Alexander McCall Smith

Hello. I'm Alexander McCall Smith. I'm the author of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series of books and various other books. I do quite a number of series in fact: there's the Botswana series, *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency,* as I've said; there's the *Scotland Street* series, set in Edinburgh; there's my *Isabel Dalhousie* series, set in Edinburgh as well; and a new series, which is the *Ulf Varg* series, set in Sweden. I'd like to say a little bit about that, and have a reading from that, as we go through this.

I'd like to send my best wishes to the virtual Book Festival. I'm sorry that we're not meeting in the flesh. I hope that we get back to normal before too long, in that we'll be able to resume the sort of contacts that you have at a book festival, which is always a wonderful thing, for the author to meet the readers of the books in person. But I feel we're still doing this, even if we're doing it courtesy of a camera.

So let's start by looking at the most recent book that I have had published, which is called *The Talented Mr Varg*. It's got a very attractive cover there. I take a great interest in cover design. The artist has done a marvellous job there, putting Ulf's footprints across the front of the book, because Ulf Varg (who is the central character of this series) is a Swedish detective, whose name means Wolf Wolf. Ulf is wolf in Danish and Varg is wolf in Swedish. So he's Wolf Wolf. So the wolf footprints are quite appropriate there.

The series is called *The Department of Sensitive Crimes* series. The first book had that title and this new one is volume 2 in the series. Ulf lives in Malmo. He is your typical Swedish detective, in that he has the issues that Swedish detectives in fiction, if we believe fiction, have. So he's depressed. His dog, Martin, who is hearing impaired, is the only dog in Sweden who can lip read in Swedish. He is also depressed. Martin has Seasonal Affective Disorder but he, like his owner, is receiving therapy.

Ulf is concerned with very small crimes, very small issues. This is Scandanavian blunk. It's not Scandanavian noir. Scandanavian noir has all sorts of exciting things happening in it, lots of bodies and whatnot. We don't have that in Scandanavian blunk. All the crimes, the issues, are very very small ones that Ulf deals with. They're sensitive ones, hence the name of *The Department of Sensitive Crimes*.

In this particular book, we start off – and I'd like to read a little excerpt from it – we start off with Ulf going to group therapy. He's there with a number of people in this group therapy session. The chapter's called In Defence of Stereotypes. It's just a little excerpt to give you some sense of the flavour of this series of books, which is light-hearted and, I suppose, involves a certain send-up of what we expect from a

Scandanavian crime novel – which it isn't really. So there he appears, with various people, in the group therapy session. It's being run by Doctor Ebke. There are various other patients, along with Ulf Varg, one of whom is called Olaf. Here's a little exchange from this group therapy session.

Olaf said, 'I want to share something with you. I've never talked to other people about this, never.'

Doctor Ebke nodded, encouragingly.

'Well, Olaf,' he said, 'this is why we're here. The whole point of the group approach is to share the burden. That's why we call it sharing the … the burden.'

Henrietta said, 'Yes, yes. I've always believed that sharing the burden makes it lighter. It really does. That's been my experience at least.'

This appeared to please Dr Ebke.

'Henrietta's quite right, you know. It's always easier to carry something if you have others helping you. This applies to anything: a parcel; a rucksack; anything.'

Ulf frowned. How exactly could more than one person carry a rucksack? The whole point of a rucksack was that you strapped it onto your back. That was the way they were designed, and it would be impossible, surely, to get two people into those straps. They would end up facing away from one another with the rucksack suspended in between them, the straps entangled in their arms.

Olaf had more to say. 'I know I should say what I have to say quickly. I mean now, as opposed to later.'

Henrietta leaned forward. 'Yes, Olaf. I want to hear. I really want to hear.'

Olaf looked at her with concern. 'Why?' he asked. 'Why should you be so keen?'

Henrietta gave him a look of injured innocence. 'Because we want to help you,' she said. 'That's why we're here: to help you with these improper impulses of yours.'

Olaf turned to Dr Ebke. 'Improper? Who said anything about improper?'

Although the question had been addressed to Dr Ebke, it was answered by Henrietta.

'You did, Olaf. You told us about them, in your bio.'

'I didn't,' protested Olaf. 'I said I was troubled. I said troublesome thoughts.'

