

# *The Queen's Gambit*: The coming of age of a chess prodigy

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*The Queen's Gambit*, currently one of the most-watched series on Netflix, is a serious and thoughtful account of the life of a young chess prodigy who overcomes immense obstacles on the way to becoming the world's greatest player.

Based on the 1983 novel of the same title by Walter Tevis (*The Hustler*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), as adapted and directed by Scott Frank, the story of Beth Harmon is unusual but believable.

The series follows Beth (Anya Taylor-Joy) from the time she is orphaned as an eight-year-old in Kentucky, through her chess triumph in her early 20s. The young girl's journey is a coming-of-age story, one in which chess success is also bound up with her own social and psychological development.

Soon after the series opens, young Beth is brought to a Christian orphanage after an auto accident kills her mother. Flashbacks provide a brief glimpse of the latter, a brilliant mathematician but also a very troubled woman. Beth clearly has inherited some of her mother's intellectual gifts. She vividly remembers discussions in which the older woman counsels her on the need for independence and self-sufficiency. These memories, combined with the emotional trauma she has faced, produce a steeliness in Beth, and at times a sullen withdrawal from others.

The orphanage is a lonely and colorless place. Beth is befriended by a somewhat older black girl named Jolene (Moses Ingram), who becomes her main source of companionship and advice. The orphans are given "green vitamin pills"—in fact tranquilizers—on a daily basis, justified on the grounds this will help with their "disposition." Beth develops a dependency on the tranquilizers, which continues to play a major part in her life.

In another early turning point, Beth meets Mr. Shaibel (Bill Camp—*Lincoln*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Birdman*, *Love & Mercy*, *Loving*, *Vice*). The building's janitor, he plays solo chess in the basement, and Beth finds herself fascinated. Shaibel, after overcoming understandable suspicion at the unexpected presence of this child who wants to play chess, agrees to play with her.

The relationship between the two develops through discussion of chess strategy. Shaibel at first cannot quite believe the capabilities of his new companion. He nurtures her gifts with constructive advice. When it becomes clear she needs more than he can possibly give, he tells the president of a local chess club about the prodigy. Beth goes to the club and easily defeats every one of the older players. Here and throughout her rise through the chess ranks, Beth's rivals are all men. While she faces some condescension and skepticism, she proceeds without giving this

much thought, and quickly shows what she is capable of.

In the midst of these developments, Beth is adopted by a couple in Lexington, Kentucky. Her adopted mother, Alma Wheatley (Marielle Heller—director of *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*), is bored and unhappy, and clearly a problem drinker. Her husband, totally uninterested in Beth, quickly leaves. Mother and daughter develop an increasingly close relationship. Alma is surprised to find out that significant amounts of money can be won through local and statewide chess tournaments. Acting out of motives that are not purely or even primarily selfish, she encourages Beth to pursue the opportunities. At one point, she asks Beth for a 10 percent "agent's fee," and Beth responds by making it 15 percent.

A Kentucky championship is followed by larger tournaments across North America. Mother and daughter travel to Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Las Vegas and elsewhere. Beth dives deep into the world of professional chess players.

The series pays attention to the theory, strategy and mental tactics of high-level chess players, without losing the attention of audience members who may know little or nothing about the game. According to the filmmakers, every game in the series is based on scripts of famous matches and real world-class players, such as José Capablanca and Paul Morphy.

Beth's goal from early on in her chess career is to someday surpass the level of Soviet Grandmaster Vasily Borgov (Marcin Dorocinski). There are many twists and turns along the way, as Beth triumphs over various rivals—D.L. Townes, Harry Beltik and Benny Watts—but also learns from each of them.

The final episode of *The Queen's Gambit* brings together a number of important themes. Seeking financial support for a trip to Moscow to compete in the 1968 World Championship, Beth reluctantly listens to an offer of assistance from the Christian Crusade. In a fascinating scene, this fanatically anti-communist outfit makes clear its aid is contingent on her agreeing to denounce "Marxist-Leninist-atheism." Without discussing her views, Beth says she will not go along with such demands.

Meanwhile, Jolene re-emerges in Beth's life. She now appears to be a black radical, with a typical '60s Afro hairstyle. The two old friends reconnect. Jolene unhesitatingly offers a loan of the considerable sum needed for the trip to the USSR.

*The Queen's Gambit* has its weaknesses, including, at times, its length, but one forgives the series' flaws, more than overcome by the strength of the acting, dialogue and rounded characters.

