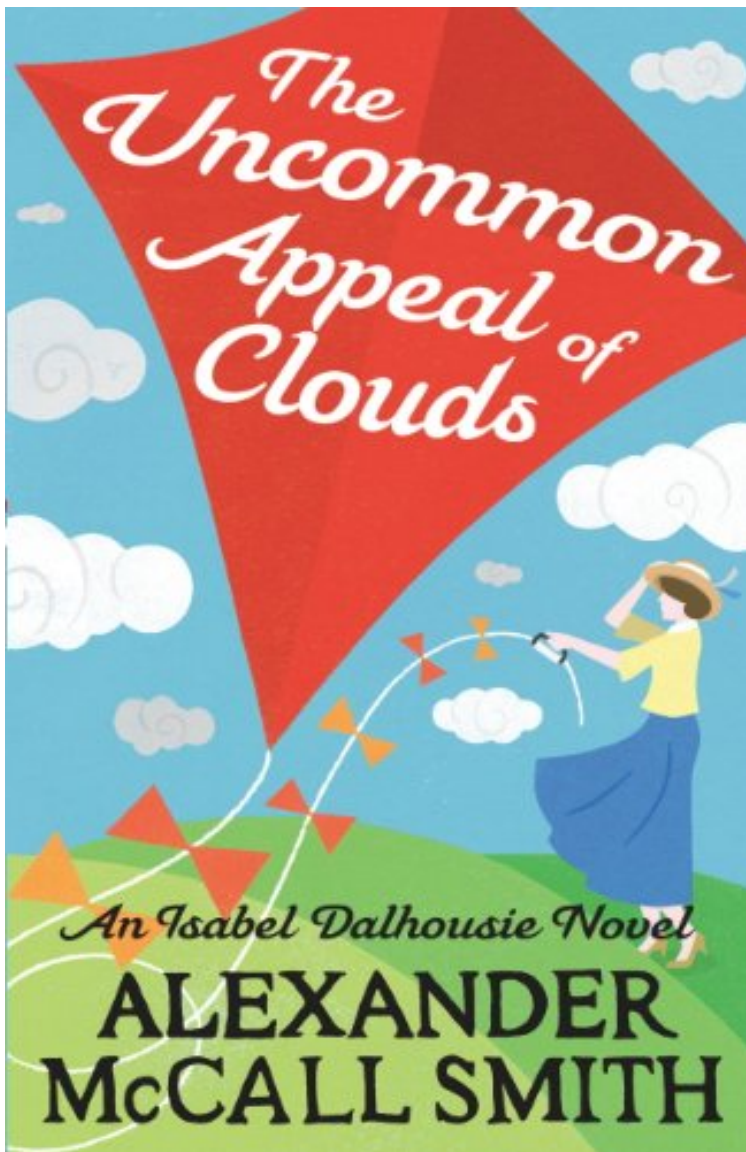


# The Uncommon Appeal of Clouds



Par Alexander McCall Smith  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAs a mother, wife, employer and editor of the of Applied Ethics, Isabel Dalhousie is aware that to be human is to be responsible. So when a neighbour brings her a new and potentially dangerous puzzle to solve, once again Isabel feels she has no option but to shoulder the burden.A masterpiece painting has been stolen from Duncan Munrowe, old-fashioned philanthropist, father to two discontented children, and a very wealthy man. As Isabel enters into negotiations with the shadowy figures who are in search of a ransom, a case where heroes and villains should be clearly defined turns murky: the list of those who desire the painting - or the money - lengthens, and hasty judgement must be avoided at all cost. Morals, it turns out, are like Scottish clouds: complex, changeable and tricky to get a firm grip on; they

require a sharp observational eye, a philosophical mindset, and the habit of kindness. Fortunately for those around her, Isabel Dalhousie is in possession of all three. Extrait CHAPTER ONE Mozart, said Isabel Dalhousie. And then she added, Srinivasa Ramanujan. From his side of the kitchen table, Jamie, her husband of one year, lover of more than four, looked up quizzically. Mozart, of course, but Srin... He attempted the name, but decided he could not manage it and trailed off into a liquid melt of vees and sibilants. Indian names, mellifluous sounding though so many of them may be, can defeat even those with a musical ear. Jamie was accustomed to the stocky sound of Scottish names, redolent as they were of an altogether more forbidding and windswept landscapethose Macdonalds and Macgregors, Macleans and Mackays. Srinivasa Ramanujan, Isabel repeated. He was, like Mozart, a child prodigy. A genius. I used to be so discouraged by Mozart, said Jamie. I suspect he has that effect on any child whos interested in music. You hear about how he was composing complicated pieces at the age of five, or whatever, and you think, Im already twelve which is ancient by comparison and I havent written anything. And it makes you ask yourself whether theres much point in making all that effort. He paused. But what about this Srinivasa? He was a brilliant mathematician back in his day, said Isabel. She made a gesture that indicated the earlier part of the twentieth century or at least did so to her; to Jamie it was no more than a vague movement of the hand. He died when he was barely into his forties. Like Mozart. What age was he when he died? Thirty-five, wasnt he? Isabel nodded. Which prompts the usual thoughts of what might have been. Of music lost, said Jamie. He had noticed that people invariably said something like that when the shortness of Mozarts life was mentioned. What he could have done if he had lived another ten years, another twenty... the symphonies, the operas... Isabel reached for her teacup. Yes. And in the case of Ramanujan, of problems unsolved. But thats not what interests me. Ive been thinking of the parents and of their role in their childrens lives. Mozarts father spent a very large part of his time on his childrens musical education. Teaching him to compose, taking him on those long tours. A pushy father, if ever there was one. And Srinivasa... what about his parents? Isabel smiled. He had a mother to contend with. She doted on him. She said that he was the special gift of the households private god. She was a mathematician too. So the best chance of being a prodigy is to have an obsessive parent? Isabel agreed, but only to an extent. She believed in nurture, but she gave more weight to nature. You have to have the right genes in the first place. Mozarts sister had the same upbringing as he did, with the same musical attention. She became a very competent performer but she was not a musical genius. Jamie looked up at the ceiling. Imagine being Mozarts sister... Yes, imagine. That bit the genius bit has to be