



The Lost Art of Gratitude

Alexander McCall Smith

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ISABEL DALHOUSIE - Book 6

Nothing captures the charm of Edinburgh like the bestselling Isabel Dalhousie series of novels featuring the insatiably curious philosopher and woman detective. Whether investigating a case or a problem of philosophy, the indefatigable Isabel Dalhousie, one of fiction's most richly developed amateur detectives, is always ready to pursue the answers to all of life's questions, large and small.

Isabel's son, Charlie, is now of an age--eighteen months--to have a social life, and so off they go to a birthday party, where, much to Isabel's surprise, she encounters an old adversary, Minty Auchterlonie, now a high-flying financier. Minty had seemed to Isabel a woman of ruthless ambition, but the question of her integrity had never been answered. Now, when Minty takes Isabel into her confidence about a personal matter, Isabel finds herself going another round: Is Minty to be trusted? Or is she the perpetrator of an enormous financial fraud? And what should Isabel make of the rumors of shady financial transactions at Minty's investment bank?

Not that this is the only dilemma facing Isabel: she also crosses swords again with her nemesis, Professor Dove, in an argument over plagiarism. Of course her niece, Cat, has a new, problematic man (a tightrope walker!) in her life. And there remains the open question of marriage to Jamie--doting father of Charlie.

As always, there is no end to the delight in accompanying Isabel as she makes her way toward the heart of every problem: philosophizing, sleuthing, and downright snooping in her inimitable--and inimitably charming--fashion.

The Lost Art of Gratitude Details

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Sve says

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Chazzle says

I really like this series. And it's nice to have a series that "just works", like a doughnut stick and milk; or a hot fudge sundae. Comfort food, comfort reading.

But this installment in the series is shortchanged by being termed merely "comfort reading". Yes, the flow of the writing style is very pleasant, but it's more than that. Isabel Dalhousie's musings on ethics, with her education as a doctorate in philosophy, lulls the reader, perhaps intentionally, into a sense that she's just being "academic". Yes, her musings arise from the immediate objects of her attention, and many of these issues are fairly trivial. The centerpiece of her considerations, the main issue of the book, though, is a direct confrontation of evil itself. It very much reminded me of the moral goosebumps I experienced watching a movie called *The Emperor's Club*, starring Kevin Kline. I'm trying to convey that the experience of reading this book can be felt very much. It's not just an academic exercise or another cosy mystery by any means. At least to me.

Anne Hawn Smith says

This is my favorite book of all Alexander McCall Smith's and it is for one huge reason...the poem at the end. While the book is very entertaining and Isabel has numerous situations which cause her to work through various moral dilemmas; her insecurities about Jamie, what to do with the obnoxious Professor Dove, and especially the possibly amoral Minty Auchterlonie, the book is always more about then people than the plot. Minty approaches Isabel to help her resolve two connected issues and Isabel reluctantly agrees to help, but finds herself being used by Minty to further her own schemes. Somehow, she manages to work good in the lives of the victims instead of the evil left from Minty.

Her niece, Cat, has found a new boyfriend and this is possibly the worst of all. He is a tightrope walker and stuntman and Jamie and Isabel can only shake their heads and get ready to hold up Cat when the end comes, as they pray that it will. I am always inspired by the way Isabel finds to see beyond Cat's thorniness and love her. I can almost see Cat 20 years in the future finally realizing that it was her aunt's abiding love which remained constant through the angst of her struggle for maturity.

All of this leads to the end of the book where Jamie puts to music one of the most moving poems I have read in ages.

What we lose, we think we lose forever,
But we are wrong about this, think of love –
Love is lost, we think it gone,
But it returns, often when least expected,
Forgives us our lack of attention, our failure of
Our cold indifference; forgives us all of this, and more;
Returns and says, “I was always there.”
Love, at our shoulder, whispers: Merely remember me,
Don’t think I’ve gone away for ever:
I am still here. With you. My power undimmed.
See. I am here.”

I was listening to the audio book and I could just hear God at my shoulder saying those words and I found myself playing them over and over. I read that the handwritten poem was sold at a charity auction and felt that if I had a lot of money, I surely would have bid on it, even to the point of sacrifice.

