

The Subtle Pleasures of Indiscretion

By Alexander McCall Smith

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McCALL SMITH



abacus
books

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First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Abacus

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-0-349-14888-5
Trade paperback ISBN 978-0-349-14889-2

Typeset in Bembo by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Abacus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Abacus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative
in the EEA is
Hachette Ireland
8 Castlecourt Centre
Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland
(email: info@hbgi.ie)

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

This book is for Colin Mumford

I love you more than Parmesan



‘I have never bitten anybody,’ said Isabel Dalhousie. And then she added, as is sometimes necessary, given the unreliability of human memory, ‘At least, as far as I can recall.’

She addressed this remark to her husband, Jamie, a bassoonist, her soulmate and the father of her two children, Magnus and Charlie, both of whom now had a history of biting other children at nursery school.

Jamie was inclined to be tolerant. ‘Who among us has not bitten somebody?’ he asked. ‘And according to Freud – I think – biting is a normal feature of the oral stage.’

Isabel looked thoughtful. ‘The *id* can quote scripture for its own purposes,’ she said. ‘Normal, yes, but still resistible?’

‘Magnus is impulsive,’ said Jamie. ‘All small children are. We can’t expect him to resist his impulses.’

‘But he has to learn,’ insisted Isabel. ‘That’s what socialisation is all about.’

They were in the kitchen when this exchange took place.

Jamie was busy preparing a cheese soufflé that he intended to serve with a broad-bean salad, it being his turn to do the evening meal. There was a rota pinned on the back of the kitchen door, and cooking duties were shared equally. He, though, tended to do more than his fair share, frequently offering to make dinner when it was really Isabel's turn.

'I don't mind,' he said. 'You have much more to do than I have. I've only got to play a few notes from time to time ...'

Isabel smiled at the self-deprecation. Jamie was modest – unduly so; she knew how demanding it was to be a professional musician. There were long hours spent in practice and in poring over scores; there were protracted rehearsals with difficult conductors. It was work that was quite capable of taking a physical toll.

'Cooking is relaxing,' Jamie continued. 'Particularly after a stressful day. One can always chop onions mindfully.'

Isabel agreed, although she felt that it was important to bear in mind that for the majority of women, preparing family meals was an unrewarding chore, to be repeated day after day – and without much assistance from men. She was careful, though, to remind herself that there was nothing to complain about in her own circumstances. On the contrary; she and Jamie lived in a comfortable house in a leafy corner of Edinburgh; he had a job he loved, doing what he really wanted to do, which was to make music with others; and she, for her part, was her own boss as editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*, a journal she happened to own. If that were not enough, Isabel had inherited from her late father the services of a housekeeper, Grace, who kept the house clean, helped to look after the boys, and seemed to enjoy routine supermarket shopping.

Professional housekeepers have their quirks, but even by the standards of her profession, Grace was markedly unusual. Not

only did she have esoteric reading habits – she had recently made her way through a two-volume biography of the Russian mystic Madame Blavatsky – but she was also a long-term member of an enthusiastic spiritualist group. This met each Wednesday in the Spiritual Dimension Centre in the city. There, the members of the group communicated through a guest medium, with what she called ‘the other side’. The precise location of the other side was never made clear – it was referred to as a place, even if, as Grace insisted, notions of time and physicality were largely otiose in that dimension. ‘We prefer not to think in physical terms,’ she reminded Isabel, in a tone of slight reproach. ‘Place has no meaning in the world of spirit. That dimension is . . . is all spirit, you see. It involves complete disembodiment.’

‘So, we leave everything behind?’ Isabel asked. As a philosopher, she had no difficulty in grasping the notion that *concepts* had no physical form – although Plato spoke of ideas existing in their own realm, a ‘place beyond heaven’ as he put it. More prosaically, Isabel wondered whether Grace believed we ourselves might look the same on the other side. Did our physical imperfections survive? Did we age, or were the young forever young once they crossed the Styx? The beautiful might remain the beautiful, perhaps, while the less favoured stayed, disappointingly, just as they were. Of course, we might all be miraculously transformed into equal beings, shimmering *presences* freed of our earthly burden, or we might simply become *ideas*, devoid of bodily form.