there somewhere in the brain. Its probably a matter of brain design, of neuro-anatomy. Mozart had it; his sister clearly didnt. Jamie called that the wiring. Badness, he thought, was usually a question of faulty wiring; Isabel was not so sure. I read about a rather interesting case of mathematical genius, she said. Nabokov. The author? The one who wrote Lolita? Yes, said Isabel. Nabokov was a mathematical prodigy as a child. He could do elaborate calculations in his head, within seconds. Jamie was interested. Musicians were often competent or even more than competent mathematicians the wiring, perhaps, was similar. At school his best subject, after music, had been mathematics, and yet he had always had to approach it slowly, even ploddingly. How do they do it? I just cant imagine how its possible. Do they have to think it through, or does the answer come to them automatically, just like that? Isabel said that she thought they had their trick systems that allowed them to make seemingly instantaneous calculations, just as people with exceptional memories had their mnemonics. Some of it, though, comes to them instantly because they just know it. She took a sip of her iced tea, and looked at Jamie. You wouldnt have to think, would you, if I asked you what number multiplied by itself gives you nine. She smiled encouragingly. Would you? Three. You didnt have to work that out? Jamie replied that the answer had simply been there. He had, in fact, seen the figure 3. Then perhaps its the same for them, said Isabel. The work is done at a subconscious level the conscious mind doesnt even know its being done. She returned to Nabokov. He was capable of amazing calculations and then suddenly he became ill with a very high fever. When he recovered his mathematical ability had gone. Just like that. The fever affected the brain? Yes. Burned out the wiring, as you might say. How strange. Yes. Very. They looked at one another wordlessly. Each knew that the other was thinking of their young son, Charlie, now an energetic three-and-three-quarter-year-old; energetic, but currently asleep in his bedroom on that summer morning that was already growing hot. An uncharacteristic heat wave had descended on Edinburgh and the east of Scotland. It brought with it not only a summer languor, but the scent of the country into the town cut hay, baked hillsides, heather that was soon to flower purple, the sea at Cramond... Isabel broke the silence. So what exactly did he say? Jamies reply was hesitant. I think it was something like this. You know those bricks of his the yellow ones? Isabel did. They had on them bright pictures of ducks engaged in various pursuits driving a train,

drinking tea, flying in small biplanes and Charlie adored them, even to the extent of secreting one of them under his pillow at night. One could love anything as a child, she thought; a teddy bear, a security blanket, a yellow brick... There were twenty bricks, Jamie went on. We counted them. And he counted with me, all the way up to twenty which is impressive enough, if you ask me. But then I said, Lets take half of them away. I dont know why I said it I hadnt imagined that hed be able to cope with the concept of halves. But you know what he said? He said, Ten. Just like that. He said, Ten. There was more. Then I said, All right, lets put eight bricks here and take half of those away. And he said, Four. He didnt even seem to think about it. Isabel was listening intently. Had Charlie ever done anything similar for her? She did not think so. He had asked some perceptive questions, though, and one or two of them had startled her. The other day, apropos of nothing, he had suddenly said, Brother Fox know something? Know not a dog? She had been momentarily taken aback but had replied, I think he knows that. Then she had quizzed him as to why he had asked her this, but his attention had been caught by something else and he had simply said, Foxes and dogs, before moving on to another, quite different subject. For Isabels part, she had been left