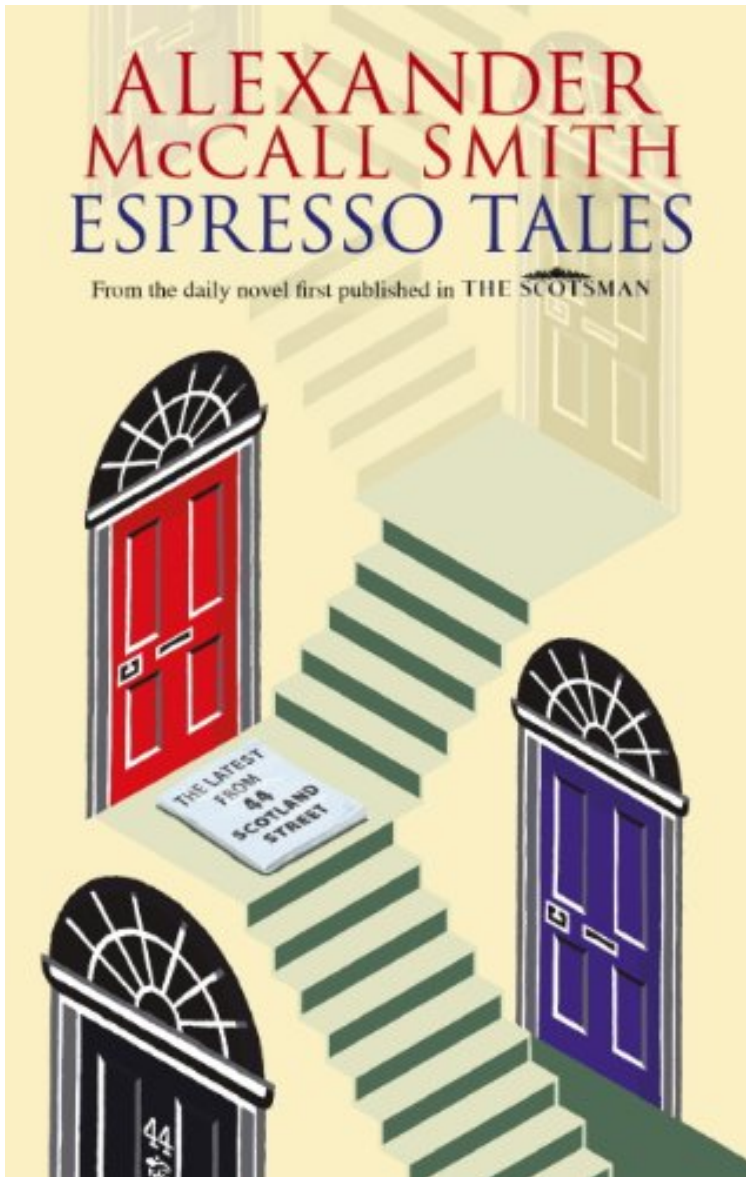


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# Espresso Tales



*Par Alexander McCall Smith*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn Espresso Tales, Alexander McCall Smith returns home to Edinburgh and the glorious cast of his own tales of the city, the residents of 44 Scotland Street, with a new set of challenges for each one of them. Bruce, the intolerably vain and perpetually deluded ex-surveyor, is about to embark on a new career as a wine merchant, while his long-suffering flatmate Pat MacGregor, set up by matchmaking Domenica Macdonald, finds herself invited to a nudist picnic in Moray Place in the pursuit of true love. Prodigious six-year-old Bertie Pollock wants a boy's life of fishing and rugby, not yoga and pink dungarees, and he plots rebellion against his bossy, crusading mother Irene and his psychotherapist Dr Fairbairn. But when Bertie's longed-for trip to Glasgow with his ineffectual father Stuart ends with Bertie taking money off

legendary Glasgow hard man Lard O'Connor at cards, it looks as though Bertie should have been more careful what he wished for. And all the time it appears that both Irene Pollock and Dr Fairbairn are engaged in a struggle with dark secrets and unconscious urges of their own. Extrait 1. Semiotics, Pubs, Decisions It was summer. The forward movement of the year, so tentative in the early months of spring, now seemed quite relentless. The longest day, which always seemed to arrive indecently early, had passed in a bluster of wind and light rain, but had been followed by a glorious burst of warmth that penetrated the very stones of Edinburgh. Out on the pavements, small clusters of tables and chairs appeared here and there, populated by knots of people who could hardly believe that they were sitting outside, in Scotland, in late summer. All of them knew that this simply could not last. September was not far off, and after that, as was well-known to all but the most confused, was October - and darkness. And Scottish weather, true to its cultural traditions, made one thing abundantly clear: you paid for what you enjoyed, and you usually paid quite promptly. This was a principle which was inevitably observed by nature in Scotland. That vista of mountains and sea lochs was all very well, but what was that coming up behind you? A cloud of midges. Pat Macgregor walked past just such caf-hedonists on her way back to Scotland Street. She had crossed the town on foot earlier that day to have lunch with her father - her mother was still away, this time visiting another troublesome sister in Forfar - and her father had invited her for Saturday lunch in the Canny Man's on Morningside Road. This was a curious place, an Edinburgh institution, with its cluttered shelves of non-sequitur objects and its numerous pictures. And, like the trophies on the walls, the denizens of the place had more than passing historical or aesthetic interest about them. Here one might on a Saturday afternoon meet a well-known raconteur enjoying a glass of beer with an old friend, or, very occasionally, one might spot Ramsey Dunbarton, from the Braids, who many years ago had played the Duke of Plaza-Toro