



## The art of doing good. Aging, creativity and wisdom in the Isabel Dalhousie novels



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### ABSTRACT

Several studies have examined the interaction between the aging process and literary creativity, either to confirm the stereotype that wisdom and experience do not compensate for the inevitable decline of intellectual (and all) capacities (Lehman 1953; de Beauvoir 1972) or to highlight the empowering possibilities of embracing the knowledge and insight of a lifetime to continue developing creativity in maturity (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen 1993; Cohen-Shalev 2002; Casado-Gual, Domínguez-Rué and Worsfold 2016). Not so much emphasis, however, has been put on how this new creative stage and the wisdom gained in a lifetime can contribute to improving the author's personal and/or intellectual fulfilment and, by extension, benefit readers by the sharing of that experience. Since wisdom is a quality often associated with old age, it would not be odd to assume that the lessons learned from life and career can not only lead the artist to a period of renewed engagement, but the sharing of that awareness can also inspire readers to get a glimpse of “the good life”. One such example is the Scottish writer Alexander McCall-Smith (1948). McCall-Smith is currently one of the best-loved and most prolific authors in English, having written more than a hundred volumes, mostly after the age of fifty. Among such an extensive production, this article concentrates on his Sunday Philosophy Club series, featuring middle-aged philosopher and amateur detective Isabel Dalhousie, whose deep philosophical interrogations and intensely human dimension interrogate fundamental notions about ethical living and life at large.

### Introduction

Several studies have examined the interaction between the aging process and literary creativity, either to confirm the stereotype that wisdom and experience do not compensate for the inevitable decline of intellectual (and all) capacities (Lehman, 1953; De Beauvoir, 1972) or, following Edward Said's, (2006) notion of “late style”, to highlight the empowering possibilities of embracing the knowledge and insight of a lifetime to continue developing creativity in maturity (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen, 1993; Cohen-Shalev, 2002; Casado-Gual, Domínguez-Rué and Worsfold, 2016). In these and other works, stress has been made on how creativity in late life has impacted on the older artist's production; that is, for example, to come to terms with issues of the past, to reflect upon their life/literary works, or to underline (or adjust, or transform) recurrent themes in their oeuvre. Not so much emphasis, however, has been put on how this new creative stage and the wisdom gained in a lifetime can contribute to improving the author's personal and/or intellectual fulfilment and, by extension, benefit readers by the sharing of that experience. Since wisdom is a quality often associated with old age, it would not be odd to assume that the lessons learned from life and

career can not only lead the artist to a period of renewed engagement, but the sharing of that awareness can also inspire readers to get a glimpse of “the good life”. One such example is the Scottish writer Alexander McCall-Smith.

Alexander McCall-Smith (1948) was born in Bulawayo, in the former British colony of Southern Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe) and was Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh as well as member of various professional committees before turning into writing fiction, while he is still Emeritus Professor at Edinburgh's School of Law. McCall-Smith is currently one of the best-loved and most prolific authors in English, having written more than a hundred volumes (most of them after the age of fifty) that include novels, children's books, short stories and non-fiction, as well as several book series – among which are the celebrated N°1 Ladies Detective Agency featuring beloved Precious Ramotswe, the 44 Scotland Street series, the Von Igelfeld books, the Corduroy Mansions series, and the Sunday Philosophy Club. Among such an extensive production, this article concentrates on his Sunday Philosophy Club series, featuring middle-aged philosopher and amateur detective Isabel Dalhousie, whose deep philosophical interrogations and intensely human dimension

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McCall-Smith's choice of relinquishing all his professional commitments at the age of 57 to devote himself to writing fiction evidences that, as many cultural gerontologists have remarked (Heilbrun, 1997; Cohen, 2010; Cohen-Shalev, 2002; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995) late life must not necessarily involve disentanglement from taking an active part in society or decay in one's professional or intellectual capacities. Rather, it might be the time for further personal and intellectual development, ability to make more meaningful choices, and the chance to achieve a better understanding of oneself and others. Is literary production in old age always synonymous with wisdom? Is such wisdom, as (and if) evinced by late life creativity, a symptom of the author's newly-achieved fulfilment? Is that what we mean by "the good life"? In order to answer those questions, I will use a cultural gerontology approach that includes examining theories about creativity in later life and briefly revising the concept of wisdom as a cultural construct that is commonly associated with advancing age. My choice of *The Sunday Philosophy Club* series responds to my hypothesis that the inherent humanity and ethical qualities that have become so distinctive in the character of Isabel Dalhousie become especially significant in revealing the author's sharing of his perception of "the good life" – that is, a life that is more humane, less skeptical and less aggressive. In order to provide an illustration of my argument, examples will be provided from the following novels – first, sixth and eleventh in the series – with the aim of offering a brief but sufficiently comprehensive overview of the issues examined: *The Sunday Philosophy Club* (2004), *The Lost Art of Gratitude* (2009) and *A Distant View of Everything* (2017a, b).

