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# The Charming Quirks Of Others



*Par Alexander McCall Smith*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAs well as its advantages, there are drawbacks to the enlightened village that is twenty-first-century Edinburgh, where every Saturday night ears burn at dinner parties across the city, and anyone requiring the investigative abilities of a philosophical soul knows where to find her.Jillian McKinlay -- wife of a trustee of an illustrious school -- is the latest petitioner; she asks Isabel to look into a poison-pen letter that makes insinuations about applicants for the position of principal. Isabel's niece Cat has another new boyfriend who seems too good to be true. And when a pretty cellist with a tragic story takes a fancy to her husband-to-be, Isabel finds herself contemplating an act of heroic and alarming self-sacrifice.ExtraitTHE NEXT DAY was a working day for Isabel. As editorand now ownerof the of Applied Ethics, she could

determine her own working patterns, but only to an extent. The journal was quarterly, which might have led outsiders to think that Isabel's job could hardly be onerous. Such outsiders would be wrong as outsiders usually are about most things. Although three months intervened between the appearance of each issue of the journal, those three months were regulated by a series of chores that were as regular as the tides, and as unforgiving. Papers had to be sent out for review and, if accepted for publication, edited. The professors of philosophy who wrote these papers were, as Isabel had discovered, only human; they made mistakes in their grammar and egregious mistakes in some cases even if in others only minor solecisms. She corrected most of these, trying not to seem too pedantic in the process. She allowed the collective plural: If you wish to reform a person, you should tell them. Isabel allowed them because there were those who objected strongly to gendered pronouns. So you could not tell him in such circumstances, but would have to tell him or her, which became ungainly and awkward, and sounded like the punctilious language of the legal draughtsman. She also allowed infinitives to be split, which they were with great regularity, because that rule was now almost universally ignored and its authority, anyway, was questionable. Who established that precept, anyway? Why not split an infinitive if one wanted to? The sense was as easily understood whether or not the infinitive was sundered apart or left inviolate. But it was not just the editing of papers that took up her time. An important part of each issue was the review section, where four or five recent books in the field of ethics were reviewed at some length, and a few others, less favoured, were given brief notices. Then there was a short column headed Books Received, which listed other books that had been sent by publishers and were not going to be given a review. It was an ignominious fate for a book, but it was better than nothing. At least the journal acknowledged the fact that the book had been published, which was perhaps as much as some authors could hope for. Some books, even less favoured, got not even that; they fell leaden from the presses, unread, unremarked upon by anyone. Yet somewhere, behind those unreadable tomes, there was an author, the proud parent of that particular book, for whom it might even be the crowning achievement of a career; and all that happened on publication was silence, a profound and unfathomable silence. That morning, four large padded envelopes were sitting on Isabel's desk in her large Victorian house in Merchiston. She closed the study door behind her, and looked at her desk. The four packages were clearly books; they had that look to them and several other envelopes which her housekeeper, Grace, had retrieved from the door of the hall were just as evidently papers submitted for publication. It would take her until lunchtime to deal with these, she decided; Jamie had a free morning no bassoon pupils and no rehearsals which meant that he could devote his time to his son. They were going to Blackford Pond, where the ducks were a source of infinite fascination to Charlie. Then they would go somewhere else, he said, but he had yet to decide where. Charlie will have views, he said. Hell tell me. Charlie now spoke quite well, in primitive sentences with a subject as often as not himself and a verb, usually in the present tense but occasionally in the past. His past tense, Isabel had noticed, had a special ring to it. It is a special past tense he uses, she said to Jamie. It is the past regretful. The past regretful is used to express regret over what has happened. All gone is a past regretful, as is Ducks eaten all bread. He still talked about olives, of course; olive had been his first word, and his appetite for olives was as strong as ever. Olives nice, he had said to Isabel the previous day, and she, too, thought that they were nice. They had then looked at one another, Charlie staring at his mother with the intense gaze of childhood. She had waited for him to say something