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Heroes and Heroines

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Keira Nightley as Elizabeth Bennet

Meet the twenty-year-old Miss Elizabeth Bennet, complex, honest, out-spoken. Elizabeth is the second eldest of the Bennet sisters. They belong to the estate of Longbourn, in the village of Meryton in Hertfordshire, England. She is an intelligent young woman, with "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous". She often exhibits a good-natured impertinence, that does not offend. She is proud of her mental quickness and her acuity in judging the behaviour and intentions of others. Elizabeth is her father's favourite, described by him as having "something more of quickness than her sisters".

A recent acquaintance is Precious Ramotswe, who is the first female private detective in Botswana. She is wise, intelligent and patient, as revealed in her approach to the cases that she takes on as a private investigator in a small town in Botswana. The assignments include tracking down missing husbands and children to bring them back to their families. Precious Ramotswe is the daughter of the late Obed Ramotswe, a Motswana cattle farmer from Mochudi. After a disastrous marriage to Note Mookie, a jazz musician, and the death of her father, she sold the cattle she inherited and founded The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency in Gaborone, taking on Grace Makuti as her

secretary. She does not limit herself to answering clients' questions but



Jill Scott as Precious Ramotswe

endeavours to do so with humanity and kindness. Sometimes this means responding to a client's unspoken need for affirmation or closure. In other investigation, she urges the clients to reconcile past bitterness. Often she does not reveal certain details of her discoveries to avoid distress to the clients.

Precious Ramotswe is a traditionalist in her adherence to the old Botswana moral values. She is also of 'traditional' build. She relies on social relationships to find information with the motherly touch of a woman of middle age. She holds in high respect the Queen, Nelson Mandela and Sir Seretse Khama, whom she often quotes. She loves the melons that grow in her yard, the character of her countrymen, and the austere beauty of the Kalahari



desert. She is fond of red bush tea, and she often promotes it as a therapeutic drink to her clients. In the evenings, she sits on the porch of her modest home on Zebra Drive, with a cup of tea, grateful for the satisfactions of her life and the fond memory of her honourable, loving father.

I met Atticus on the pages of "To Kill a Mockingbird". He is one of the most upright characters portrayed in any novel. Atticus represents the moral ideal of both a lawyer and a human being. He is honest and a tireless crusader for good causes (even hopeless ones).and a virtual pacifist. He is devoid of any of the racial or class prejudices of the other citizens of Maycomb. As a father, he goes to great lengths to mentor his children on the importance of being open-minded, judicious and generous neighbours and citizens. He is eventually revealed to

be an expert marksman. He chooses to keep this fact hidden from his children lest they think of him as a man of violence. Though once the best shot in Maycomb County, he quit shooting because he felt he had an unfair advantage.

Physically, he is tall, middle-aged man with glasses to correct his failing eyesight, with slightly greying hair at the temples. He prefers to keep his vest and tie, except right before changing for bed. An exception was when did loosen up his collar during his closing argument at Tom Robinson's trial.

Jockey cum photographer Phillip Nore is a particularly well-crafted character. He is multi-faceted, intellectual and introspective to a much larger extent than is the norm. Philip Nore drifts along in life, taking whatever comes his way without high expectations for life or high opinions of himself. He had a complex childhood, mother often dumping him with her friends, while on a whimsical jaunt. This left him self-dependent and with low expectations from others. Though he is passionately devoted to his way of life, the winning and an occasional fall, he has become increasingly disillusioned with the cheating and corruption he perceives at all levels of the racing world. Nore is a lonely man, with a badly shrivelled ego

that even his occasional racetrack triumphs cannot rescue. He appears to have no real sense of his own identity.

For one happy period of his childhood, he lived with a couple of male photographers and became a life- long camera buff. At one point, he was also



left with a racehorse trainer and learned the

steeplechasing dodge. "Things had happened to me all my life," he says. "I'd never gone out looking. I had learned whatever had come my way, whatever was there."

Nore is now 30 and no longer quite the pliable good chap he grew up to be. The owner and trainer he works for have made him throw too many races, and he has reached the end of his tether. Either he rides to win, he insists, or he will not ride at all.

George Smiley is an antithesis of the other British spy, James Bond. He is quiet, self-deprecating, mild-mannered and middle-aged, and lives by his wits.

Quite unlike Bond, he excels in the art of bureaucratic manoeuvring rather than gunplay. Also, unlike Bond he is not a bed-hopper; in fact, it is Smiley's wife Ann who is notorious for her affairs. In "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy", Le Carre describes Smiley as a "brilliant spy and inadequate man".

Smiley is an exceptionally skilled spymaster, gifted with a prodigious memory. A practitioner of espionage with a deep insight into the human frailties and fallibilities. Highly sagacious and incredibly perceptive with a strong moral conscience; he also understands the grisly and unethical aspects of his profession. Despite his series of retirements, Smiley maintains



an extensive range of aides and support staff, both inside and outside the Service, extending even to "retired" police officers and former Service members. His fidelity to them and his strong character appears to promote genuine respect and loyalty to him. Le Carré describes him as a somewhat

short and fat man, who always wears expensive but badly fitting clothes (he "dressed like a bookie"). He also has a peculiar habit of cleaning his glasses on the "fat end" of his necktie.

Katniss Everdeen, the narrator of Hunger Games and the sequels is another strong character. According to Good Reads, "Katniss is slender with black hair, grey eyes and olive skin. She is sixteen years old and attends a secondary school somewhere in Appalachia, known in the book as District 12, the coal mining sector. She is quiet and is generally liked by District 12's residents, because of her ability to provide highly-prized game for a community for which starvation is a constant threat".

We meet the aristocrat-turned detective inspector Thomas Lynley for the first time in Elizabeth George's crime novel, A Great Deliverance. Her novels are remarkable for their intricate plots, multi-dimensional characters and realistic but chilling explorations of the criminal mind. Lynley matches these characteristics of the novel perfectly. He is complex, multi-dimensional. He is aristocracy, the eighth Earl of Asherton. Oxford-educated and a privileged son of a privileged family. Nevertheless, he throws everything he has into his cases and is a temperamental man given to deep passions and strong emotion.

Lynley will do what he thinks is his job first and clear it with his superiors later. Jack Reacher is another recent acquaintance. He is the hero of Lee Child's racy thrillers. Reacher, by choice, is a drifter who travels the hot and dusty highways of America wearing the same set of clothes for several days at a time. He has no luggage, no ID, nothing at all but a toothbrush and an ATM card, occasionally replacing his clothes with brand-new ones, bought cheap. Reacher is intimidatingly large; 250 pounds of solid muscle, a human tank. Ever a frugal sort, Reacher prefers hitchhiking whenever possible.

I have many more fictional friends. Lucy Montgomery's red-haired, freckle-faced orphan who develops into the feisty, funny and above all unabashedly passionate Anne of Green Gables; Thomas Harris's cannibal-hero, the sophisticated killing machine called Hannibal Lecter; Wodehouse's man of all seasons Bertie gave to a life of utter enjoyment; Joseph Heller's Yossarian in Catch-22, the counterculture hero; Steig Larsson's Lisbeth Salander armed with unlimited skills in questionable pursuits like computer hacking and martial arts. Sometimes I find in people whom I meet the shadows of these characters, but perhaps it is a product of my imagination.