Grace considered Isabel’s question and then nodded. ‘Everything is left behind.’

Isabel pondered this. ‘And men and women – are they the same on the other side?’

Grace had the answer. ‘They are beyond all that. That’s earthly business that makes no sense in the world of spirit.’

Isabel looked thoughtful. ‘There’s a case for that approach – even on this side,’ she said. ‘Don’t you think life might be easier if we spent more time on shared identity than on our differences?’

No, Grace did not think it was that simple. ‘We have to inhabit bodies,’ she told Isabel. ‘We cannot just be spirit – on this side.’ She paused. ‘But I agree with you that we should spend more time on what we have in common rather than on what keeps us apart. We’re all Jock Tamson’s bairns, after all.’

Isabel understood the reference. Jock Tamson, in Scottish parlance, was the ordinary man, the person in the street, the average citizen – Joe Average, Everyman – he had a number of names, but in Scotland he was Jock Tamson. Jock had no side to him – no pretensions to be anything other than what he was. None of us, therefore, was any better than anybody else. To say that we were all Jock Tamson’s bairns was to make a statement of egalitarianism that resonated at a fundamental level with Scottish sentiments. *Nae nonsense* – no nonsense – was another way of putting it in the Scottish vernacular.

‘The bottom line,’ Grace continued, ‘is that everybody deserves to be treated with respect . . .’

‘With decency,’ Isabel interjected. You currently heard more about respect than decency, but she felt the idea of decency still had work to do. Her mother – *her sainted American mother*, as she referred to her – had spoken to her of decency. ‘It was decency,’ she said, ‘that simple word, that put a stop to Joe McCarthy. That lawyer said to him *Have you no sense of decency?* And the American public heard that, and knew in its bones what decency meant. And that was the end of Senator McCarthy and his bullying.’

Grace agreed with Isabel. ‘Decency, yes. Respect – same thing. But nobody is anything special. That’s the bottom line.’

Isabel bit her lip. She had banned the expression *the bottom line* from the *Review of Applied Ethics*. It had become a cliché, she felt – a substitute for more nuanced expressions. It also reminded her, subversively, of things with which it had nothing to do: the red mark in the flesh that came from wearing a bikini that was too tight – there was that, of course; and then there was the line round the hull of a ship, just above water level. That was the Plimsoll line, and it marked the point beyond which a cargo ship should not be loaded. Isabel knew that because for some reason she had been taught it at school when she was eight. Many of the things we learn at that age we forget, but it seemed to her that everyone remembered this piece of knowledge that few of us are ever likely to need; and remembered, too, that it was named after Samuel Plimsoll, an earnest Victorian whose life's ambition was to get that line painted on all British ships. What a strange cause to espouse, Isabel thought. But how satisfactory to believe in something to the extent that it becomes a lifetime campaign.

Did she herself have a sustaining cause of that sort? What did she believe in? What threat could move her to chain herself to the metaphorical railings? Climate change? That was something she imagined she would willingly protest about, although there would be limits that she would not exceed. She was wary of damaging public property in order to draw attention to a cause. Apart from anything else, that could be counterproductive, as the public turned against those who resorted to such measures. She did not approve, for instance, of people who threw tomato soup over paintings in public galleries. Nor would she care to glue herself to any roadway or sit down in the middle of an airport runway – both of which struck her as positively dangerous.