more, but he had not. They had said everything there was to say about olives, it seemed, and so she bent forward and kissed him lightly on his forehead. She thought of that now as she surveyed her desk. She sighed; she was a mother, but she was also an editor, and a philosopher, and she had to work. Settling herself at her desk, she opened the first of the book parcels. Two books tumbled out, accompanied by a compliments slip on which a careless hand had scribbled For favour of a review. Underneath was the date of publication and a request that no review should appear before then. That, thought Isabel, was easily enough complied with, given that journal reviews were sometimes published as much as two years after publication. She herself had reviewed a book eighteen months after publication and had only discovered after her review had been published that the author had died six months previously. It was not a good book, and in her review she had written that she felt that the author's next book on the subject would be much better. Worse than that, she had commented on a certain lifelessness in the prose. Well, he was dead; perhaps he was dying when he wrote the book. She shuddered at the memory. She had tried to be charitable, but she had not been charitable enough. Remember that, she said to herself; remember that in your dealings with others they may be dying. The two books looked interesting enough. One was on the moral implications of being a twin; the second was on the notion of fairness in economic judgements. She was not greatly excited by the economics book that would be received, she thought . . . unless the author

was dying, of course. She turned to the back ap and looked at the photograph of the author. He looked young, she decided, and healthy enough to write another book, which might get a full review. He could be placed in the received pile without risk of . . . she was about to say injustice to herself, when she realised she was being unjust. Just because she was not particularly interested in discussions of fairness in economics, that did not mean that others would not be. No, she would promote the book to the Brief Notice section. That was fair. As for the twins book, on opening it, she saw this sentence: Because moral obligation comes with closeness, there is a case for saying that the twin owes a greater duty to his or her twin than is owed by non-twins to their siblings. She frowned. Why? She icked through several pages and read, at random, Of the many dilemmas confronting the twin, a particularly demanding one is the decision whether or not to tell ones twin of a medical diagnosis received. If one twin is diagnosed with a genetic disease, for example a form of cancer in which there is a strong familial element, then the other twin should know. That, said Isabel to herself, is not a dilemma. You tell. The twins book would have to be reviewed, and it occurred to Isabel that it would be interesting to have it reviewed by somebody who was a twin. But the twin would have to be a philosopher, and she was not sure if she knew any person answering that description. The author, perhaps, might know; she would write to him and ask him. Of course she could not commit herself to any name that he suggestedauthors could not choose their reviewersbut it would be a start. She opened the next parcel and extracted from it a slender book bound in blue. Tucked into it was a folded letter, which she took out and opened. She saw the heading of the notepaper rst and caught her breath. Then she read it. The letter came from Professor Lettuce, the previous chairman of the s editorial board and friend and collaborator of Professor Christopher Dove, the closest thing to an enemy that Isabel was aware of possessing. She had not chosen Dove as an enemyhe had assumed that role himself, and had revealed a ruthless streak in the process. He had recently accused Isabel of publishing a plagiarised article, but had been seen off. Lettuce had initially backed him, but had been persuaded by Isabel to change his waysI have been a foolish Lettuce was his memorable remark on that occasion. Now it appeared that Dove and Lettuce were friends again, because here was Lettuce sending Isabel a new book by Dove and offering to review it. Dear Isabel [wrote Lettuce], I hope that this nds you well and that the is thriving in your capable hands. Our mutual friend [our mutual friend, Isabel muttered sotto voce] Chris Dove [Chris!] has, as you may know, written a rather interesting new book. Im not sure if the publishers have sent you a copyperhaps they havebut at the risk of burdening you with numerous copies, here is another one. I thought I might offer to review it for you, and have started penning a few thoughts, if thats all right with you. Ill do about two thousand words because I think that this is a work that deserves a decent discussion. Im a bit pressed at the momentthis wretched research assessment business is such a burdenand Dolly [Dolly Lettuce, his wife, thought Isabel. Poor woman. Dolly!] is in the middle of making redecoration plans for our house at Wimbledon, so