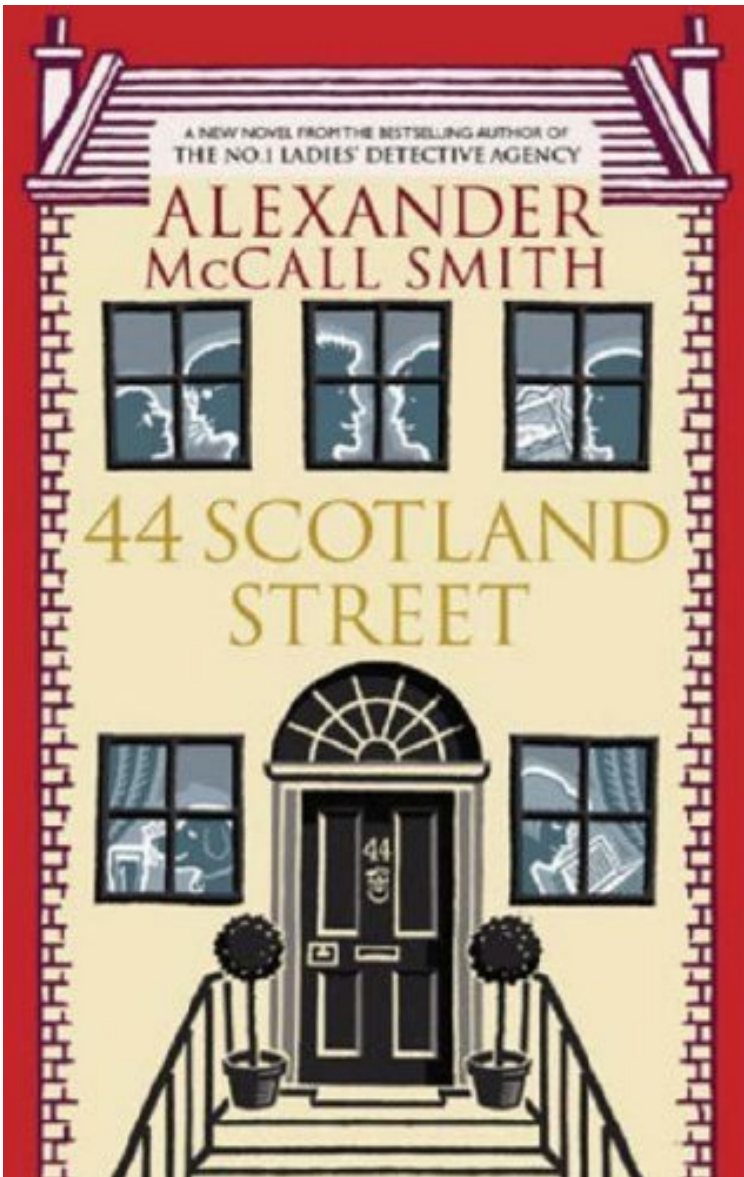


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44 Scotland Street



*Par Alexander Mccall Smith
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe story revolves around the comings and goings at No. 44 Scotland Street, a fictitious building in a real street in Edinburgh. Immediately recognisable are the Edinburgh chartered surveyor, stalwart of the Conservative Association, who dreams of membership of Scotland's most exclusive golf club. We have the pushy Stockbridge mother, and her prodigiously talented five-year-old son, who is making good progress with the saxophone and with his Italian. Then there is Domenica Macdonald who is that type of Edinburgh lady who sees herself as a citizen of a broader intellectual world.In McCall Smith's hands such characters retain charm and novelty, simultaneously arousing both mirth and empathy. 44 Scotland Street is vintage McCall Smith, tackling issues of trust and honesty, snobbery and hypocrisy, love

and loss, but all with great lightness of touch. Clever, elegant and funny, this is a novel that provides huge entertainment but which is underpinned by the moral dilemmas of everyday life and the characters' struggles to resolve them.