Laura says

3.5 stars, but 4.5 stars for the Brother Fox storyline. This series, by one of my favorite authors, is a good one for listening to when trying to fall back to sleep. It's not boring, but earthshaking events rarely, if ever happen. The main character is the editor of a philosophical journal, and there are a lot of "what if" questions, usually (but not always) of an ethical nature, that give me food for thought throughout.

Davina Porter narrates the audiobooks, and her voice is perfect to get across the mood of the story and characters, not to mention the occasional Scottish brogue. 4.5 stars for the audio performance straight across the board.

This is a series to read because you enjoy the characters and tone of the story. I find Alexander McCall Smith fills the bill when what I'm looking for is that settled feeling that all is right with the world. Nothing earth-shattering typically happens in any of his novels, but they'll often have you grinning or laughing, and they'll sometimes make you scratch your head and wonder a bit. He also shows quite an appreciation for the natural world (a fox is one of the minor characters in this series), and these are things that hit all of my cozy buttons, which is why he is one of my favorite authors.

Emily says

I truly enjoy Isabel Dalhousie's philosophical tangents. There are those, I'm sure, for whom they are supremely annoying and all they want is for her to shut up and get back to the story at hand. But I love the weight she gives to questions of ethics and morality that so many of us skip by blithely, completely ignorant that there is even a question to be addressed. And I love that those questions distract her from the conversation or activity right in front of her. It draws such a picture of the character, I'm sure I'd recognize her if we met in a cafe in Edinburgh someday.

Of course, a few things happen in this installment of the series, but it's not particularly plot-driven. There are some mysteries and conflicts to iron out, but they serve more to illuminate the characters than to move the story forward.

A light, enjoyable read.

For more book reviews, come visit my blog, Build Enough Bookshelves.

Richard Derus says

After all, what can one say about life that hasn't been said before? Jamie, Isabel, Grace, the aptly named Cat, and young Charlie are here presented for our quiet pleasure, going about their lives and moving through their entirely real world. The characters are deeply enmeshed in the pleasure centers of a certain type of reader, the one who smiles fondly at Ellen Glasgow or Elizabeth Goudge books when they emerge, raining the slight wisps of dust that neglect engenders, from a long shelf-slumber. McCall Smith manages to bring these characters to modern life, Trollopean in his expansion of the core characters's world but maintaining a caring and kindly focus on them.

I wish more people could achieve the feat of getting novel cycles like this published. It's not that there is anything that will win a Nobel contained in these pages, but rather that every page of them affords the voyeuristic pleasures that reading always does, but without the slightly unsavory prurience that so often seems obligatory in current sex-drugs-violence potboilers.

I expect, one day soon, to visit Edinburgh and see Isabel's "green Swedish car" tootle by me as I stand at a zebra crossing, Charlie in his carseat and Jamie animatedly making a point to a composedly driving Isabel, as I wait to cross the Royal Mile. I can think of no more precious compliment to give to Alexander McCall Smith than that.

Desislava Filipova says

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Susan says

Borrowed this review from "Mary" because it says everything I've been thinking about this series: This series is starting to grow on me. I've been confused because, although they're catalogued as mysteries, they're very gentle mysteries, having more to do with the eternal puzzle of why humans (Scottish ones,

mostly) behave as they do. Isabel Dalhousie can't restrain herself from getting to the bottom of philosophical conundrums. In this particular episode, trouble in the form of a previous Nemesis (the wonderfully named Minty Auchterlonie) comes looking for her. As always, the "mystery" part of the story is a subplot to the real ongoing plot involving Isabel, her gorgeous young bassoonist lover Jamie, their precocious toddler Charlie, her opinionated, Spiritualist housekeeper Grace, and her niece, Cat, who in my opinion would greatly benefit from psychotherapy and medication.

Alexander McCall Smith mostly does an excellent job writing from a female point of view. Really the only nit I have to pick is that Isabel's cultural and technological conservatism do not ring true in a character who is supposed to be in her early to mid-40's. To be fair, Jamie, 10 or so years her junior, is the same, so at least they're well matched. Isabel, who is independently wealthy, edits a philosophical journal from home. She insists her contributors submit their articles to her in hard copy; she does not, apparently, utilize voice mail or a cell phone. Music is a large part of her life, but it's not clear how it's played in her home. I think one of the earlier books referred to a turntable. I'd like the author, who himself is 65, to enlist a female consultant in Isabel's age range to lend a bit more credibility to her character.