Peaceful protest was another matter, and there were plenty

of causes that could potentially get her out on the streets. Serious injustice might do it. Isabel disliked unfairness of any sort. Fairness was not a difficult concept to master – even Charlie and Magnus seemed to understand it intuitively – and so there was no excuse for treating others unfairly. It was all there in the works of John Rawls, who had been a professor of philosophy at Harvard and who had proposed a theory of justice that Isabel had always found attractive. Imagine the society in which you are going to have to live, although – and this lay at the heart of the idea – you have no idea which position in that society you will occupy. As you work out what will be the opportunities offered to every member of that society, you will obviously bear in mind that you could be any one of those. You would therefore want everybody to have a fair chance – because that everybody could be you. Generalising from this, it becomes the moral duty of every society to do all that it reasonably can to help those who are disadvantaged and try and ensure they have a fair chance.

It was such a clear and defensible position, Isabel felt, and yet there were plenty of people who would disagree with Rawls. But not President Clinton, Isabel reminded herself – he gave Rawls a medal. She approved of that. Medals were the grown-up equivalent of the gold stars she awarded her boys if they behaved themselves. Three gold stars, stuck to the refrigerator door, brought the reward of a chocolate bar. It was a system that worked – the carrot element in the carrot-and-stick approach. And it would be a happy day she thought, when the stick could be put away; carrots were always preferable.

This mention of bites had its roots in the day's events. That morning, on delivering Magnus to the infant department of the nearby school, Isabel had been told that the principal wanted to have a quick word with her, if she did not mind.

No parent would dare ignore or put off such an invitation, and Isabel certainly did not. After handing Magnus over, and receiving a slightly disapproving look from the teacher, she made her way to the large door marked *Reception* behind which, in an inner sanctum, the school authorities conducted their interviews with parents. She did not have long to wait, as within a few minutes a door along a corridor was thrown open and from it emerged the imposing figure of Mrs Catriona Laurie, head of the infant department. She invited Isabel to join her in a room further down the corridor where they might have what was described as ‘a brief but serious chat’.

‘Is this about biting?’ Isabel asked Mrs Laurie.

The older woman looked at her in surprise. ‘As it happens,’ she said, ‘it is. And the fact that you anticipated that suggests the problem is one with which you are already familiar. Of course, Charlie was also inclined ...’ She did not finish the sentence. Charlie, older brother to Magnus, had in his day bitten several of his classmates and was obviously remembered for the effect that he had had on the equanimity of the class. *They think we’re a family of biters*, Isabel thought, as she listened to Mrs Laurie. *She sits in judgement on me ...*

She had to defend herself, and her boys – any mother would. ‘Charlie hasn’t bitten anybody for a very long time,’ she said. ‘I think he’s got well beyond that stage now.’

She looked at Mrs Laurie, trying to fathom what her intentions were. It was not fanciful to imagine that Magnus might even be expelled – that was a rarely used weapon but it was still there in the school armamentarium, ready to be used when psychology and all its ploys had failed. There was a limit, Isabel thought, to what manoeuvres were available when one was dealing with bad behaviour in the under-sevens. Isabel had never claimed to be a great psychologist – it was difficult

enough being a philosopher, without having to master a whole new discipline – but she did remember a few details from a couple of lectures in developmental psychology attended out of curiosity in her student days. And what stuck in her mind was the fact that seven was the age at which awareness of the feelings of others began to manifest itself in the childish mind. Before that, our world revolved around us in such a way as to allow very little room for other centres of consciousness. Jean Piaget had said seven was the milestone, and Isabel had remembered that long after she had forgotten all else from the great French psychologist's writings. And more recently, there had been a lengthy article in the *New Yorker* about the unfinalised nature of the teenage male brain. In some cases, the article said, seven came and went without any notable improvement in sensitivity, and in these cases things might be more serious. 'Teenage boys,' Isabel had read, 'do stupid things *because that is how their brains are wired*.'

It was all a question, she was told, of imbalance between the rate of development of the prefrontal cortex – the responsible part of the human brain – and the reward system, particularly the ventral striatum. She had never before heard of the ventral striatum, but was quite prepared to regard it as being responsible for a great deal of young male impetuosity and bad judgement. It might be that the urge to bite others – controlled in the case of adults – was too much to overcome when you were a five- or-six-year-old boy. If that were the case, then no matter how much one scolded the likes of Charlie and Magnus, or attempted to reason with them, one would be unlikely to eradicate undesirable behaviour until their still-developing brains had matured.

