

44 SCOTLAND STREET

by Alexander McCall Smith

So many books unread and bikes uncycled

THE following morning, Domenica MacDonald took slightly longer over her breakfast than usual. This was not because there was more to eat – her breakfasts were always the same: a bowl of porridge, made from the cut-oats she obtained from the real-food shop in Broughton Street, and two slices of toast, one spread thinly with Marmite and one with marmalade. This breakfast never varied, at least when she was at home, and it was accompanied by whatever reading was current at the time – *Mankind Quarterly*, with its earnest anthropological papers, rubbed shoulders with the toast as easily as did the daily newspaper or an interesting letter set aside for leisurely perusal. Not that there were many of those: Domenica still wrote letters, by hand, but received few back, so depleted had the ranks of letter-writers become.

She had read somewhere that the vast majority of boxes of notelets that were sold in stationery



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shops are never used. They were bought with good intentions, or given as presents in the same spirit, but they remained in their boxes. But that, she reflected that morning, was a common fate for so many objects which we make and give to one another. Exercise bicycles, for example, were not designed to go anywhere, but the wheels, at least, were meant to go round, which they rarely did. Exercise bicycles in gyms might be used, but this did not apply to those – the majority – bought for use in the home. They stood there, in mute affront to their owners, quite idle, before being moved to a spare room and ultimately to an attic. Then they were recycled, which did not mean, in this case, that they had been cycled in the first place.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and stared out of the window. And then, she thought, there were those books bought and not read. Somewhere there might be those who read each and every book they acquired – read them with attention and gravity and then put them carefully on a shelf, alongside other books that had received the same treatment. But for many books, being placed on the shelf was the full extent of their encounter with their owner. She smiled at this thought, remembering the anecdote about the late King George VI – she thought, or V perhaps, or even Edward VII – who was presented with a book by its author and said: "Thank you, Mr So-and-So, I shall put it on the shelf with all the other books." This was not meant to be a put-down to the author – it was, by contrast, a polite and entirely honest account of what would be done. And one could not expect one who was, after all, an emperor, to read every book given to him, or indeed any. Although – and this thought came to Domenica as she took her first sip of her

coffee, even those whose office makes them too busy to read are never too busy to write their book when they leave office – a book which, by its very nature, will be most likely to appeal to those in similar office, who will be too busy to read it.

Some books, of course, were destined not to be read, largely because of their unintelligibility to all except a very small number of people. Domenica could think of several examples of this, including the remarkable books of her friend, Andrew Ranicki, a professor of mathematics at the university. She had once asked him how many people in the world would understand his highly regarded but very obscure books from cover to cover, and he had replied, with very little hesitation: "Forty-five." He had said this not with an air of resigned acceptance, as might be shown by an author reporting on the public's failure of taste, but with the air of one who knows from the beginning that he is writing for forty-five people. And surely it is better that forty-five should buy the book and actually read it, than should many thousands, indeed millions, buy it and put it on their shelves, like George VI (or V, or Edward VII, or possibly somebody else altogether). That, she remembered, had been the fate of Professor Hawking's *Brief History of Time*. That was a book that had been bought by many millions, but had been demonstrated to have been read by only a minute proportion of those who had acquired it. For do we not all have a copy of that on our shelves, and who amongst us can claim to have read beyond the first page, in spite of the pellucid prose of its author and his evident desire to share with us his knowledge of ... of whatever it is that the book is about?

And then, she thought, there were those novels

that went on forever. Readers in a more leisurely age may have stayed the course, but not now. Domenica herself had tried to read Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* four times, but on each occasion had got only as far as page eighty. This was not because of any lack of merit in the novel – it was very fine – but because of its sheer scale. Such a fat book, she thought – in her defence; so many pages, and marriages, and family relationships. Almost like Proust, whom she had never finished, and whom she accepted she now never would. *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* was on her shelves – and in a prominent position, and every so often she would dip into it and wander away into a world of dreamy reminiscence, but she would never finish it; she knew that. The sentences were too long. Modern sentences are short. In Proust, we encounter sentences which appear interminable, meandering on and on in a way which suggests that the author had no desire to bring a satisfying or intriguing line of thought to any form of conclusion, wishing rather

to prolong the pleasure, as one might wish if one were an author like Proust, who spent most of his time languishing in bed – he was a chronic hypochondriac – rather than experiencing life – an approach which encouraged him to produce sentences of remarkable length, the longest one being that sentence which, if printed out in standard-size type, would wind round a wine bottle seventeen and a half times, or so we are told by Alain de Botton in his *How Proust can Change your Life*, a book which has surely been read by most of those who have bought it, so light and amusing it is.

Domenica stopped. She had been gazing out of the window, allowing her thoughts to wander. But there were things to be done that day, and Proustian reverie would not help. One of these things was to remind Antonia that it would be her turn to sweep the common stair next week; not an onerous duty perhaps, but one of those small things upon which the larger civilisation in which we lived was undoubtedly based.

CATCH-UP

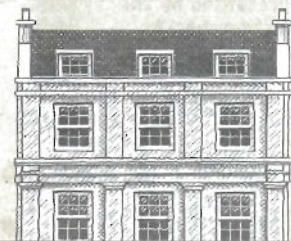
LAST week Matthew proposed to Pat at a party given by the Duke of Johannesburg. She gave no immediate response, but asked for some weeks to consider her position. Stuart returned early from the office, thinking of the bad Scottish diet. He then took Bertie off to a saxophone lesson, at which Bertie, as usual, distinguished himself. On the way back, father and son called in at Big Lou's, where Bertie had

several portions of Dundee cake and a glass of Irn Bru. They met a jazz expert there, who invited them to come to a jazz evening at Hospitalfield, near Arbroath. On the way back to Scotland Street, Bertie spoke to his father about the appearance of his new brother, Ulysses. Why did Ulysses look like Dr Fairbairn, Bertie asked. This rendered Stuart speechless, so no answer was forthcoming.

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