Magill says

Having read the previous books in this series, I found this book to be somewhat less enjoyable than prior books in the series. I still enjoyed the visit but found the story-line with Minty and the non-resolution of ***spoiler*** lying, forgery, threats etc. to be less than satisfactory. Isabel's philosophy may allow her to feel that she has done/said the right thing, but that was essentially nothing. You know that Edmund Burke saying "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."? Well, that is how I feel about the resolution of the story. But I am glad Isabel and Jamie have inched into an engagement.

Mommalibrarian says

This book was shelved with the mysteries but it is not a mystery. Nothing happens. There is no plot, no character development, in that the characters as presented in the first chapter are completely unchanged throughout the book. There is no action or adventure. The vocabulary is not outstanding; the authors thoughts are not thought-provoking; the style is mundane.

There is some weak humor as when the lead character "imagined herself in the street, dabbing disinfectant on passers-by, as a religious proselyte might thrust a tract into a stranger's hand; absurd thought. But surely it was just as intrusive for people to buttonhole others with a view to converting them to a religion. She had thought of the massive presumption of such earnest missionaries, that they should imagine that a few words from them should be able to overturn another's whole theology or philosophy of life. Did they really expect that one would say, 'My goodness, so I've got it wrong all my life.'" This is the best humor in the entire books so now you will not have to read it.

The main character is a 'professional philosopher'; an independently wealthy middle-aged lady who edits a journal because she bought it. Every thought that passes through her mind is presented and analyzed in her head. The author unwittingly admits as much on p.252 when he has the character say, "Please pay no attention to what I say. I'm a professional philosopher, you see, and we go on about things rather a lot."

Bee says

There is a comfortable familiarity in the Isabel Dalhousie series, which always reminds me of Seinfeld and its 'show about nothing'. Because really, these books are NOT plot-heavy and sort of gently ramble their way through a series of not very exciting events and end in a mild, sputtering anti-climax. Don't get me wrong -- I love Isabel, Jamie, Charlie, Grace, Cat (sort of...), Eddie, etc., but these tend to be the books about nothing.

I don't know if I'm getting mildly bored or if this one wasn't up to the same calibre as the others, but I wasn't charmed. Isabel, instead of being endearing, annoyed me quite often. We all know she can't help but get involved in these situations that inevitably crop up, but this time (around page 125 if I recall) I wanted to scream at her. She really butted in where it was clearly none of her business and kept blathering on about how she had a moral obligation to do so. Perhaps it's just because I disagree, but this really got on my nerves. She also seemed preachier than usual, and irritatingly passive and controlled to the point of being inhuman.

I will keep reading, though. For all that, there is something quietly enjoyable about this entire series.

Joy says

I've had Alexander McCall Smith on my list of authors to read for a long time.

He is quite good. I jumped in with the sixth book in a series on a female philosopher in Edinburgh (home of Smith). Isobel is a thoughtful, kind woman and mother of an 18-month-old son.

It was as much philosophizing as story, but the story itself was realistic and interesting. I'll certainly be ready to read more -- from the beginning. Quotes

(as always): Oscar Wilde gazing in dismay at the decorations surrounding his deathbed and saying, by way of farewell, "Either that wallpaper goes or I do." More: "Treat everyone you meet as if it's their last day."

"An unpredictable person could not be predicted to be unpredictable." "The best sort of relationship, she thought, was where each person had a private area, a place of mental retreat." Last:

"People who looked after animals were by and large kind people; they simply practised kindness, unlike those who made much of it. Thus, thought Isobel, are virtues best cultivated--in discretion and silence, away from the gaze of others, known only to those who act virtuously and to those who benefit from what is done."

