

Well-Read Mom Member-Recommended
Summer Reads and Reflections 2021

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Looking for another Rumer Godden book? Well-Read Mom Suzanne Tanzi recommends *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*.

Mystery and Miracles: Following the Promise of Love

by Suzanne Tanzi



Rumer Godden is a master of revealing beauty through contrasts. Good and evil, holy and vulgar, light and dark, old and young, rich and poor, summer and winter... By unpacking the ultimately mysterious connections between the unconnectable, she draws the reader into her very human portrayals with rare finesse. While this is wonderfully evident in *In This House of Brede*, it drives the plot with greater drama (and far fewer pages) in a more mature novel, *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*. The latter novel was published ten years after the former, and it further elucidates the gifts of Church community; vows and sacraments; Eucharistic Adoration; and other intimate and fruitful experiences of the faith. This is doubly an impressive accomplishment considering that the scene often shifts to brothels and jails! Perhaps this reflects Godden's maturation as a Catholic. She had only converted a year before *Brede* was released and over the following ten years she was surely exploring many facets of Catholicism. That much surmised (back to contrasts!), it is a more lurid — though not overly graphic — novel. While we met with scandal in *Brede*, this story is inspired by it. But Godden does not bring you to the depths without revealing the heights; her goal is light and redemption.

With an undulating forward-and-backward time sequence beginning at the end of World War II, the story spans three decades. Godden's fictional novel is based on the actual order of the Dominicaines de Béthanie, a unique Dominican Third Order of the

Congregation of Saint Mary Magdalen founded by the real-life saintly figure Father Marie Jean Joseph Lataste. The order was populated by many who were ex-convicts — particularly prostitutes — and their missionary focus was largely prison ministry, where, surprisingly, many vocations were discovered. As in *Brede*, the earlier life of the protagonist (as well as that of the antagonist, Vivi) is unveiled slowly through flashbacks, keeping the suspense high throughout. This device allows one to ponder the wonder of conversion and the unseen work of the Divine in the worst of times, ultimately imparting the sincere hope that the author herself must surely have possessed. For the main character Lise and others, when they are at the beginning of this blessed new path, God’s plan is only recognized in retrospect. As they grow in their commitment, it becomes a quotidian conviction: “When you have seen as much of God’s providence as I have,” says Soeur Raymonde, “seen the unfathomable ways in which he works... you learn not to question or judge — only to trust.” By degrees, the illustration of this truth through the plotline brings us to examine our own experience of (and desire for) the same.

Another key element of the story is the necessarily communal aspect of this redemption. Lise is introduced to her “chosenness” by Soeur Marie Alcide and, in turn, another central character, Lucette, will know of this same promise of love through Lise. And so on. All who followed the implications of such an auspicious promise are dotingly but firmly supported by the custodians at Bethany. The sisters carry and pour out God’s love, which penetrates hearts more deeply than the hurt inflicted and the sins committed in the troubled world from which many had come. “As Christ is called the corner stone, so also are his members called stones, living stones.” Among the solidity of these “living stones,” Lise sometimes feels “clear of herself, as if the old self had dropped away -- ‘as if I hadn’t been given enough!’” Yet, in a period of irritation toward one of the sisters, she laments, “that ‘old self’ she had thought wiped out had not gone after all.” How familiar this struggle is for all of us in our own families and communities!

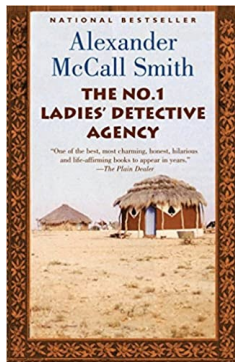
While the characters in this alternating milieu of prisons and convents might seem to have little in common with most readers, they live so much that is both familiar and wished-for as they enlighten our own challenges and joys. The seasonal rhythm of a life lived with illuminated reason, a life sometimes chaotic but always informed by prayer, is

something to which every reader can relate. Through the eyes of Rumer Godden, we are invited to acknowledge the “miracle” of it all: “Another year was rounded, and nothing anyone could say could tell the meaning of each succeeding year, of its unfolding; what is a day-to-day miracle...” A miracle which, Soeur Raymonde insists, is a “wonderful witness” to the Lord’s presence in our lives, “bringing you up higher than you thought you could go.”