Extrait 1. Stuff Happens Pat stood before the door at the bottom of the stair, reading the names underneath the buttons. Syme, Macdonald, Pollock, and then the name she was looking for: Anderson. That would be Bruce Anderson, the surveyor, the person to whom she had spoken on the telephone. He was the one who collected the rent, he said, and paid the bills. He was the one who had said that she could come and take a look at the place and see whether she wanted to live there. "And we'll take a look at you," he had added. "If you don't mind." So now, she thought, she would be under inspection, assessed for suitability for a shared flat, weighed up to see whether she was likely to play music too loudly or have friends who would damage the furniture. Or, she supposed, whether she would jar on anybody's nerves. She pressed the bell and waited. After a few moments something buzzed and she pushed open the large black door with its numerals, 44, its lion's head knocker, and its tarnished brass plate above the handle. The door was somewhat shabby, needing a coat of paint to cover the places where the paintwork had been scratched or chipped away. Well, this was Scotland Street, not Moray Place or Doune Terrace; not even Drummond Place, the handsome square from which Scotland Street descended in a steep slope. This street was on the edge of the Bohemian part of the Edinburgh New Town, the part where lawyers and accountants were outnumbered - just - by others. She climbed up four flights of stairs to reach the top landing. Two flats led off this, one with a dark green door and no nameplate in sight, and another, painted blue, with a piece of paper on which three names had been written in large lettering. As she stepped onto the landing, the blue door was opened and she found herself face-to-face with a tall young man, probably three or four years older than herself, his dark hair en brosse and wearing a rugby jersey. Triple Crown, she read. Next year. And after that, in parenthesis, the word: Maybe. "I'm Bruce," he said. "And I take it you're Pat." He smiled at her, and gestured for her to come into the flat. "I like the street," she said. "I like this part of town." He nodded. "So do I. I lived up in Marchmont until a year ago and now I'm over here. It's central. It's quiet. Marchmont got a bit too studenty." She followed him into a living room, a large room with a black marble fireplace on one side and a rickety bookcase against the facing wall. "This is the sitting room," he said. "It's nothing great, but it gets the sun." She glanced at the sofa, which was covered with a faded chintzy material stained in one or two places with spills of tea or coffee. It was typical of the sofas which one found in shared flats as a student; sofas that had been battered and humiliated, slept on by drunken and sober friends alike, and which would, on cleaning, disgorge copious sums in change, and ballpoint pens, and other bits and pieces dropped from generations of pockets. She looked at Bruce. He was good-looking in a way which one might describe as . . . well, how might one describe it? Fresh-faced? Open? Of course, the rugby shirt gave it away: he was the sort that one saw by the hundred, by the thousand, streaming out of Murrayfield after a rugby international. Wholesome was the word which her mother would have used, and which Pat would have derided. But it was a useful word when it came to describe Bruce. Wholesome. Bruce was returning her gaze. Twenty, he thought. Quite expensively dressed. Tanned in a way which suggested outside pursuits. Average height. Attractive enough, in a rather willowy way. Not my type (this last conclusion, with a slight tinge of regret). "What do you do?" he asked. Occasions like this, he thought, were times for bluntness. One might as well find out as much as one could before deciding to take her, and it was he who would have to make the decision because Ian and Sarah were off travelling for a few months and they were relying on him to find someone. Pat looked up at the cornice. "I'm on a gap year," she said, and added, because truth required it after all: "It's my second gap year, actually." Bruce stared at her, and then burst out laughing. "Your second gap year?" Pat nodded. She felt miserable. Everybody said that. Everybody said that because they had no idea of what had happened. "My first one was a disaster," she said. "So I started again." Bruce picked up a matchbox and rattled it absent-mindedly. "What went wrong?" he asked. "Do you mind if I don't tell you? Or just not yet." He shrugged. "Stuff happens," he said. "It really does." After her meeting with Bruce, Pat returned to her parents' house on the south side of Edinburgh. She found her father in his study, a disorganised room stacked with back copies of the Journal of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. She told him of the meeting with Bruce. "It didn't last long," she said. "I had expected a whole lot of them. But there was only him. The others were away somewhere or other." Her father raised an eyebrow. In his day, young people had shared flats with others of the same sex. There were some mixed flats, of course, but these were regarded as being a bit - how should one put it? - adventurous. He had shared a flat in Argyle Place, in the shadow of the Sick Kids' Hospital, with three other male medical students. They had lived there for years, right up to the time of graduation, and even after that one of them had kept it on while he was doing his