### Wisdom and creativity in later life

Wisdom has been a quality traditionally associated with old age in most cultures, and consequently, elders have been (seemingly) respected and appreciated as recipients of that wisdom. Notwithstanding what one might usually think, wisdom does not actually constitute an "added value" to the aging person, since cultural discourses on aging have often equated late life with irritability, impatience, foolishness, and a general decline of intellectual capacities. Such views, as some studies have perceived (Cohen-Shalev, 1989; Woodward, 2002), have diminished (or erased) respect for the elderly and the accountability of their judgements, and thus, by extension, their value as recipients and vehicles for the transmission of wisdom. As a result, as Ronald Manheimer similarly reflects, "the 'modern' older person is neither venerated as representative of the accumulated knowledge of the group (ethnic, regional, social), nor considered a relevant player in the challenges of contemporary life" (1989: 232). Besides, as Kathleen Woodward has argued (2003), cultural discourses on wisdom in old age have aligned it with calmness, serenity, detachment, and a sense of finitude – therefore perpetuating the assumption that old people "disengage" (Cumming and Henry, 1961), that is, gradually withdraw from active participation in society. Similarly, long years of experience and practice in artistic creativity, as Amir Cohen-Shalev has observed, "have frequently been observed to curtail originality and spontaneity, both considered essential, even synonymous, with creativity" (1989: 23).

In light of these views, the aging model determined by chronological time has identified advancing age as inversely proportional to artistic achievement, and has thus invalidated other views that have evidenced the contrary, thereby precluding more positive discourses on aging and creativity. In short, in the same way that our regular interaction with elderly people who live longer, healthier and fulfilling lives may have not contributed to change the decline narrative, the evidence of authors whose work continues to develop and flourish into later life may have not helped to counterbalance the predominantly negative correlation between later life and creativity.

As a possible way to create a counter-discourse to the decline narrative, Mari-Ann Berg, (1996) examines Bakhtin's dialogical principle as a continuous process in which utterances (individuals, discourses,

cultures) participate in a "great dialogue" that generates constantly changing meanings. She points to the relevance of the concept of "creative understanding" to oppose the overwhelming(-ly negative) monologic approaches to aging in cultural discourses and propose "a new model for how to approach old age in a constructively open-ended way" (1996: 16):

Creative understanding emerges in contrast to ageism, its opposite. Ageism is an expression for what Bakhtin termed a *monologic*, or 'single voiced' view, that is a closed system suppressing potentials and other points of view and therefore reducing or even excluding the possibility of understanding. (1996: 16)

In her words, "the 'great dialogue' is a dynamic and creative process that is kept going by the renewal of the different voices which participate in it." (1996: 25) Several voices have certainly appeared in the last decades (Manheimer, 1989; Liang and Luo, 2012) that have advocated for recovering the value of the stories of wisdom found in representations of the life course of more traditional societies. Indeed, in texts from Ancient Greece and Rome, as several studies indicate (Baars, 2012; Edmonson, 2005), wisdom was attributed to those (men) of advanced age. However, the connection between age and wisdom was not conceived as a direct relationship as one would generally assume; rather, it was a necessary condition. As Jan Baars puts it,

A higher age was never seen as a guarantee that somebody had acquired this perspective, but only that aging would offer special opportunities to learn some important lessons and to develop an understanding that might also be valuable for younger people. (2012: 98)

In other words, wisdom indeed increases with advancing age, although not in every person; it does "in those who are capable of developing it", as Ricca Edmonson writes in her ethnographic study about wisdom in later life, "simply because experiences take a long time to be collected and assimilated" (2005: 352). As Jan Baars similarly puts it, wisdom was not a merit that one would attain just by virtue of having lived for a certain number of years, but it rather was the result of enduring commitment to knowledge and perseverance in philosophical reflection, both of which should have already begun in youth (2012: 90). As he explains,

there is a conditional not a direct relationship between old age and wisdom: in Plato's "Republic" the leaders were not considered wise because they were old, as in some traditionally oriented societies, but because they had studied rigorously and thought deeply all their lives. (2012: 95)

As narrated by Plato, the philosopher does not actually possess wisdom but is driven by the wish to conquer it: thus, he "is neither wise or unwise, but *aspires* to attain wisdom and to determine what this might be" (*Phaedrus* 278d4; *Symposion* 204a; cited in Baars, 2012: 93; emphasis in original). Thus, wisdom is not merely the accumulation of life experience – or philosophical knowledge, for that matter – but rather an ongoing search for it. I understand being wise, then, not as a static but as a dynamic condition, since it does not simply entail possessing a great amount of knowledge or experience stored in one's brain but the effort and the ability to put it into practice for one's own benefit as well as for the common good.

Very significantly for the purpose of this essay, studies as that of Ryan, (2016) have emphasised the value of understanding and commitment in relation to knowledge and experience as relevant qualities with respect to attaining of wisdom and living "the good life", thus contradicting discourses that associate advancing age with apathy and the predisposition to 'disengage'. In this respect, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown (1990: 303) similarly points out that "words like *agape*, *caritas*, *humility*, and *empathy*" were used by Erik Erikson in an interview "to describe the culminating values of old age". Experience and knowledge thus necessarily involve intellectual and moral as well as emotional

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