Suzanne Tanzi, a mother of five living in Kensington, Md., is Media and Promotions Manager at Theological College, the national seminary of The Catholic University of America, and a contributing writer for Magnificat. One of her daughters is a professed sister with the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo in Rome and another is in the Sisters of Life novitiate. (And her daughter Madeleine began a Well-Read Mom group this year.)

Share the love! We have more copies of *In This House of Brede* for purchase in our [WellReadMom.com Store](http://WellReadMom.com).

Lessons from Mma Ramotswe by Carla Galdo



Alexander McCall Smith's book, *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, and the series of books that follow it, are based on the fictional adventures of Precious Ramotswe, the determined founder of the only private detective agency in Botswana. McCall Smith most often refers to her as “Mma Ramotswe,” using the slightly formal Setswana term for “Mrs.” She is an unlikely hero for this genre, a mother-figure, a Sherlock sans superiority, with an addiction only to red bush tea and fruitcake. In one of her first cases, she does manage to capture and gut a crocodile, but generally the criminal capers are less dramatic. She refers to herself as an African woman of “traditional build,” using a genteel colloquialism to describe a physical heft so significant that it weighs down one side of the tiny white van she uses to motor around the city. She is not likely to catch her crooks by chasing them down dark alleyways; rather, she fights crime with her good sense, close observation, and intuitive understanding of humanity's many foibles.

She was a good detective, and a good woman. A good woman, in a good country, one might say. She loved her country, Botswana, which is a place of peace, and she loved Africa, for all its trials. “I am not ashamed to be called an African patriot,” said Mma Ramotswe. “I love all the people whom God made, but I especially know how to love the people who live in this place. They are my people, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to help them to solve the mysteries in their lives. That is what I am called to do.”

Mma Ramotswe is matter-of-fact about her affection for her country, her people, and her traditions. While she's all for progress — she is the head of a woman-owned-and-operated business after all — she has a persistent love for the ways of “old Botswana.” She often recalls her late father, Obed Ramotswe, a laborer in the back-breaking South African diamond mines. His earnings were scant, but thrift with his wages helped him amass a substantial herd of cattle and a comfortable home. With his rumpled hat, gentlemanly manner, and traditional habits, her father is, for her, a beloved icon of Botswana's goodness.

McCall Smith's novels are generally easy-going, sidling between lyricism and humor, crime-solving and contemplation, with an ever-so-slight sprinkling of the fantastic to keep things interesting. While not macabre, his books don't shy away from darkness, treating it with a levelheaded clarity that simply accepts it as a part of life. Even his star detective has scars, reminders of her capacity for foolishness and the exploitative iniquity of others. Though a small stream of suffering runs beneath the surface of her days, Mma Ramotswe is generally contented, certain about her place in the world and her vocation to solve her compatriots' mysterious problems. When business is slow, she reclines under the acacia tree in her yard, with chickens pecking in the dust around her, “contemplat[ing] some of the issues which, in everyday life, may so easily be pushed to one side.”

Unlike Mma Ramotswe, I'm not one to recline when one part of life slows down. I simply take up another task to fill in the time, with a sometimes unhealthy need to

constantly accomplish, create, organize, or fix something — anything! Once, during a rare weekend alone, while my husband and five children went to the beach, I spent an entire day scrambling from one item on my to-do list to the next. It hadn't occurred to me, until I stretched my sore legs into bed that night, that I could have taken a nap, or sat on the porch with a lemonade, or paused to watch the sun set.

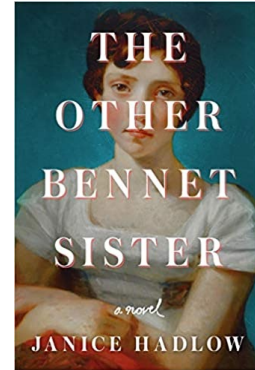
There's something so compelling about the world that Alexander McCall Smith has woven in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, and particularly about the leading lady at the center of it all. I'm currently reading the sixteenth book in the series, and I've begun to think of Mma Ramotswe from time to time throughout my day. Her sleuthing is punctuated by chats with friends over cups of red bush tea, cool morning walks in her garden, and moments of rest on the veranda of her home on Zebra Drive. More than any pile of self-help books, this fictional, matronly detective has not only entertained me but has inspired me to slow down. The other day, amid deadlines and babies and chores and all that cried out for my attention, I deliberately brewed myself a cup of red bush tea. I walked upstairs to a secluded corner of the house and shut the door. I sat in a soft chair and called a friend, and we talked and laughed and lamented for the better part of an hour. Nothing was fixed or organized, and no crimes were solved, but much was accomplished. I think Mma Ramotswe would have been proud.