in *The Gondoliers* at the Church Hill Theatre (with such conspicuous success). There was no such interest that day. A mousy-looking man in a blue suit sat silently in a corner with a woman companion; the silence that reigned between them being broken only by the occasional sigh by one or other of them. He looked steadfastly down at the menu of open sandwiches, as if defeated by the choice and by life; her gaze moved about - out of the window, at the small slice of sky between the Morningside Road tenements, at the barman polishing glasses, at the tiles on the floor. As she waited for her father to arrive, Pat found herself wondering at the road which had brought them to this arid point - a lifetime of small talk, perhaps, that had simply run out of steam; or perhaps this is what came of being married. Surely not, she thought; her own parents were still able to look at one another and find at least something to say, although often there was a formality in their conversation that made her uncomfortable - as if they were talking a language, like court Japanese, that imposed heavily on them to be correct. In Pat's company, her father seemed more comfortable. Leaning back in the bench seat at the Canny Man's while he perused the menu, his conversation took its usual course, moving, by easy association, from topic to topic. "This is, of course, the Canny Man's," he observed. "You'll notice that the sign outside says something quite different. The Volunteer Arms. But everybody - or everybody in the know, that is - calls it the Canny Man's. And that pub down on the way to Slateford is called the Gravediggers, although the sign outside says Athletic Arms. These are verbal tests, you see. Designed to distinguish." Pat looked at him blankly. Her father was intelligible, but not all the time. "These tests are designed to exclude others from the discourse - just as the word discourse itself is designed to do. These words are intended to say to people: this is a group thing. If you don't understand what we're talking about, you're not a member of the group. "So, if you call this place the Canny Man's it shows that you belong, that you know what's what in Edinburgh. And that, you know, is what everybody wants, underneath. We want to belong." He laid the menu down on the table and looked at his daughter. "Do you know what the NB is?" Pat shook her head and was about to reply that she did not; but he cut her short with a smile and a half-raised hand. "An unfair question," he said. "At least to somebody of your age. But anybody over forty would know that the NB is the North British Hotel, which is today called the Balmoral - that great pile down at the end of Princes Street. That was always the NB until they irritatingly started to call it the Balmoral. And if you really want to make a point - to tell somebody that you were here before they were - that it's your city - you can refer to it as the NB. Then at least some people won't know what you're talking about." "But why would anybody want that?" she asked. "Because we like our private references," he said. "And, as I've said, we want to feel that we belong. It's a simple matter of feelings of security . . ." He smiled at his daughter.

