently launched. It aims to provide primer-style introductions or "biographies" of some of the landmarks in world literature — written by personalities such as Karen Armstrong (the Bible), Christopher Hitchens (Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Man") and P. J. O'Rourke (Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations").

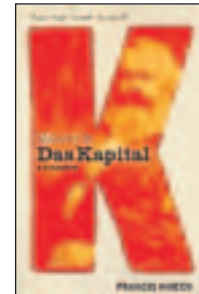
Two things might be said about the titles selected for treatment: They are books that (a) everyone interested in such a series has heard about, but (b) almost no one interested in such a series has actually read. And not without reason. They are repetitive, prolix and often obscure.

Some are also sacred books, obviously in the case of the Bible and the Qur'an, but almost as much so in the case of Marx's "Kapital," Smith's "Wealth of Nations," Plato's "Republic" and Darwin's "Origin of the Species." What this means is that these are works that have taken on a life of their own. Through generations of interpretation, their ideas have so entered the collective consciousness that they are now a part of us, even if we have no acquaintance with their original expression. All the more reason then to get introduced.

The first thing to note is that these are both timely and personal introductions.

Bruce Lawrence, whose book is both the most devout to its source as well as the least interesting, doesn't tell a single narrative "biography" of the Qur'an, but rather a series of thematic vignettes illustrating the interpretation of the Qur'an in different historical and cultural contexts. He also mentions Osama bin Laden quite a bit.

Simon Blackburn gives the impression he doesn't much care for Plato's Republic but is trying to be objective. Again the attempt is made to place



Plato's idea in various contexts. Blackburn mentions George W. Bush and Tony Blair quite a bit. And as for P. J. O'Rourke, his book talks a lot about P. J. O'Rourke himself.

For some reason (one suspects marketing, but there must be more), "On the Wealth of Nations" seems far more concerned with O'Rourke than Smith.

While a picture of Marx graces the cover of Marx's "Das Kapital," a wise-looking fellow in a toga is on the cover of Plato's "Republic," and some Arabic script for The Qur'an (no need to go looking for trouble there!), the cover of "On the Wealth of Nations" leaves out the name of Adam Smith and has a photograph of P. J. It's also the only book that lists the author's own works

above the other books in the series opposite the title page. And it costs two dollars more.

It isn't worth it. O'Rourke is a glib, entertaining columnist, but his shtick wears thin quickly. And one can't escape the feeling he's only using Smith's text as a line on which to hang gags about the relevance of all of this to various aspects of contemporary life. Too bad, since he has read the book and is capable of making interesting observations. It's simply that his work is too padded with his own personality. "Why is 'The Wealth of Nations' so damn long?" he asks in one chapter. It is a question he might have asked of his own book.

Based on these four books, the se-

Prince de Talleyrand was a great charmer

TALLEYRAND - BETRAYER AND SAVIOUR OF FRANCE
by Robin Harris
(John Murray, 436 pages, \$50 hardcover)

By WILLIAM CHRISTIAN

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand (1754-1838) was a bishop, an apostate, a politician, an embezzler, a libertine, possibly the greatest gourmet in France, and supremely charming.

He was not only a great diplomat, but one of the greatest diplomats, although he never saw a negotiation or a treaty out of which he could not make an immense fortune.

Sometimes he made that fortune by betraying the wishes of whomever



happened to be his political master at the time, but he rarely betrayed France.

Political masters came and went,

but the Prince de Talleyrand went on forever. He served Louis XVI, the revolutionaries who overthrew and executed him, the council that replaced them, Napoleon who replaced the council, and Louis XVIII when he was restored to the throne. On more than one occasion, he saved France from chaos.

The prince was an extraordinary man and it would require a gifted historian to convey the texture and details of his life in 400 pages.

This book is solid and workmanlike, but you aren't charmed by Charles-Maurice in the same way that almost everyone who met him was.

• *William Christian is a political science professor at the University of Guelph.*

IN 20 LINES OR LESS . . .



CHILDREN
For You, Daddy
by Jan G. Hansen (Gooseneck Press, www.gooseneck.com, \$6 softcover)

Looking for the perfect gift for Dad, the one that he will cherish long after the kids have grown up and left the nest?

Jan Hansen of Kitchener, a school vice-principal currently on leave, has produced a story about the heroic things that a child would do for his or her dad. It's a great little literacy project that both adults and children can collaborate on and the result would make a perfect gift for Father's Day.

The book encourages young artists to create a cover as well as illustrate the words on each page, based on seven fairy tales listed on the back cover. And they'll be proud to add their own names to the "Illustrated by . . ." cover and title pages.

