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CULTURECLINIC



Kate
Weinberg

This week: novelist
**Alexander
McCall Smith**
submits to a little
light therapy

Patient examination

The ending of which book/film has most disappointed you?

I was disappointed by the outcome in *Be Near Me*, Andrew O'Hagan's magnificent, moving novel. I wanted the priest to be acquitted. (I would also have liked Madame Bovary to get away with it. And, come to think of it, I wish Thomas Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach had not got cholera.)

What has been your greatest discovery online?

It's www.abebooks.com – a superb site that allows one to gain access to the lists of more than 13,000 second-hand book dealers throughout the world.

What is your fantasy other job?

Cutting-edge virologist.

If you had to be stranded in any one place in the world, where would you like it to be?

Montalcino in Tuscany. Who could be unhappy stranded in a village in the Sieneese hills, especially when it produces such great wine?

If you could have been born in a different century, which would it be?

It would have been interesting to be around during the 18th-century Enlightenment, particularly in Edinburgh, but, on balance, I would opt for two thirds of the way through the 19th century. Life was becoming slightly less nasty, brutal and short.

Name something or someone you truly believe in.

That manners need to be taught again, by parents and in schools, as the basic building-blocks of concern for others.

Who, in the whole of history, would you most like to sit next to on a long-haul flight?

WH Auden. I greatly admire his poetry and would have loved to meet him, even in his crotchety middle-age.

Which public figure do you think is most overrated?

I would not like to name one in particular. However, I am not an enthusiast for the works of contemporary installation artists.

What question are you never asked, and most want to answer?

"Have you got a theory on who shot the Earl of Erroll?"

Our diagnosis

You see yourself as a realist (you're a Scot, after all), but the truth is that you're deeply sentimental about people and believe everyone should live happily ever after. Thank God you're not actually messing

around in a white lab coat trying to rid the world of viruses – at worst you'd start some lethal epidemic, at best it would just depress you. Here are three reasons why artistic types should continue to get carried away by their imagination – on the page.

Our prescription

♣ Recommended film:
Atonement (2007)

Before you launch into an explanation about who shot the Earl of Erroll (and thus why you could be a real-life detective as well as a writer of detective novels), watch this film. Briony Tallis, 13, is a talented author in the making. But her precocious efforts at writing plays fail to distract her from the story she sees developing between her sister, Cecilia, and their

housekeeper's son, Robbie Turner. Convinced that she sees a link between two unconnected scenes, the writer plays detective – and gets it badly wrong.

♣ Recommended book:
The Uncommon Reader (2007)
by Alan Bennett

If you haven't yet read this new novella by Alan Bennett, make it a priority. Out walking her dogs one morning, the Queen stumbles upon a mobile library. Embarrassed to leave without a book, she departs clutching one by Ivy Compton-Burnett. After

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taking advice from Norman, the bookish kitchen boy, her subsequent discovery of fiction and its ability to make One relate to humanity as a joy rather than a duty, transforms her twilight years. A cast-iron, corgi-filled reason for you not to stray too far from the redemptive powers of your laptop.

♣ **Recommended music:**

Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D'Arby (1987)

This debut album was a huge critical and commercial success, with more than a million copies sold in the first three days of its release. No wonder, with brilliant songs such as *Wishing Well*, which (at a stretch) you wouldn't even mind being piped into a lift. Sadly, it all went to D'Arby's head and his next album, the experimental *Neither Fish Nor Flesh*, hit such a wrong note that his career never really recovered. The moral: stick with what you're good at. The rest of the world can do without you; your fans can't.

♣ Next week: comedian/actor **Ben Miller** checks into the Culture Clinic.

♣ kate.weinberg@telegraph.co.uk



Alexander McCall Smith:
the power – and the risk –
of imagination

PATIENT'S NOTES

Name: Alexander McCall Smith

Age: 59

Job: Novelist

Last book read: *Emotion and Meaning in Music* by Leonard B Meyer

Last film seen: *The Lives of Others*

Last music heard: Penguin Café Orchestra CD

Last dose of live culture: Capella Nova concert in Edinburgh