"Talking of the NB Hotel, there was a wonderful poet called Robert Garioch. He wrote poems about Edinburgh and about the city and its foibles. He wrote a poem about seeing people coming out of the NB Grill and getting into what he called a muckle great municipal Rolls-Royce. That said it all, you see. He said

more about the city of his day in those few lines than many others would in fifty pages." He paused. "But, my dear, you must be hungry. And you said that you have something to tell me. You said that you've made a momentous decision, and I'm going on about semiotics and the poetry of Robert Garioch. Is it a really important decision - really important?" "It is," said Pat. "It really is. It's about my whole life, I think." "You think?" "Yes, I think so." 2. Letting Go When his daughter had announced that she had made an important decision - an announcement casually dropped into the telephone conversation they had had before their lunch at the Canny Man's in Morningside Road - Dr Macgregor had experienced a distressingly familiar pang of dread. Ever since Pat had chosen to spend her gap year in Australia, he had been haunted by the possibility that she would leave Scotland and simply not return. Australia was a world away, and it was full of possibilities. Anybody might be forgiven for going to Melbourne or Sydney - or even to Perth - and discovering that life in those places was fuller than the one they had led before. There was more space in Australia, and more light - but it was also true that there was there an exhilarating freedom, precisely the sort of freedom that might appeal to a nineteen-year-old. And there were young men, too, who must have been an additional lure. She might meet one of these and stay forever, forgetful of the fact that vigorous Australian males within a few years mutated into homo Australiensis suburbis, into drinkers of beer and into addicts of televised footie, butterflies, thus, into caterpillars. So he had spent an anxious ten months wondering whether she would come back to Scotland and upbraiding himself constantly about the harbouring of such fears. He knew that it was wrong for parents to think this way, and had told many of his own patients that they should stop worrying about their offspring and let go. "You must be able to let go," he had said, on countless occasions. "Your children must be allowed to lead their own lives." And even as he uttered the words he realised the awful banality of what he said; but it was difficult, was it not, to talk about letting go without sounding like a passage from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, which had views on such matters. The trouble with *The Prophet* was that it all sounded so profound when you first encountered it, and yet it was the sort of thing that one grew out of - just as one grew out of Jack Kerouac. It was entirely appropriate to have *The Prophet* on one's shelves in one's early twenties, but not, he thought, in one's forties, or beyond. One must be prepared to let go of *The Prophet*. And although he gave this advice to people, he found it difficult - almost impossible, in fact - to practise it himself. He and his wife, Maureen, had only one child; she was their future, not only in the genetic sense, but in an emotional one too. In the case of Dr Macgregor himself, this was particularly true. He enjoyed cordial relations with Maureen, but there was a distance between them which he realised could never be bridged. It had been apparent from the earliest years of the marriage that they really shared very few interests, and had little to talk about. Her energies were focused on public causes and on her own, largely dysfunctional family. She had two difficult sisters and one difficult brother, and these siblings had duly spawned difficult and demanding children. So while she nominally lived in Edinburgh, in reality she spent a great deal of her time moving from relative to relative, coping with whatever crisis had freshly emerged. The sister in Angus - the one who drank - was particularly demanding. This manipulative sister really wanted Maureen to live with her, and to this end she longed for Maureen's widowhood, and said as much, which was tactless. There are many women whose lives would be immeasurably improved by widowhood, but one should not always point that out. The absenteeism of his wife had its natural consequence. Pat became for him the focus of his family feeling; she was his best friend, and, to the extent that the father and daughter relationship permitted, his confidante. Of course he knew of the dangers of this; that the investing of one's entire world in a child was to give a powerful hostage to fortune, and that he should develop other friendships and ties. But he had somehow failed to do that. He was popular with his professional colleagues and he would have called many of these his friends, but there were limits to such friendships. People moved jobs; they went away; they developed new, outside friendships which were more absorbing than those of work. He should join a club, perhaps; but what clubs could he possibly take seriously? He had never had much interest in golf, and he was not sure whether he would approve of the