all is rather fraught on the domestic frontbut I should be able to get it done by the end of the month and will send it along then. Thanks so much for agreeing to this, and pleasepleasedo get in touch with me when you wrench yourself away from the provinces and come to London. Lunch will be on me. All best, Robert Lettuce Isabel felt the discomfort of being outraged but not being sure of which cause of her outrage was the more significant. Lettuce had casually insulted Scotlandwhich was not a province of England, but a countryand an old one at that within a union with England. Nothing could be more calculated to annoy a Scotswoman, and Lettuce should have known that. But that was merely a matter of personal pride, which Isabel could swallow easily enough; it was more difficult for her to deal with the breathtaking arrogance of his assumption that he could write a review without being asked. He thanked her for agreeing to publish his reviewwell, she had not agreed and felt highly inclined not to do so, and she would not be bought off with a breezy invitation to lunch in London. She would write to Lettuce, she decided, and thank him for offering to review Doves book, but would say that she must very reluctantlydecline his offer because . . . She thought of reasons. It would be tempting to say that it was because Doves book was not of suficient interest to merit a reviewthat was very tempting. Or she might say that she had decided to review the book herself. That was perhaps even more tempting, because it would give her the chance to cast Doves book into the outer darkness that it undoubtedly deserved. This slight contribution to the literature, she might write, is unlikely to nd many readers. Or, An effort to elucidate a difficult topic courageous, yes, but unfortunately a failure. She stopped herself. Such thoughts, she told herself, were crude fantasies of revenge. Dove had plotted against her and would have succeeded in hounding her out of her job had she not had the resources to buy the from under his nose, and then get rid not only of him but also of Lettuce, who had been his co-conspirator. Dove had planned her removal, but that did not mean that she should stoop to his level and seek revenge by writing a critical review of his book.

That would be quite wrong. She looked up at the ceiling. One of the drawbacks to being a philosopher was that you became aware of what you should not do, and this took from you so many opportunities to savour the human pleasure of revenge or greed or sheer fantasising. Well might St. Augustine have said Make me chaste, but not just yet; that was how Isabel felt. And yet she could not; she could not let herself experience the pleasure of getting her own back on Dove because it was, quite simply, always wrong to get ones own back on another. It was her duty to forgive Dove and, if one were to be really serious about it, to go further than that and to love him. Hate the acts of Doves, not Doves themselves, she muttered; they said that about sin, did they not? Hate the sin, not the sinner. She put aside Lettuces letter and picked up Doves book. She read the title, Freedom and Choice: The Limits of Responsibility in a Role-Fixated World. She wrinkled her nose. Was the world really role-xated? Freedom of choice, though, was a subject in which she was interested, and indeed she had written on the subject when she was still a graduate research fellow. Turning to the end of the book, she found an annotated bibliography. She could see that Dove had been assiduous in his marshalling of the literature, and there, yes, there were her two papers on this subject. And after the rst of thesea paper that had been published in the Journal of Philosophy, and which had been fairly widely citedwas Doves annotation. He had used only one word: Unreliable. Revue de presse "A seriously charming mix of romance and revelation." --Parade Magazine McCall Smith continues to capture the best of traditional British mysteries. Sacramento Book Like Mma Ramotswe of the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency, Isabel has the gift of an expansive, forgiving humanity which embraces the world it inhabits. The Scotsman Lighthearted . . . spiced by [McCall Smiths] own subtle humor. The Washington Times McCall Smiths heroes are among the most endearing in contemporary fiction . . . because they're so humble in their quest for goodness. Richmond Times-Dispatch Isabel is a force to be reckoned with. USA Today Charmingly told. . . . Its graceful prose shines, and Isabels interior monologues meditations on a variety of moral questions are bemused, intelligent and entertaining. The Seattle Times Endearing. . . . Offers tantalizing glimpses of Edinburghs complex character and a nice, long look into the beautiful mind of a thinking woman. The New York Times Book In Mma Ramotswe, [McCall Smith] minted one of the most memorable heroines in any modern fiction. Now, with the creation of Isabel Dalhousie, hes done it again. . . . Shes such good company, its hard to believe shes fictional. You finish [one] installment greedily looking forward to more. Newsweek