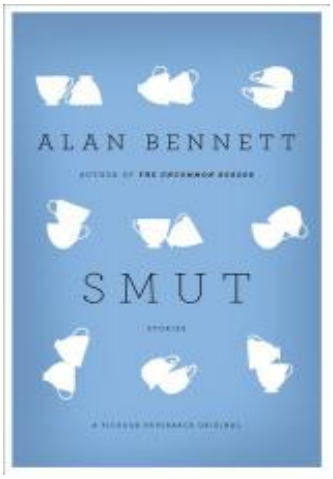
Smut: Stories

by Alan Bennett



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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Alan Bennett has been one of England?s leading dramatists since the success of *Beyond the Fringe*, which brought him to New York in the 1980s. His work includes the *Talking Heads* television series and the stage plays *Forty Years On, The Lady in the Van, A Question of Attribution*, and *The Madness of George III*. His debut novella, **The Clothes They Stood Up In**, was a *Today Show* Book Club Pick. His most recent play, *The History Boys*, won six Tony Awards, including Best Play. It was also released as a feature film. His memoir **Untold Stories** was a #1 bestseller in the U.K., and he was named the Author of the Year at the 2006 British Book Awards.

Critical Praise

"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."

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