ethos of a golf club, and what other clubs did people have in mind when they recommended membership as an antidote to loneliness? Perhaps they meant the Scottish Arts Club; he had walked past it one day and seen people having lunch in the dining room on the ground floor. He had stopped in his tracks and gazed in at the sight. A well-known journalist was holding court, it seemed, to an audience of antique dealers - he knew one of them, a man with an exemplary moustache - and portrait painters. They had full glasses of red wine before them and he saw, but could not hear, their laughter. For a moment he had been transfixed by this vision of fellowship and had thought: this is what I do not have. But although this sight had made him think that he might perhaps apply to join, he had done nothing about it, and he had gone back

to his empty house that day (Pat had been in Australia and Maureen in Kelso, at her difficult brother's house), and he had sat and reflected on loneliness and on how few, how very few, are the human bonds that lie between us and the state of being completely alone. How many such bonds did the average person have? Five? Ten? In his case, he thought, it seemed as if the answer was two. So it was natural that he should feel trepidation about any decision that Pat should make, because that decision could always be to go back to Australia. That was what he dreaded above all else, because he knew that if she did that, he would lose her. He wanted her to stay in Edinburgh, or go to Glasgow at the most. Her choice of St Andrews University was perfect in his mind; that was just up the road and completely unthreatening. Now, in the cluttered surroundings of the Canny Man's, he steeled himself for impending loss. "You said that you'd made a major decision?" Pat looked at her father. "Yes. I've decided not to go to St Andrews after all." He caught his breath. She was returning to Australia. How few were the words needed to end a world. 3. Narcissism and Social Progress Pat saw nothing in her father's face of the hollow dread he felt. He was accomplished at concealing his feelings, of course, as all psychiatrists must be. He had heard such a range of human confessions that very little would cause him so much as to raise an eyebrow or to betray, with so much as a transitory frown, disapproval over what people did, or thought, or perhaps thought about doing. And even now, as he sat like a convicted man awaiting his sentence, he showed nothing of his emotion. "Yes," said Pat. "I've written to St Andrews and told them that I don't want the place next month. They've said that's fine." "Fine," echoed Dr Macgregor faintly. But how could it be fine? How could she turn down the offer from that marvellous place, with all that fun and all that student nonsense, and Raisin Week and Kate Kennedy and all those things? To turn that down before one had even sampled it was surely to turn your back on happiness. "I've decided to go to Edinburgh University instead," went on Pat. "I've been in touch with the people in George Square and they say I can transfer my St Andrews place to them. So that's what I'm going to do. Philosophy and English." For a moment Dr Macgregor said nothing. He looked down at his shoes and saw, as if for the first time, the pattern of the brogue. And then he looked up and glanced at his daughter, who was watching him, as if waiting for his reaction. "You're not cross with me, are you?" said Pat. "I know I've messed you around with the two gap years and now this change of plans. You aren't cross with me?" He reached out and placed his hand briefly on hers, and then moved his hand back. "Cross is the last thing I am," he said, and then burst out laughing. "Does that sound odd to you? Rather like the word order of a German or Yiddish speaker speaking English? They say things like, 'Happy I'm not,' don't they? Remember the Katzenjammer Kids?" From Publishers Weekly Once again McCall Smith fixes his telescope on the windows of 44 Scotland Street, the converted Georgian townhouse in Edinburgh that provided the title for his previous novel and initiated this latest series. This time out, perhaps Bertie, the gifted five-and-three-quarter-year-old, will be allowed to have the normal boyhood envisioned by his father, Stuart, and go trout fishing instead of taking yoga and Italian lessons in the "ungendered" life designed by his mother, Irene. But maybe trout fishing will turn out to be less than idyllic. McCall Smith delivers plenty of twists and turns as he skewers the puffery, the pretense, the tedium and self-defeating moves in his characters' daily lives. He also forgives them their weaknesses and bathes them in love. Take Ramsey Dubarton, who puts his wife, Betty, to sleep by reading her installments of his memoirs: Betty dozes and the reader laughs with real admiration for his opacity. As ever, McCall Smith's pacing is impeccable: moving his focus from one character to another seamlessly, dropping in just the right amount of description, keeping the talk light and sharp. Fans of this new series, here served with plenty of java, will be buzzed to know that a third volume is in the making. (July 11) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.