

# The DEFINITE ARTICLE

*We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week: author Alexander McCall Smith*

**The prized possession you value above all others...** My 34ft sailing boat called Puffin. I sail around the Outer Hebrides in summer wearing a white naval cap!

**The biggest regret you wish you could amend...** Discovering Australia so late in life. I first went in my mid-forties. I'm 66 now and I'd like to have spent longer there. I love its landscape and its people.

**The temptation you wish you could resist...** Bacon. I have some once a week, but I shouldn't. We're told every slice takes days off your life.

**The book that holds an everlasting resonance...** WH Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems*, which introduced me to his work in my mid-20s. I went to a reading he gave once and his flies were undone. There was a gasp as he stood up.

**The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day...** I hate piped music in restaurants, so I'd pull the plug on this painful stuff.

Right: James I of England (James VI of Scotland). Above right: a saxophone. Far right: elephants drinking in Botswana

**The pet hate that makes your hackles rise...** Unsolicited advertising phone calls.

**The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you...** To play a musical instrument well. I play the baritone saxophone badly in an amateur orchestra called The Really Terrible Orchestra!

**The film you can watch time and time again...** *The Cruel Sea* because I love the heroism of the sailors. There's a marvellous scene where they eat sausages and Stanley Baker says, 'Snorkers, good-oh!'

**The person who has influenced you most...** My old friend Dr Howard Moffat from Botswana. He's devoted his life to helping others and is an inspiration.

**The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint...** James VI of Scotland (James I of England). I'd be interested to hear how he governed Scotland when it was full of division.

**The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child...** Do what you want to do, rather than what others expect you to.

**The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity...** Morris dancing! I went to Oxford with my wife, Elizabeth, on May Day this year to watch the Morris dancers. It's so English and pagan.

**The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again...** A steam engine I had growing up in Rhodesia. You lit a meths stove to heat water to drive the engine. I have no idea what happened to it.

**The unending quest that drives you on...** To keep writing.

**The poem that touches your soul...** Auden's *Streams*, in which he describes how he falls asleep near a stream and dreams that everyone in the world is given the gift of love.

**The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase...** That my books aren't about ordinary people. The accusation is usually made by people who haven't read them.

**The event that altered the course of your life and character...** Winning a literary competition in Scotland in

1978 with a children's story, which led me to an agent in London. Without that support I might have given up.

**The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it...** I'd blow up wind farms. They're inefficient and wreck our landscape.

**The song that means most to you...** *Soave Sia Il Vento* from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* always makes me weep.

**The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions...**

I'd wake up at Belmond Eagle Island Lodge in the Okavango Delta, Botswana, and write on the veranda, watching elephants coming to drink. Then I'd have breakfast – a boiled egg, toast, marmalade and figs. I'd be with Elizabeth and our daughters Emily, 28, and Lucy, 30, and her son Douglas, who is nearly one. We'd watch wildlife, then I'd go to Atticus Books, Toronto, and buy lots of books. Lunch would be pasta in Florence, followed by a visit to the Uffizi Gallery. Dinner would be with friends at our house in

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Argyll by the sea loch. We'd cook mussels picked from the shore and I'd catch some mackerel, served with samphire picked at low tide. We'd have a bottle or two of Brunello di Montalcino red wine, as the sun sinks over Ben Hiant, the mountain on the horizon. I'd let off some fireworks just before bed.

**The happiest moment you will cherish forever...** When my publishers told me they planned to make *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* books bestsellers in 2003. I went out of the office feeling dazed – and bought a pair of shoes!

**The saddest time that shook your world...** Leaving Botswana in 1981 after spending a year there teaching. I felt a great sense of sadness because I knew I'd never live there again.

**The philosophy that underpins your life...** Be sympathetic to others.

**The order of service at your funeral...** A fanfare of trumpets followed by a reading of Auden's *The More Loving One*. Then the choir would sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica* (*God Bless Africa*). A bagpiper would play me out and there'd be whisky afterwards. I'd like my ashes scattered on a hill in Scotland.

**The way you want to be remembered...** As that chap who wrote those books.

**The Plug...** Alexander McCall Smith's *The Novel Habits Of Happiness* (Little, Brown, £17.99) is out now and *The Revolving Door Of Life* (Polygon, £19.99) is published on 13 August. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon



PHOTOGRAPHS: STUART WALLACE/NEWS SYNDICATION; ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY; REX

## PS...

*Emma Thompson and Robert Carlyle team up in comedy The Legend Of Barney Thomson – in cinemas Friday. John Simm is in Three Days In The Country at the National Theatre from Tuesday. And Tom Jones' tour returns to the UK with a show in York on Friday*



## NEXT WEEK

- Rupert Penry-Jones on racy new BBC drama *Life In Squares*
- Rick Stein's delicious recipes from the Eastern Med
- Monty Don's tips for a bee-friendly garden
- Britain's best TV guide