Carla Galdo has a B.A. in Spanish Literature and Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia, and a M.T.S. from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies in Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. She reviews books for Humanum, an online publication of the JPPII Institute's Center for Cultural and Pastoral Research, and The FORMA Review, which offers readers a classical approach to contemporary culture. She is a wife and mother, is blessed to live on a hobby farm in small-town Virginia, and to homeschool her six children. She stays busy teaching high school theology classes at her parish homeschool co-op, swimming, hiking, and watching British period dramas when time allows.

On Janice Hadlow's *The Other Bennet Sister*

by Eileen Larkin Wilkin

“All any of us want is a little attention.” So thinks Mary in *The Other Bennet Sister* when, at a London dinner, she is relegated to a seat next to the gruff, silent, heavy-drinking Mr. Hurst. Mindful of the loneliness she has often felt, even in her own home, and the pain of being ignored, Mary draws Mr. Hurst into conversation.



When I was in junior high, a teacher conducted an activity in which we were to write something good about each classmate on a piece of paper with his or her name on it. Only three different words appeared on my sheet: *quiet*, *nice*, and *smart*. For me, a shy, bookish, four-eyed girl who had come new to the school the previous year, those words did little to give me a sense of belonging. I wanted words of affection, words that told me I was *liked*.

Mary Bennet was considered accomplished, but that has nothing to do with likability. At a dinner at Lucas Lodge, she comes to an awful realization:

there was no-one in her immediate society who considered her worthy of attention; and if this was so when she was still young, why should it improve as she grew older? [...] Mary felt steadily diminished by this knowledge, imagining herself fading from view, minute by minute, hour by hour until she felt as though she had disappeared altogether, leaving nothing behind to remind anyone that she had ever been there at all.

The Mary we laugh at in *Pride and Prejudice* is here presented in a different light. The Austen-like opening of Janice Hadlow's novel delighted me: “It is a sad fact of life that if a young woman is unlucky enough to come into the world without expectations, she had better do all she can to ensure she is born beautiful.” I soon realized that the tongue-in-cheek sarcasm typical of Austen is not intended here. Instead, it is sad irony. Sad because it rings true for Mary, the plain middle sister eclipsed by a bevy of beauties.

Irony because it's something over which she had no control. The second sentence is: "To be poor and handsome is misfortune enough; but to be penniless and plain is a hard fate indeed." Mary's fate seems fixed.

She didn't know why Mrs. Bennet never complimented her as she did her sisters. Until she was ten, Mary didn't realize she was an "ugly duckling among swans." But when she overhears her mother lamenting her lack of beauty to Mrs. Phillips, the reason for all the sighs, frowns, and dismissals becomes clear: Mary is displeasing to her mother because she committed the unforgivable offense of being born plain. Mrs. Bennet has no hope of Mary ever blooming. Why even try? She was like a dandelion in a rose garden. Resorting to austere dress and hairstyle, Mary throws herself instead into the cultivation of her mind. She distances herself from her sisters and they, puzzled, give up trying to include her. She practices piano endlessly, reads serious books, and spouts axioms, all at the expense of any real connection with others.

Mary's loneliness made me think how easily we slight others in real life. *The Other Bennet Sister* was a profound reminder to me that every individual has a backstory, even the likes of the ridiculous Mr. Collins, the pompous Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and the irrational Mrs. Bennet... even the likes of the snobbish Bingley sisters, the foolish Lydia, and the sheep-like Kitty... even the likes of dull, bookish Mary.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet says to Lizzy: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors and laugh at them in our turn?" Austen invites us to do this. We can imagine her smiling as she delivers biting sarcasm at the expense of the characters she herself created. We're expected to laugh at them, because they serve her purpose of teaching virtue ethics in a highly entertaining fashion.

Hadlow invites us to consider Mary and others from a different point of view. In doing so, she reminds us that in real life it's not okay to make sport of our neighbors uncharitably. Certainly, we need to be able to laugh at ourselves and be laughed at, as Lizzy slowly teaches Darcy to do after they're married. A healthy sense of humor regarding human foibles is essential, but it should go hand-in-hand with love and acceptance. It's not okay to unkindly label or be dismissive of others. Every person has an inner life that we can't entirely know. If Hadlow can compel me to sympathy for

Mary, Charlotte, and Mr. Collins, then I can do the same for real people. Isn't that what I want from others? Mary learns it and, in her simple way, helps Charlotte and Mr. Collins find happiness in marriage. Even Mr. Hurst is touched by her attention.