'No you didn't,' interjected Peter. 'Look, it's here.' He extracted the administrator's letter from his pocket and unfolded it. 'Yes, it says troubling impulses. Impulses. See? Not thoughts.'

Dr Ebke raised a hand.

'I don't think we should take an accusing tone with one another, everybody. The important thing is what Olaf says here, in our presence.'

'I'd like to know the difference between an impulse and a thought,' Peter interjected. 'Is there one, do you think?'

'It's really a question of -' began Olaf.

Peter interrupted him. 'I was asking Dr Ebke,' he said, 'not you.'

Olaf looked injured. 'You don't need to take that tone with me. It's my thoughts we were discussing.'

'Your impulses,' said Henrietta.

Ulf observed. He had his eye on Olaf and was wondering whether he'd encountered him somewhere before, professionally. It would be a tricky matter, he thought, if one of these people started to talk about having done something criminal. Would he have to act? Would he have to suddenly extract his police ID card and say, 'Enough group therapy. You're under arrest!'

So that gives you an idea of the tone of this book. Nothing terribly serious happens in it. As I say, the problems are relatively minor ones. In this one there's a possible blackmail of a very famous writer, who enjoys a reputation as a very tough character; hard drinking character who does all sorts of Hemmingway-type things. And the question is, is he really like that or is he rather different inside? So Ulf gets involved in that. So that's just being published round about now.

At the same time I'm busy writing volume 21 of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series. That's going to be called *How To Raise An Elephant*. There's an expression that you sometimes hear, you hear it being used in Africa, talking about *It takes a whole village to raise a child*, which is quite an interesting idea; and I think says something about how we're responsible for one another and how children are raised in community, rather than individually in many circumstances. So that's volume 21 of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series. I have no idea when I started that series, that I'd end up writing that many books about Mma Ramotswe. I've enjoyed my long literary conversation with her very much indeed. The problem is that I get involved in these serial novels, that are all in series. You write one and you get caught up in the next one and you want to go back to a conversation with the same characters. It's very enjoyable for the author.

So I'm doing that and I'm also writing the next *Scotland Street* novel. That features a number of characters of whom I'm particularly fond, especially little Bertie who's one of my favourite characters. He's a little boy who has a major 'pushy-mother' problem. Bertie's mother is very, very difficult. And people keep writing to me saying - when is Bertie going to get a break; when is Bertie going to be relieved of this terrific pressure that his rather ambitious mother puts on him? The answer is I'm bringing some relief to Bertie, in that his mother's gone off to do a PHD in Aberdeen, which will help. But he still has, poor chap, he still has issues. Bertie has been six for eight years. I kept him as a very young character. And people keep asking me about when Bertie is going to have a birthday. The answer is we don't really get around to it. So Bertie remains suspended in that rather nice stage that he's at.

So those are the books that I write. I also write short stories. I've done a book recently called *Pianos and Flowers*, in which I've written stories around old photographs. I very much enjoyed doing that. You take the old photograph and then you try to imagine what is going on in the photograph, which could be an orphan photograph; nobody knows who's in it, where it comes from or whatever. So you create a story around that. I've done several books of that nature. I did a book called *Chance Developments*, which was like that, then *Pianos and Flowers*, and I'm writing another one at the moment.

I also write poems and I act as a librettist for composers. I'm doing some of that at the moment. I love writing the words for songs, for choirs, or whatever. So quite a number of my poems have been set to music by various composers with whom I work. But then I also write poems which are used in the books. So in every one of my *Scotland Street* books there's a poem at the end, which I write as if written by one of the characters, Angus Lordie. Right at the end of the book there's a poem in which Angus will be thinking about, often about, his feelings for Scotland, his thoughts on his country and his city. I will be having a collection of my poetry published later on this year.

I thought I might read three poems to you, which demonstrate the sort of thing that I write when I'm meeting poetry. The first one is one which I wrote on an aeroplane. I often write on aeroplanes. I find that I can when I'm touring. I can get quite a lot done on a plane. I was on a plane, a couple of years ago, and I was listening to the announcements that were being made on the public address system on the plane and realised that a rather sterile form of English was being used; rather odd aviation English, which involved all sorts of circumlocutions. So they'd say things like, 'At this time we're commencing our descent.' Rather than saying, 'We're now going to land.' That sort of thing. So it's a rather sterile English. It's not a very attractive form of the language which is used. And I found myself wondering what it would be like if a pilot started to speak poetically when he addressed his passengers from the flight deck. Why not? What would it sound like? I wrote a poem called *The Language of Pilots*, in which I explore that rather ridiculous possibility.