The article in which Isabel had read about the neuroscience behind this had gone on to deal with wider issues of

responsibility. The younger male brain, it argued, was wired in such a way that many young males were not fully responsible for their actions until they were in their late twenties – or possibly even beyond. That was ridiculous, thought Isabel. Theories of responsibility had to be *practical* – they had to make sense in the real world. She was prepared to accept that young men behaved inconsiderately simply because they were young men, but it would be impractical to shield them from blame until they were in their late twenties. What did the French say? *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* – to understand all is to forgive all. Well, aphorisms often sounded better in French – a language that could clothe the banal in impressive language – but one still had to be practical. Wrongdoing had to be met with a reaction, or life in society would become impossible. Determinism, which implied that everything we did was the result of factors beyond our control, might be theoretically supportable, but would simply lead to chaos if applied in the real world of human affairs.

Now, as she sat in the kitchen with Jamie, a glass of New Zealand white wine on the table in front of her, she recalled her conversation with the teacher that morning in the school office.

‘I’m afraid we have to take incidents of this nature very seriously,’ Mrs Laurie had intoned, fixing Isabel with a look that seemed to imply that she, Isabel, had bitten somebody.

Isabel looked out of the window. Did the teacher imagine that she was indifferent to the fact that her son had bitten somebody? She almost said as much, but stopped herself, and uttered an apology instead. ‘I really am very sorry about this. I’m not saying that this is the first time—’

She was not allowed to finish. ‘He’s biting at home?’

There had been an allegation – from Charlie, who had

accused his brother of biting him in the course of some minor argument of the sort that all children had. Magnus had denied the charge and accused Charlie of spitting at him in the first place. No physical evidence had been produced – there were no teeth-marks.

‘You know how little boys are,’ Isabel had replied. ‘They can be very physical.’

Mrs Laurie sighed. ‘We have to deal with this sort of thing all the time,’ she said. ‘We know that boys, in particular, can be somewhat physical. We find it helpful, though, to enquire as to the reason for instances of bad behaviour. Often, this is a result of something happening at home . . .’

The sentence was unfinished, leaving the unexpressed question hanging in the air.

Isabel drew in her breath. She felt extremely uncomfortable. The unstated implication was clear: marital tension.

‘Everything’s fine at home,’ she said quietly.

Mrs Laurie was at pains to reassure her. ‘Oh, I did not imagine that there *was* anything,’ she said. ‘It’s just that we often find that . . . domestic difficulties of some sort or other lie behind behavioural issues at school. Not always, of course, but it’s common enough.’

‘Well,’ said Isabel, ‘I don’t think that’s the case here.’

There was a brief silence. A large clock on the wall marked out the seconds with a loud tick. Then Mrs Laurie said, ‘Sometimes these things are genetic. We have to bear that in mind, I suppose.’

Isabel now told Jamie about this exchange. He turned to her, away from his task of grating cheese for the soufflé. ‘She said *what?*’ he exclaimed.

‘She said that sometimes these things are genetic.’

Jamie shook his head in disbelief. ‘Was she implying that

Magnus gets it from us? From you and me? That *we* have a history of biting people – a sort of family tradition?’

Isabel laughed. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I find this so funny. That’s the way I took it – when she first said it. I wanted to say to her: are you suggesting that my husband and I have a tendency to bite others? Of course, I didn’t say that.’

Jamie smiled. ‘One never says these things. They always occur to one far too late.’

‘I think,’ Isabel continued, ‘that she meant *innate* rather than genetic. In other words, that a tendency to bite may be a feature of the general human genome – or the genome that is particular to small boys in general, rather than the general genome – if you see what I mean.’