I carried my shyness into high school and college and was always slow to find my place in new situations. The result was I often felt a little on the perimeter of social circles. I assumed that many of my peers thought of me as bland, if they thought of me at all, and were nice to me out of charity rather than genuine affection. Thankfully, I was never completely without friends, and I had parents who loved me, so I could bloom in my own way and my own time.

Mary desperately needed people who genuinely liked her and believed her worthy of attention. She finds it at last in Aunt Gardiner, who helps her realize her own worth, and prods her to show it in how she dresses and does her hair. The Gardiners welcome Mary into their social circle, not as one to be pitied but as an equal. Their friends meet Mary without any prejudices. In the Gardiner home and society, Mary finally experiences sincere acceptance and love, and she witnesses what true happiness looks like. Thanks to the Gardiner family and their social circle, Mary finds more than a little attention. Mary finds a place to bloom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Consider Mary's evolution, from her childhood before learning she was an ugly duckling, through her many painful and lonely years, to her time at the Gardiner home. Did you find it believable? How did it touch you (or fail to do so)?
2. Discuss ways in which Jane and Elizabeth were kind toward Mary, and ways they fell short. Do they bear any responsibility for their sister's plight? If so, what could they have done differently? What about the rest of Mary's family?
3. Discuss the path of Charlotte Lucas in comparison to that of Mary. Do you think Charlotte found, or would eventually find, happiness to the same degree as Mary? Why or why not?

4. At the end of Ch.18, Charlotte says to Mary, “Our interventions are only welcome if they are agreeable... and by that, I mean that they reflect what everyone else thinks and are delivered with a most submissive smile.” Is Charlotte’s assessment accurate? Can it be applied to modern times?
5. To have beauty is still considered advantageous today, and I imagine few of us can say we’re immune to caring about our own looks. In what ways are we better off in today’s world in regards to that attitude? Are there ways in which we are not better off, or even worse off?
6. Relationships between biological sisters aren’t always what they could be. Discuss how the sisterly relationships in the Bennet family — Jane and Lizzy, Kitty and Lydia, the lone Mary — reflect real life. Does this speak to you in your own life?

If you’ve read Jane Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice* . . .

7. How did your view of Mary change as you read *The Other Bennet Sister*? If you were to read *Pride & Prejudice* again, do you think you would respond to Mary’s character differently?
8. Do you feel that the ways Ms. Hadlow portrays the *Pride & Prejudice* characters fit with who they were in Austen’s novel? Were there ways she portrayed any of them that you felt did not ring true?

Eileen Larkin Wilkin writes from Mendota Heights, MN, where she lives with her husband and the youngest two of their five children. She holds bachelor’s degrees in music and French, and a master’s degree in piano performance and pedagogy. Having just finished her twentieth and last year of homeschooling, Eileen has hopes of giving more time to writing, prayer, cooking, the outdoors, exercise, and getting the house entirely cleaned and organized. How many of those hopes become reality remains to be seen.

On the Marking of Books

To mark or not to mark: that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler to respect a book as someone else's work of art
or to possess it as one's own by underlining,
circling,
annotating in the margins.

To mark, to write—to write perchance in pen; ay, there's the rub,
for in defacing pages, lo, we risk
not being able to resell the works on Marketplace;
this gives us pause.

And yet, to pause while reading,
letting words make meaning in our minds,
linking thought to thought, the story to our lives,
and in taking up the pen to shape our own thoughts into words—
this makes of books a source of life
and to our future selves can bring remembrance
of words both beautiful and strong.
Clues, page numbers, scribbled on the inside of back covers
may one day lead us back
to scenes and episodes, to themes and characters.
Like returning to a favorite place, a garden or café,
to breathe and sip, to take it in again,
we take in once again the lines,
the light,
the life.

These self-made marks are maps recording where our minds have been,
and signposts so that we can find our way back there again.
Not only that, but future readers—
perhaps a granddaughter, perhaps a browser in a second-hand bookshop
may find this well-marked copy and join the conversation,
glad for the company along her reading journey and for the inspiration.

—Tracey Finck

Tracey Finck teaches English courses at North Central University and does freelance writing and editing. She and her husband live in Princeton, Minnesota. They have three married children and two grandchildren.