houseman's year. Girlfriends had come for weekends now and then, but that had been the exception. Now, men and women lived together in total innocence (sometimes) as if in Eden. "It's not just him?" he asked. "There are others?" "Yes," she said. "Or at least I think so. There were four rooms. Don't worry." "I'm not worrying." "You are." He pursed his lips. "You could always stay at home, you know. We wouldn't interfere." She looked at him, and he shook his head. "No," he went on. "I understand. You have to lead your own life. We know that. That's what gap years are for." "Exactly," said Pat. "A gap year is . . ." She faltered.

She was not at all sure what a gap year was really for, and this was her second. Was it a time in which to grow up? Was it an expensive indulgence, a rite de passage for the offspring of wealthy parents? In many cases, she thought, it was an expensive holiday: a spell in South America imposing yourself on a puzzled community somewhere, teaching them English and painting the local school. There were all sorts of organisations that arranged these things. There might even be one called Paint Aid, for all she knew - an organisation which went out and painted places that looked in need of a coat of paint. She herself had painted half a school in Ecuador before somebody stole the remaining supplies of paint and they had been obliged to stop. Her father waited for her to finish the sentence, but she did not. So he changed the subject and asked her when she was going to move in. He would transport everything, as he always did; the bundles of clothing, the bedside lamp, the suitcases, the kettle. And he would not complain. "And work?" he asked. "When do you start at the gallery?" "Tuesday," said Pat. "They're closed on Mondays. Tuesday's my first day." "You must be pleased about that," said her father. "Working in a gallery. Isn't that what most of you people want to do?" "Not in particular," said Pat, somewhat irritated. Her father used the expression you people indiscriminately to encompass Pat, her age group, and her circle of friends. Some people wanted to work in a gallery, and perhaps there were a lot of those, but it was hardly a universal desire. There were presumably some people who wanted to work in bars, to work with beer, so to speak; and there were people, plenty of people, who would find themselves quite uncomfortable in a gallery. Bruce, for instance, with his rugby shirt and his en brosse haircut. He was not gallery material. That had been another interview altogether. She had seen the discreet, hand-written notice in the window of the gallery a few streets away. A bit of help wanted. Reception. Answering the phone - that sort of thing. The wording had been diffident, as if it was almost indecent to suggest that anybody who read it might actually be looking for something to do.

But when she had gone in and found the tall, slightly lost-looking young man sitting at his desk - the wording had seemed perfect. "It's not much of a job," he had said. "You won't have to sell any paintings, I expect. You'll just be providing cover for me. And you'll have to do the occasional other thing. This and that.

You know." She did not know, but did not ask. It looked as if he might have found it tedious to give the details of the job. And he certainly asked her nothing about herself, not even her name, before he sat back in his chair, folded his arms, and said: "The job's yours if you want it. Want it?" 2. A Room with a Smell Bruce had shown Pat the vacant room in the flat and this had brought home to him what a complete slut Anna had been. He had asked her to clean the room before she left - he had asked her at least twice - and she had assured him, twice, that it would be done. But he should have known that she did not mean it, and now, looking at the room with a visitor's eyes, he saw what she had done. The middle of the carpet had been vacuumed, and looked clean enough, but everywhere else looked dirty and neglected. The bed, pulled halfway away from the wall, had large balls of dust under it, as well as a collapsed stack of magazines. A glass of water, with lipstick stains on the rim, had been left on the bedside table. She had moved out a week ago and he should have checked, but he had always hated going into the room while she was there and her presence somehow lingered. So he had left the door closed and tried to forget that she had ever lived there. Pat stood still for a moment. There was a musty odour to the room; a smell of unwashed sheets and clothes.