Here it is - *The Language of Pilots*.

They speak with high authority. Air rooms and wings are responsive to their touch. Their words are functional too. But why, I wonder, should a pilot not be a poet too and say, 'We now descend, at last, through banks of cloud, white fields as wide as any ocean, at least when viewed from where we are, a few moments ago were. For it is Bernoulli's principle that lifts and keeps us here, between the patient earth below and this empty soaring sky. Ladies and gentlemen, rain falls in distant veils. Look from your windows, to the starboard side of this metalled tube we call an aircraft. Look out there and see the rain, the grey-white shafts of rain. Do you know *that those whisps of cloud you see up above are crystals of ice, falling like gossamer. Did you know that? Now please about your waists affix the belts you must, as slowly towards the earth we drop to land's embrace, your belts adjust. We are a little late. But what are a few minutes? Nothing more, here and there. Not much, I think. Goodbye and take with you the things you brought, your few possessions. Goodbye until we meet again and once more we carry you on wings of steel, on wings of steel to places you would wish to go. Goodbye, dear friends. It matters not whether you are a member of the loyalty scheme we've got. We love you all as parents love their children, equally. Remember that and please come back. Goodbye again. And cabin crew, unbar the doors, let light be seen, secure what needs securing and cross-check, whatever that might mean. Goodbye, for soon these great engines on landing will be silenced. As will I.'*

So that's *The Language of Pilots*, of a poetic pilot.

Here's a poem that I wrote for somebody in the United States. I was asked to write a birthday poem for a Reader, and I wrote a series of poems, four poems, about books. I'd like just to read one section of that, that particular offering, which is called *On The Bedside Table*. This short poem really talks about the books that we may have on our bedside table. Many of us have quite a pile of books on our bedside table, that we try to get through. Sometimes they remain there for a long time and often, I'm afraid, are unread. But nonetheless it's aspirational we want to read them. This poem, I suppose, concentrates on the idea of those books we had as children, the books of our childhood and how we might wish to pass them on to our children, in due course, and introduce our children to the books that we loved. So it's a hymn of praise to childhood's books. It starts off by reflecting on what else you would find on the bedside table. You'll see this as we go into it.

On The Bedside Table

Pray that, in our later years, on our bedside table there will be more books than jars of pills. Pray that when we dim the light, it is on a world of complex plots rather than one of rancour. Pray that we will still believe it important, that the heroine should still marry the hero. Pray that to our children, we shall still give those books we ourselves loved when young, that the dish should still run away with the spoon in an unwise elopement, that the velveteen rabbit will never be made less tragic by prescription antibiotics, that pirates will still walk the plank rather than be given the benefit of the doubt, that at the end of the day Scout and Jem will still be read to by Atticus Finch, that mice and men, and great white whales, will frolic in their elements. Pray for all of that and for that device, the book, our beloved companion and our friend.

Now a final poem is called *Love Lost*. That is about the power of love and, indeed, of agape. Agape, of course, is that form of general, universal love of humanity that can be so important in our lives.

Love Lost

A proper winter reminds us of the attractions of months when it never gets truly dark, when newspapers might be read outside at midnight or close enough. If only the news of the day, by then, were not so stale. A cold blast from a thoroughly northern quarter brings nostalgia for better behaved winds from the south. Winds which, at the end of their journey, still retain some memory of those regions, where it is not quite so important that windows should close to with a tight fit. What we do not have we remember we once had. Innocence glimpsed in others reminds us of the time when our own consciences were clear. Birdsong, heard on a still morning, brings to mind the memory that once the skies were filled with birds; and there were hedges and unruly places for them to nest in, as the seas were full of fish, and there were fishermen with boats and songs about fish and the catching of them. What we lose we think we lose forever. But we are wrong. Think of love. Love is lost; we think it gone but it returns, often when least expected; forgives our lack of attention, our fear of faith, our cold indifference; forgives us all this and more, returns and says I was always there. Love, agape, whispers, 'Mary, remember me. Don't think I've gone away forever. I am still here, with you, my power undimmed. I never left you. See? I am here.'

Thank you.