

READING GROUP GUIDE

Smut

Stories

by Alan Bennett

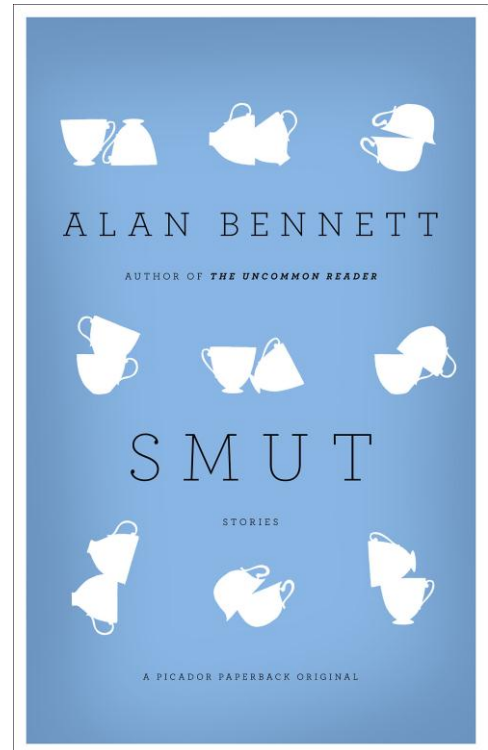
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Fiction – Literary
Fiction – General
Short Stories

The bestselling author of THE UNCOMMON READER returns with a double novella about the unexpected secrets that lie behind people's public personas.

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Smut* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Smut*.



About the Book

One of England's finest and most loved writers explores the uncomfortable and tragicomic gap between people's public appearance and their private desires in two tender and surprising stories. In *The Greening of Mrs. Donaldson*, a recently bereaved widow finds interesting ways to supplement her income by performing as a patient for medical students, and renting out her spare room. Quiet, middle-class, and middle-aged, Mrs. Donaldson will soon discover that she rather enjoys role-play at the hospital, and the irregular and startling entertainment provided by her tenants.

In *The Shielding of Mrs. Forbes*, a disappointed middle-aged mother dotes on her only son, Graham, who believes he must shield her from the truth. As Graham's double life becomes increasingly complicated, we realize how little he understands, not only of his own desires but also those of his mother.

A master storyteller dissects a very English form of secrecy with two stories of the unexpected in otherwise apparently ordinary lives.

About the Author

Alan Bennett has been one of England's leading dramatists since the success of *Beyond the Fringe*. *The History Boys* (Faber, 2006) won six Tony Awards; his most recent play is *The Habit of Art*.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that the novel is entitled *Smut*? What statements do you think that Bennett is making by using a title with such connotations?
2. What connections can be drawn between the two novellas? Is the topic of sex approached the same way in both novellas? Do the characters share similar feelings about maintaining separation between their public and personal lives?
3. Do you ever feel as if you lead a double life? Do you think that everyone has habits that would shock the people that know them best? Or do you think that the characters are extreme examples of the disparity between an individual's personal life and the fronts that he or she puts on publicly?
4. Mrs. Donaldson and Graham Forbes both conceal sexual secrets from those around them, but they react very differently to the possibility of those lives being exposed. Why do you think that Mrs. Donaldson was secretly thrilled by the potential revelation of her secret life, while Graham succumbed to his blackmailer? The fact that their secrets were indeed known by those around them is ironic. What do you think Bennett was trying to say about the separation of our public selves and our secret lives?

5. The end of “The Greening of Mrs. Donaldson” was left open-ended. How do you think things would have ended with Ollie? What do you think she would have done about Dr. Ballantyne’s proposal?
6. In both stories, Bennett focuses on family. How do you think that Mrs. Donaldson’s relationship with her late husband and her daughter affected her decision-making? Why do you think it was so important for Graham to conceal his homosexuality from his parents? Why do you think his parents never told him that they suspected him of being homosexual? What do these concealments say about the relationships within these families? Is Bennett making a statement about all families, or are these families somehow different from the average family?
7. “The Shielding of Mrs. Forbes” includes several surprising twists. Which one surprised you most? Did you find all of the characters’ actions believable?
8. What elements of British humor does Bennett employ? How do you think the book would have been different if it had been written by an American author? Do you think that this type of humor works particularly well for these stories? How does Bennett’s tone add to the book’s overall message and meaning?

Praise

“Two substantial stories in one slight volume.... It’s something of a triumph that the smut in *Smut* is not just the incidental sooty fleck. Bennett may sprinkle double entendres and fire off the occasional Tourette-like burst of blunt common nouns, but he really does manage to startle his supposedly unshockable modern readers with each story’s very premise, slowly revealed and, yes, smutty.”—Thomas Mallon, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Why did Alan Bennett give the title *Smut* to this admittedly slight but always enjoyable and often hilarious pair of novellas?...Maybe Maybe the title is wry, rueful, ironic, nostalgic and mischievous — all of which *Smut* itself turns out to be.” —*The New York Times*

“[A] delightfully subversive little book, which puckishly celebrates dirty little secrets as a vital component in both sex and life.”—**Heller McAlpin, NPR**

“Bennett's [sense of humor] is subtle and often wry, full of clever word play, innuendo, and decidedly British. Oh, and there are naughty bits, too.... *Smut* takes a grown-up and satiric look at how we play roles.”—*The Boston Globe*

“Bennett, the British author and dramatist best known for his play *The History Boys*, has something far more subversive — even obscene — in store. His matrons are not at all what they seem, and in pushing them toward revelation, he playfully shows us how misleading appearances can be.... Delightfully sly comedy.”—*The Washington Post*

Links

Macmillan site: <http://us.macmillan.com/smut/AlanBennett>

Facebook fan page: <http://www.facebook.com/alanbennettofficial?ref=ts>

Media:

- <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/books/review/smut-stories-by-alan-bennett-book-review.html?pagewanted=1&r=3&ref=review>
- <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/04/144639324/secrets-and-lies-the-joy-of-smut>
- <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/books/la-ca-alan-bennett-20120108,0,6352488.story>

Audio:

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=pByLGIGFWHs
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