There are no simplistic villains or caricatures in this story, and few false notes. Taylor-Joy, Ingram, Camp and Heller are outstanding, while Thomas Brodie-Sangster (*Love Actually*, *Wolf Hall*) as Benny Watts, Harry Melling as Harry Beltik and Jacob Fortune-Lloyd as D.L. Townes are equally effective as Beth's chess colleagues. The cinematography, design and production values are impressive, as the viewer is taken to Mexico City, Paris and Moscow, as well as to cities across the US.

Perhaps the one questionable element in the plot is the suggestion that Beth's addiction to tranquilizers is a spur to her genius. Drug dependency would much more likely be an obstacle to the concentration required for the game. In the end, she overcomes this obstacle as well.

Most notable is the way in which *The Queen's Gambit* demonstrates that inborn talent or potential does not exist in a social vacuum. Beth's development reveals that even the most brilliant geniuses are shaped by the world around them. What emerges from this story of chess, that apparently most "individual" of games, is that it too is not cut off from the broader events and processes. Teamwork and collective effort are highlighted in the final episode, after the championship game has been adjourned overnight. Townes, covering the competition for a newspaper in Kentucky, puts Beth on the telephone, where her old chess rivals give her advice on how to win the match when it resumes in the morning.

Though Beth is a woman in a male-dominated field, her male colleagues are shown as friends, not enemies. Of course she faces barriers, but they are overcome, and cooperation is vital, along with her own determination. The men Beth beats in chess are generally courteous and respectful. The young American chess masters with whom she becomes involved, romantically in a few cases, become her biggest champions. In an interview with *Life* magazine, she discusses her passion for the beauty and logic of chess, and is uninterested and even perplexed by a focus on her gender.

Race is also part of the story, in the person of Jolene. Like the other characters, she is a many-sided and intriguing figure. She alludes to the bitter struggles for equal rights of that period, and some of her words reflect the growth of nationalist moods in the late 1960s, in response to the disappointments with the limited reforms of the era. At the same time, Jolene also feels the closest of bonds with Beth and emphasizes what they share in common.

Mr. Shaibel, whose first name we never learn, is perhaps the most substantial character next to Beth herself. We only see him on screen in the early part of the series, but his presence is felt even more strongly at its conclusion. Jolene brings word that he has died, and Beth, feeling guilty that she has not kept in touch with the man who encouraged her talent, travels with Jolene to his sparsely attended funeral service.

Later, Beth pays tribute to him when she is interviewed by a newspaper. A moving moment, it shows the connection between generations, and how the old have much to pass on to the young. The show premiered in October, making the tribute to Mr. Shaibel all the more meaningful and poignant, in this year when tens of thousands of the ill and elderly in the US, and hundreds of thousands elsewhere, have been callously abandoned to die in

nursing homes.

Moreover, a meaningful historical element emerges from Beth's journey. Chess becomes a window, in a small but meaningful way, into wider issues. She has a healthy respect for the Soviet chess grandmasters, and understands the importance attached to the game in the USSR. The brief scenes of life in the Soviet Union during this period of the Cold War are handled quite objectively. The obligatory portraits of Stalinist chief Leonid Brezhnev are seen on the walls, and the tone is not uncritical. At the same time, however, the dedication to chess that is shown, including the number and enthusiasm of the fans, suggests a high cultural level. Earlier, Benny hints at some issues when he says to Beth, "You know why the Soviets play the best chess? Because they help each other as a team. ... They support each other. As Americans we work alone because we're all such individualists."

The closing scene of the entire series is a revealing one, keeping in mind that Tevis's book was written in 1983, in the early years of the Ronald Reagan administration, with its renewed campaign against what Reagan termed the "Evil Empire."

In the taxi on the way to the Moscow airport, Beth is informed by her State Department "handler" that she will be attending a special dinner at the White House. He begins to instruct her on what she should say at the affair, when she suddenly cuts him off, instructs the driver to stop the car and simply walks away. Beth makes her way back to the site of the competition, spurning the State Department and her moment of glory to fraternize with the scores of Soviet chess players outside in the street hunched over their chessboards.

*The Queen's Gambit* is a work of entertainment that can be appreciated on many levels. It must be said, however, that the popularity of a drama that treats its subject with this level of humanity, honesty and seriousness is both an indication of what is possible, and a hopeful sign for the future.



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