— *Brenda Hoerle*



NON-FICTION
The Last to Die: Ronald Turpin, Arthur Lucas and the End of Capital Punishment in Canada
by Robert J. Hoshowsky (Dundurn, 222 pages, \$24.99 hardcover)

This essential bit of Canadiana briefly relates the life, crimes, trials and execution of Ronald Turpin and Arthur Lucas — the two men who, at Toronto's Don Jail on Dec. 11, 1962, were the last to die by judicial hanging in Canada.

Debate over the fairness of the trials, as well as the politics and morality of the death penalty, continues to this day. Based on published reports, official documents and original interviews, Hoshowsky sheds new light on this dark and dimly understood chapter in Canadian history. Also included is a photo section with mug shots and gruesome pictures of the crime scenes.

— *Alex Good*

CRIME FICTION

The Return
by Hakan Nesser (Doubleday, 322 pages, \$29.95 hardcover)

Chief Inspector Van Veeteren returns in "The Return" to solve the mystery surrounding a body that has been found in the woods with its head, hands and feet cut off.

He soon finds himself following a thread of murder that runs back over 30 years. Even though Veeteren is weakened and woozy from recent stomach surgery, he is able to close the case in dramatic fashion, thanks largely to his uncanny intuition into all things criminal.

Nesser, a Swedish author, shows why he is enjoying a fast-growing reputation in mystery circles in this swift and clever puzzler, which includes some of his more complex exercises in narrative tease.

— *Alex Good*



WHAT THEY'RE READING



Carl Keyzers is a retired senior living in Waterloo. He recently read:

CREEPERS

by David Morrell (CDS Books, 388 pages, \$9.99 softcover)

"David Morrell is a Kitchener-born writer whose books reportedly sell in the millions. Creepers is easily the best book I've read this year — following my two-books-a-week ratio.

"The author is very successful in conveying his fascination, since childhood, with decrepit and dilapidated buildings. The kick in exploring these (and there are many enthusiasts from all layers of society) comes from entering and exploring the near-empty rooms with caved-in stairways and ceilings.

"In 'Creepers,' Morrell weaves a skillful page-turner with plenty of violence and threats in the semi-darkness, which is full of inbred cats with weird tails, bats, spiders and hiding places for those in conflict with the law. Add in an eccentric former hotel owner who installs secret doorways, elevators and walls, and the reader is kept on edge.

"This is a very good read with plenty of action and intrigue. It will certainly make you decide to stay out of that kind of building."

BOOKMARKS

• **Tomorrow** - 2 - 4 p.m. at UW School of Architecture, 7 Melville St., Cambridge. Launch of **'Proudly She Marched, Vol. II'**, by Anne Killin, about the Women's Royal Canadian Navy Service training base in Galt. For details: 519-746-0648.

JUST ARRIVED

FICTION

• **'Between Trains'**, by Barry Callaghan (McArthur & Co. \$29.95 hardcover) - 21 stories (some very short) by the Toronto writer. From the publisher: "Callaghan's stories are told in the stillness that is like the stillness of the hour between trains."

NON-FICTION

• **'Becoming the Kind Father - A Son's Journey'**, by Calvin Sandborn (New Society, \$18.95 softcover) - Sandborn, a B.C. journalist and lawyer, tells how he came to terms with buried feelings and rage caused in part by his relationship with his alcohol-fuelled father. From the publisher: "The macho society that held John Wayne as a role model has created an emotional wasteland where eighty per cent of men are unable to accurately express their feelings, and where that same percentage feel estranged from their fathers."

BEST SELLERS

Compiled based on sales reported by 250 independent Canadian booksellers for the week ending June 2. Bracketed figures indicate number of weeks on list.

HARDCOVER FICTION

- (2) **A Thousand Splendid Suns** - Khaled Hosseini
- (7) **The Children of Hurin** - J.R.R. and Christopher Tolkien
- (3) **The Quest** - Wilbur Smith
- (4) **Divisadero** - Michael Ondaatje
- (36) **For One More Day** - Mitch Albom
- (7) **The Good Husband of Zebra Drive** - Alexander McCall Smith
- (9) **On Chesil Beach** - Ian McEwan
- (5) **Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment** - Deepak Chopra
- (5) **The Yiddish Policeman's Union** - Michael Chabon
- (4) **The 6th Target** - James Patterson

HARDCOVER NON-FICTION

- (25) **The Secret** - Rhonda Byrne
- (14) **A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier** - Ishmael Beah
- (33) **The God Delusion** - Richard Dawkins
- (2) **The Assault on Reason** - Al Gore
- (5) **God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything** - Christopher Hitchens
- (7) **The Brain That Changes Itself** - Norman Doidge
- (11) **Infidel** - Ayaan Hirsi Ali
- (8) **The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating** - Alisa Smith & J.B. MacKinnon
- (5) **Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life** - Barbara Kingsolver
- (6) **28: Stories of AIDS in Africa** - Stephanie Nolen

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