"It's got a great view," said Bruce, striding across to draw the curtains, which had been left half-closed. "Look," he said. "That's the back of that street over there and that's the green. Look at the pigeons." "It's big enough," said Pat, uncertainly. "It's not just big, it's huge," said Bruce. "Huge." Pat moved over towards the wardrobe, a rickety old oak wardrobe with half-hearted art nouveau designs carved up each side. She reached out to open it. Bruce drew his breath. That slut Anna, that slut, had probably left the cupboard full of her dirty washing. That was just the sort of thing she would do; like a child, really, leaving clothes on the floor for the adults to pick up. "That's a wardrobe," he said, hoping that she would not try to open it. "I'll clean it out for you. It might have some of her stuff still in it." Pat hesitated. Was the smell any stronger near the wardrobe? She was unsure. "She didn't keep the place very clean, did she?" she said. Bruce laughed. "You're right. She was a real slut, that girl. We were all pleased when she decided to go over to Glasgow. I encouraged her. I said that the job she had been offered sounded just fine. A real opportunity." "And was it?"

Bruce shrugged. "She fancied herself getting into television journalism. She had been offered a job making tea for some producer over there. Great job. Great tea possibilities." Pat moved towards the desk. One of the drawers was half-open and she could see papers inside. "It almost looks as if she's planning to come back," she said. "Maybe she hasn't moved out altogether." Bruce glanced at the drawer. He would throw all this out as soon as Pat went. And he would stop forwarding her mail too. "If there's any danger of her coming back," he said, smiling, "we'll change the locks." Later, when Pat had left, he went back to the room and opened the window. Then he crossed the room to the wardrobe and looked inside. The right-hand side was empty, but on the left, in the hanging section, there was a large plastic bag, stuffed full of clothes. This was the source of the musty odour, and, handling it gingerly, he took it out. Underneath the bag was a pair of abandoned shoes, the soles curling off. He picked these up, looked at them with disgust, and dropped them into the open mouth of the plastic bag. He moved over to the desk. The top drawer looked as if it had been cleared out, apart from a few paper clips and a chipped plastic ruler. The drawer beneath that, half-open, had papers in it. He picked up the paper on the top and looked at it. It was a letter from a political party asking for a donation to a fighting fund. A smiling politician beamed out from a photograph. I know you care, said the politician, in bold type, I know you care enough to help me care for our common future. Bruce grimaced, crumpled up the letter, and tossed it into the black plastic bag. He picked up the next piece of paper and began to read it. It was handwritten, the second or subsequent page of a letter as it began halfway through a sentence: which was not very clever of me! Still, I wasn't going to see them again and so I suppose it made no difference.

And what about you? I don't know how you put up with those people you live with. Come through to Glasgow. I know somebody who's got a spare room in her flat and who's looking for somebody. That guy Bruce sounds a creep. I couldn't believe it when you said that you thought he read your letters. You reading this one, Bruce? It was settled. Pat had agreed to move in, and would pay rent from the following Monday.

The room was not cheap, in spite of the musty smell (which Bruce pointed out was temporary) and the general dinginess of the decor (which Bruce had ignored). After all, as he pointed out to Pat, she was staying in the New Town, and the New Town was expensive whether you lived in a basement in East Claremont Street (barely New Town, Bruce said) or in a drawing-room flat in Heriot Row. And he should know, he said. He was a surveyor. From Publishers Weekly Starred . Like Smith's bestselling Botswana mysteries, this book comprising 110 sections, originally serialized in the Scotsman, that drolly chronicle the lives of residents in an Edinburgh boarding house is episodic, amusing and peopled with characters both endearing and benignly problematic. Pat, 21, is on her second "gap year" (her first yearlong break from her studies was such a flop she refuses to discuss it), employed at a minor art gallery and newly settled at the eponymous address, where she admires vain flatmate Bruce and befriends neighbor Domenica. A low-level mystery develops about a possibly valuable painting that Pat discovers, proceeds to lose and then finds in the unlikely possession of Ian Rankin, whose bestselling mysteries celebrate the dark side of Edinburgh just as Smith's explore the (mostly) sunny side. The possibility of romance, the ongoing ups and downs of the large, well-drawn cast of characters, the intricate plot and the way Smith nimbly jumps from situation to situation and POV to POV he was charged, after all, with keeping his newspaper readers both momentarily satisfied and eager for the next installment works beautifully in book form. No doubt Smith's fans will clamor for more about 44 Scotland Street, and given the author's celebrated productivity, he'll probably give them what they want. Agent, Robin Straus. (June) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.