with a question that had become increasingly intriguing the more she thought about it. Brother Fox presumably instinctively understood that dogs were not part of his world, but did that mean that he had some concept of foxdom? Probably not. So then I tried something different, Jamie continued. I took nine bricks and asked him to put them in three piles that were all the same. And you know what he said? He said, Three. He said, Three bricks, here, here, here. Isabel looked thoughtful. Division. It sounds impressive, but is it all that unusual? Jamie shrugged. I asked them at the nursery school. They said children of four should be able to add and count up to five. They said nothing about division, or multiplication. Just counting. Or the piano, added Isabel. Or that. I told them that he can do a C major scale and they said something about his hands still being quite small and it must be difficult for that reason. They didnt seem all that interested. Isabel imagined that there were numerous parents who believed their children to have prodigious skills and boasted to teachers about it. She did not want to be one of them; and yet if the child was really talented, then shouldnt the nursery at least know? From upstairs there came the sound of a high-pitched voice something between a chuckle and a shout. Charlie was awake. Ill go, said Jamie. Isabel nodded. Well need to talk about it. About what we do if anything. He gave her a searching look. Do about what? About his being good at numbers? You think we should ignore it rather than encourage it? Im just not sure that its in his interests. Would he be any happier if we encouraged him to be a mathematical prodigy? And there was something else that worried her: being a pushy mother. All mothers were pushy to an extent: one did not have to look far in the natural world to see mothers being pushy for their offspring any self-respecting lioness would make sure her cubs got their fair share but there were limits... I dont think we should push him too much. Jamie frowned. He encountered pushy parents in his work, and one in particular came to mind. She had written to him recently asking whether her sons innate musical ability was being adequately recognised and whether he was ready for a public performance. Jamie did not want the stage of the Usher Hall for Charlie, although if it came to that, he and Isabel would of course be in the front row. And Charlie would come onstage and need a box to stand on to climb on to the piano stool; or perhaps have his teddy bear carefully seated on the stool next to him while the conductor raised his baton to bring the accompanying orchestra to order. The frown became a smile. Can one ignore something like that? Wouldnt that be to waste it? Isabel did not have time to answer. Another cry came from Charlie, more urgent now, followed by a rattling of the bars at the top of his bed. Jamie began to leave the kitchen but turned at the door and said, Mozart was quite happy being Mozart, you know. He liked billiards. He kept a canary and a horse. He enjoyed practical jokes. Isabel reflected on this while Jamie was upstairs. To play billiards, to keep a canary and a horse, and to enjoy practical jokes were very ordinary things like that the recipe for an enjoyable life? *Revue de presse* Praise for the Isabel Dalhousie series McCall Smiths talent for dialogue is matched only by his gift for characterization. Its hard to believe that he could make up a character as complex and unique as Isabel. She is by turns fearless, vulnerable, headstrong and insecure, but always delightful. *Chicago Tribune* Readers get to soak up the cozy atmosphere of this Scottish university town and McCall Smiths gentle good will. *The Boston Globe* Entertaining and enchanting reading about characters you think you know and wish you did. *Las Vegas -Journal* McCall Smiths contemporary cozies have proved that crimes need not be punishable by death to provide a satisfying read . . . A genteel, wisdom-filled entertainment. *Los Angeles Times*