



In the Alexander McCall Smith novels, the fictional Precious Ramotswe is the only female detective in Botswana. Not quite such a rare breed over here, but nevertheless, who are the British equivalents of Mma Ramotswe, and what does the job entail? And what assistance can they offer to the hard-pressed solicitor looking for a new angle on a case?

**W**hen Essex solicitor Rupinda Baines' client was accused of signing documents he claimed not to have even seen, she knew exactly how to solve the matter. She called in the services of a female private detective agency to investigate the mystery.

It took a handwriting expert just a few days to compare more than 20 examples of his signature with the writing at the heart of the dispute. After analysing every character in minute detail she was confident to report that there was absolutely no evidence to suggest he had signed the mortgage document in question and the allegations were dropped.

Some detective agencies work hand in hand with particular firms of solicitors offering many different areas of expertise, ranging from process serving to tracing missing heirs, seeking out debtors and, of course, handwriting analysis. One such firm is Alternative Solutions set up two years ago by Gina Negus (54) who used to work on some of the worst and most notorious crimes in Britain when she was a specialist at Scotland Yard's Criminal Intelligence Unit.

### Miss Marple meets Prime Suspect?

So is she like Mma Ramotswe - that wisest of wise people, one who uses her wisdom to bring happiness to others? Certainly she seems to have the tireless perseverance of Miss Marple, and that combined with the gritty ruthlessness of a Jane Tennyson are qualities which she says have undoubtedly saved her life on many occasions.

"I started in the police force at the age of 19, trudging the streets of East London. In those days women police officers weren't even allowed to carry a truncheon, let alone a gun," says Gina.

Within two years Gina was assigned to the Crime Squad in Hackney and later to Scotland Yard.

"I specialised in surveillance and dealt with cases such as kidnapping, terrorism and serious blackmail," said Gina. Indeed, she worked undercover to rescue the Nigerian Ambassador who was kidnapped, drugged and found in a crate at Stansted Airport. She was also involved in the identification and arrests of IRA terrorists and the infamous Gold Bullion Brinks Matt robbery.

## Thriving on Danger

At the time Gina thrived on the danger of her job, which sounds distinctly Cagney and Lacey. But it took a bullet to make her abandon her career. The single gun shot which pierced the air and passed within an inch of Gina's head made her re evaluate her life and took her in a different direction.

"That split second when I thought my life was over changed the way I think and live completely.

We had been called for a 4am start for a run-of-the-mill surveillance job on two getaway cars. The intelligence was that they were going to be used in a big armed robbery, £1million plus. We just had to keep watch and inform the Flying Squad when the robbers were in a position to be arrested.

"But things went wrong when we were following them and hit heavy traffic. The cars started to drive on the wrong side of the road and led us into a narrow country lane. The robbers had radioed ahead and used a van to block the road. As we turned out of a bend we were confronted with several masked armed men.

"As I saw the men coming towards us, my life flashed before me and everything went into slow motion. I remember trying to crouch down in the foot well of the car. One of the robbers opened the passenger side door and he shouted "Christ, it's a woman." As he hesitated for a moment I made a run for it and he fired at me. It must have been at least two shots, but I felt one of the bullets fly through my hair.

"Post traumatic stress wasn't recognised in those days and I was simply told to pull myself together. But I thought my life was worth more than that and I decided I had given enough to Queen and Country and left the police force."

A twist of fate and a request from an old school friend led Gina to organise a regatta at the Houses of Parliament to raise funds for the Speaker's Appeal. The event needed to raise the final £20,000 of a £1million appeal, but ended up raising nearly £80,000. As a result she received many requests for event management and fundraising work. Following that success, she set up The Projects Company, a business which specialises in training those working in the voluntary sector how to raise money, manage their funds and organise their business.

So what made her decide to go back into the world of surveillance she left behind?

## A break from the sleazy image

"Through my training and consultancy work I was coming across situations more and more often where someone needed to be prepared to stand up and be counted. I kept thinking I have the skills to sort this problem out and finally decided I should take the plunge and do it.

"I wanted the agency to break away from the typical, slightly sleazy image associated with private investigators. All of my investigators operate to an extremely high standard of professionalism and confidentiality. Although we do have male investigators working for Alternative Solutions, indeed there are some situations, for example if we are following someone who goes into a lap-dancing club, where it would be almost impossible to complete a job otherwise.

"However, I do think that women are more ideally suited to surveillance work because they are intuitive and observant. I also think females are less likely to be spotted when they are undercover and that they have a greater understanding dealing with delicate issues. I will not tolerate any of my staff turning up

for a job smelling of alcohol or tobacco or being anything less than 100 per cent scrupulous. All our work, every movement, is logged and documented and filed so it can be used as evidence if necessary. And all our people have knowledge of civil and criminal law."

## Bullying and Harrassment

Private detectives can offer a vast variety of investigation services on a global basis. These include computer and digital forensics, technical sweeps, employment screening, due diligence, close protection, matrimonial and divorce investigations, nanny watch, statement taking and probate inquiries. A further issue is the growing and potentially devastating problem of dishonesty or bullying and harassment at work.

An agency can send someone into the working environment, possibly as a temp, to act as an expert witness. And given the costs of employment tribunals, hopefully the situation can be settled, saving an employer an awful lot of money. Sometimes it is easier for an external agency to stand up to bullies whereas it can be difficult for anyone else to do it.

A recent report by the Institute for Employment Studies says that around three million Britons experience violence and intimidation at work and that the UK's record is worse than the EU average on sexual harassment. And only last year the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that one in five UK employees had experienced bullying or harassment at work in the previous two years.

IES's principal economist and author of the report Marc Cowling says that companies are potentially open to an avalanche of legal action following a ruling by the House of Lords that allows the bullied and harassed to sue companies for negligence.

And with incidents such as female member of staff who was awarded £1m from her employer in 2004 after claiming a male colleague made lewd comments to her at a Christmas party, the financial implications are very serious indeed.

## Crime-fighter-cum-Agony-Aunt?

But it is the smaller more personal investigations where Gina Negus finds she has to become an agony aunt as well. "When members of the public ring us it is often because they are desperate and don't know who else to turn to. Often their lives are being torn apart by suspicions of adultery, or things have turned extremely nasty in a divorce case. I listen to their problems and try to come up with a solution to either put their minds at rest or give them the evidence they need to move on." Jessica Fletcher meets Clare Rayner? Nancy Drew meets Dear Deirdre? Or as ever does Mma Ramotswe have the answer?

*Tea, of course, made the problem seem smaller, as it always does, and by the time they finally reached the bottom of their cups and Mma Makutsi had reached for the slightly chipped tea pot to pour a refill it had become clear what they had to do. –*

from *The Full Cupboard of Life: More from the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*  
by Alexander McCall Smith

If you would like to find out more about Alternative Solutions look on its website [www.altsolutions.co.uk](http://www.altsolutions.co.uk) or ring 0208 502 2575