Jamie looked thoughtful. ‘Possibly.’

‘Anyway,’ said Isabel. ‘We left it more or less at that. She said they would watch the situation and let us know if there were any further incidents. She said that we should talk to him about it and try a bit of positive reinforcement.’

‘In other words,’ Jamie suggested, ‘we need to reward him for *not* biting?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Or tell him that if he bites people,’ said Isabel, ‘then somebody might bite him back?’

Jamie considered this. ‘There’s something to be said for that.’

Isabel wondered if there was anything in Aesop’s *Fables* that might help. Simple morality tales were a powerful way of getting a message across to children. It was, in her view, a large part of what children’s stories were all about. Virtue was rewarded; selfishness punished. It was the central plot of so many of the stories we told children. And of thought experiments in philosophy, too, she reminded herself. Peter Singer’s shallow pond was a famous instance – he asked us to imagine

what we should do if we walked past a child drowning in a shallow pool. Were we morally bound to rescue the child – even at the cost of ruining our clothes? To which question, Isabel had never met anybody who would fail to rescue the child, although such people possibly existed. But when one substituted starving people in a distant country for the child in the pool, the duty to act was by no means so universally accepted. The dilemma rumbled on through the pages of philosophical reviews, and Isabel herself had once devoted an editorial to it in the *Review*.

Now, thinking of moral tales, she remembered that Jamie had started reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to the boys. It was going down well. Charlie inherited the chocolate factory because he was modest and respectful. The other children met a fate appropriate to their vices. The thought prompted her to ask Jamie, ‘What happened to Augustus Gloop?’

He was not expecting the question, and was surprised. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘I was thinking of moral messages.’

He nodded. Isabel was always thinking of some moral conundrum or other – it was part of who she was, and he found it appealing, if sometimes a bit frustrating when it prevented her from acting decisively.

‘He was very greedy,’ Jamie replied. ‘He got sucked into a chocolate machine.’

‘Thereby joining a long list of characters from children’s stories who come to an unfortunate end,’ said Isabel.

‘Yes.’

‘Such as Hilaire Belloc’s Matilda,’ Isabel continued. ‘She was the girl who told dreadful lies. Remember her?’

Jamie frowned. ‘Vaguely.’

‘She was burned to a crisp,’ said Isabel. ‘Nobody believed her when she shouted *Fire, Fire!* They simply answered, *Little liar!*’

‘Poor girl,’ said Jamie.

‘Indeed. But every child who heard that story reached the same conclusion, you know. *Don’t tell lies.*’

‘I don’t think you should frighten children,’ said Jamie, returning to the grating of cheese. Then he said ‘Parmesan. I love it so much.’

Isabel looked at him. My beautiful Jamie, she thought. She loved *him*. She loved him so much. *I love you more than Parmesan*, she thought – and imagined, for a moment, a thought experiment in which she was faced with an awful choice between saving Jamie’s life and wiping out the world’s future supply of Parmesan cheese. It was a ridiculous notion – not the sort of thought on which any time should be wasted. And yet intrusive thoughts like that did occur from time to time, sneaking into the mind, past all defences, past all barriers. They were difficult to dispel, although there were various psychological tricks that worked, such as counting backwards from one hundred, or reciting, in reverse order, the names of Canadian prime ministers as far back as one could remember. She could get to William Lyon Mackenzie King – in his third term in office – although she often stumbled over one of them who served only a few months. She liked Mackenzie King because he was so peculiar. He was obsessed with contacting his deceased mother – turning to her at times for guidance on the running of the country. He also believed that he could communicate with his deceased dogs, seeking their advice, at séances, on a range of spiritual matters and also on important affairs of state.

‘The just society,’ Isabel once said to Jamie, ‘is created here – in the heart.’ And she placed a demonstrative hand on her chest.

Jamie agreed, although he felt that he had to point out that she had been above the middle lobe of her right lung rather than her heart at the time. A small point, he said, but one might as well get it right.