Beth Bonini says

The Isabel Dalhousie books adhere to a pretty tight formula, and after reading six of them in quick succession that is all too obvious. There is the slow unfolding of Isabel's personal life: comprised of Jamie (a musician 14 years her junior, also her partner and the father of her child), Charlie (her 18 month old son), Grace (her implacable housekeeper) and Cat (her difficult niece, who has a different boyfriend in every book). There is the business of philosophy, not only as it relates to Isabel's job as editor of *The Review of Applied Ethics*, but also as it informs her thinking and decisions. And then there is the "mystery" which

Isabel is drawn into in each novel. Some of the mysteries have satisfying resolutions, which Isabel can take some satisfaction in, while others remain unresolved. In one of the novels, perhaps it was this one, Jamie is composing a piece of music but can't find the right resolution for it. Music is a constant theme in the novels, not just because Jamie and Isabel are both passionate about it, although there is that; but also because, like a piece of music, there are certain motifs and lines which are repeated over and over.

The mystery in this novel involved one Minty Auchterlonie, an investment banker who "sails too close to the wind". Minty has gotten herself into trouble, both in her personal and business life, by taking too many risks and behaving in a self-interested way which ignores the needs and claims of others. She draws Isabel into her problems, and Isabel discovers that Minty is far from innocent in her own troubles -- but is she actually "wicked", as one character describes her? This novel had a personal significance for me as my husband has recently been taken advantage of in business by someone he had trusted and thought of a close friend. Over the course of the last year, we have often discussed the idea of "revenge" -- and how it then taints the injured party. There is a clear-cut example of that in this novel. But then there is the problem, difficult for most humans: Should someone who has behaved badly, unethically, be allowed to benefit from their behaviour -- and, well, get off scot-free? Do bad deeds, or indeed a bad character, always reap their own just rewards? Some people call it "karma". It's an interesting, and entirely realistic, dilemma -- and although lack of resolution may be frustrating in a novel, I believe that it is appropriate to this particular philosophical problem. At one point, near the end of the novel, Isabel decides that it is better to be naive than cynical -- even if you are sometimes taken advantage of. Throughout the novels, Isabel insists on treating people with kindness -- and also, importantly, trusting them. I tend to agree with this line of thinking . . . perhaps this is why these novels have meant so much to me.

Amanda Patterson says

Reading about Isabel Dalhousie and her family is a bit like dropping in on old friends to catch up on the latest news.

Charlie, Isabel and Jamie's son, is eighteen months old. When he is invited to a birthday party, Isabel meets Minty Auchterlonie, a financier she encountered as the editor of the Review of Applied Ethics. Minty confesses that she is troubled at work. Isabel never found Minty agreeable. However, Isabel, true to form, finds that she can't help becoming involved. Isabel is as charming as ever. She never shies away from her problems. She cajoles, questions, philosophises and investigates her way through this 6th offering from her creator.

Isabel also has to deal with Professor Dove, who tried to oust her as editor of The Review in a previous novel. They argue over one of a writer's greatest fears - plagiarism. Cat, her niece, and Jamie's former lover, is involved with a stunt man. Jamie adds to her lot by pressing her to marry him.

I have loved this series for the sheer elegance of McCall Smith's writing, the kindness of his heroine and the absence of sensationalism. However, as Jamie grows, I find that she is one of the most annoying mothers that I have come across in a book. The idyllic state of motherhood is wearing thin. There is also the sense that nothing ever happens, and this can be a little tiresome. I wish that Isabel would get really mad sometimes and do something crazy. Other than that, the book is a comfortable, predictable read.

Susan in Perthshire says

Okay, I have now officially given up on Isabel Dalhousie! Life is too short.

I enjoyed the first 3 books but since then, I have become more and more bored - and ultimately annoyed at the lack of character development. I initially liked the fact that Isabel was an older, rich, independent, intelligent woman who along with her cast of characters would develop in time. Cat, Grace, Jamie, Eddie all had real potential. There is little mystery in these novels and less and less of the Scottish dimension. Ian Rankin's Edinburgh is a living, breathing construct which adds real depth to Rebus' stories. This Edinburgh is a pale reflection of what is such an exciting, cosmopolitan city. Isabel's philosophy leaves a lot to be desired and her inner angst is just now so over the top and unbelievable that I cannot be bothered any more. Trite stories which meander aimlessly do not appeal to me. The Isabel Dalhousie books are not anywhere near as good as the Number 1 detective agency or Scotland Street. Disappointed.
