

New York Times, Washington Post feminist critics disparage *The Queen's Gambit*

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A negative reaction in certain quarters to *The Queen's Gambit* was inevitable, given the current political atmosphere. The popular Netflix series, based on the 1983 novel with the same title, ignores identity politics in its portrayal of a young woman's rise to the top of the chess world.

In the *Washington Post*, Monica Hesse—who has weighed in foully in the #MeToo witch-hunt—summed up her view in a November 25 headline: “*The Queen's Gambit*, a period drama that erases sexism from 1960, is the best fantasy show of the year.” Carina Chocano in the *New York Times* (“I Want to Live in the Reality of *The Queen's Gambit*,” December 2) also asserts that a story “in which a female character succeeds in a man's world without being harassed, assaulted, abused, ignored, dismissed, sidelined, robbed or forgotten” is a “fantasy.”

Hostile comments from such sources are a form of high praise. More about these reviews later.

One of the aspects of *The Queen's Gambit* that makes the series effective is its avoidance of a didactic approach. As we have already noted, it has no simplistic villains or caricatures. The series does not begin with a message to hammer home, but realistically allows some important themes to emerge from the narrative itself.

A self-evident theme is that of young Beth Harmon's success in a field that is overwhelmingly dominated by chess players who are men. *The Queen's Gambit*, however, does not place the issue of gender front and center. Instead it shows Beth's emergence, not only as a chess champion, but also, as a rounded and wiser human being.

She struggles with the tremendous psychological trauma that comes with the loss of her family, and the particular circumstances that led to her becoming an orphan. The strict Christian orphanage in which she is placed is no help. While there, however, she meets an older girl, Jolene, as well as the building janitor, Mr. Shaibel. She finds a kind of salvation in chess.

This story, unusual but very authentic, cuts across the current orthodoxy in which every subject is depicted in terms of race and gender. Beth cannot and does not achieve her goal without assistance. Her supporters include men as well as women, Russians as well as Americans, the younger as well as older

generations. Jolene, who is African American, is one of Beth's strongest advocates. In the final episode, when she insists on lending Beth the money to travel to Moscow for the world championship competition, she says, “that's what family does.”

Then there is Mr. Shaibel, who first introduces Beth, a withdrawn and traumatized nine-year-old, to the game of chess. Again, in the final episode, the bond between the older man and the young girl is movingly expressed after Shaibel's death, when Beth, who has completely lost touch with him over the years, finds among his belongings at the orphanage a huge batch of newspaper clippings that reveal how he followed every step in her chess career. She breaks down in tears, and later, giving a magazine interview in Moscow, she insists above all that Mr. Shaibel be remembered as the man who first taught and helped her on the road to her future.

Other support for Beth comes from a number of young men who have been chess rivals, and who have come to respect and admire her for her determination and the growing warmth and generosity beneath her sometimes gruff exterior. This also finds expression in the final episode.

One can easily imagine the gnashing of teeth in upper-middle-class circles produced by these portrayals. At the same time, while *The Queen's Gambit* goes counter to some of the current trends in popular culture, it immediately struck a chord with audiences and has become the most popular streaming series on Netflix. With 62 million views within its first month, it has been widely commented on, sparked a boom in the sale of chess sets and seen wide social media identification with its protagonist.

It is in this context that the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have published very similar “appreciations” of *The Queen's Gambit* in the last two weeks. Both writers are clearly disturbed by the show, but they disguise their antagonism. Instead, they semi-facetiously choose to reinterpret the story as fantasy—escapist entertainment that has nothing at all to do with the real world.

Hesse in the *Washington Post* calls the show escapist, since it has “no women in peril” and “no skeezy men.” Though she claims to welcome the escapism, her descriptions betray her actual feelings. Her depiction of Mr. Shaibel is particularly

revealing: “Beth meets an odd, reclusive janitor in her orphanage’s basement. An experienced viewer wonders if he’s about to molest her; instead he introduces her to the chessboard.” Later, Hesse continues, one of Beth’s rivals loans her strategy books and another provides her with an air mattress when she stays overnight, rather than assaulting or sexually harassing her.

All this is nothing more than a flight of fancy, according to Hesse. “And it’s at least some of why—even if viewers haven’t put their fingers on it—the show is so dang satisfying. ... It’s revisionist history. It would be a wonderful future.”

Chocano’s approach in her *New York Times Magazine* piece closely resembles Hesse’s. She too expresses astonishment that Mr. Shaibel, “rather than molest her [Beth], teaches her to play chess.” According to Chocano, the circumstances depicted in *The Queen’s Gambit* are “so vanishingly rare that it comes across as utopian fiction.” This critic says she welcomes it—as long as we understand it as a daydream. This type of “of meritocratic, gender-agnostic fiction is desperately needed. ... Nothing could be further from our current reality, but who needs our current reality?”

The claims that the series is appreciated because it is fantasy are disingenuous, to say the least. The show has struck a chord precisely because it is not seen as utopian fiction. The book was not a fantasy novel, and neither is its adaptation for film.

In the eyes of the upper-middle-class #MeToo campaigners, the relations between the sexes simply boil down to warfare. Men are generally rapists and monsters, with a few honorable exceptions. This is not an exaggeration on our part—look at their own words. According to Hesse, “an experienced viewer” would rationally expect that an older man, working as a janitor in an orphanage, would molest a nine-year-old child—in his own workplace, no less! And it is pure fantasy, on the other hand for this “odd” worker—who perhaps has three strikes against him, being white, male and old—to be impressed with the native ability and curiosity of the girl, and to be convinced to show her the game.

What about the claim that *The Queen’s Gambit* is fantasy because it ignores the problems facing women? This is also false. Beth faces enormous obstacles. She is not uniformly welcomed. She faces curiosity, disbelief and some condescension when she shows up for tournaments. The problem for the *Post* and *Times* writers is that the problems Beth faces do not include sexual harassment, which, according to them, must always and everywhere top the list.

There are other ways in which *The Queen’s Gambit* does not ignore the real world, including the issues facing women in the 1950s and ’60s. Some of Beth’s high school classmates in Lexington, Kentucky are pressured into early motherhood, or jobs that don’t allow for their fuller development. Her adoptive mother Alma must deal with a loveless marriage, a husband who deserts her and general unhappiness that encourages a drinking problem.

The Queen’s Gambit takes us to a wider view of world, including the working class. The world of Mr. Shaibel or Jolene (who they don’t mention at all) is not one that interests our upper-middle-class critics. Nor do they take note of the Soviet chess players, or of the chess fans, mostly women, who display increasing enthusiasm as Beth exits the tournament after successive victories.

How is it possible to watch this program and not be moved by Beth’s development, especially by the closing episode, when Beth realizes the impact and the heroic character of Mr. Shaibel? This is a real turning point for the young woman, more important than her chess triumphs up to then. And it leads to and is mirrored in the closing scene, when Beth spurns the State Department and its plans to use her fame for the purposes of the Cold War, instead returning to the street to meet and fraternize with her admiring Soviet chess players, most of them past retirement age.

The *Post* and *Times* critics note that Beth faces few obstacles, but there is another part of the story that they no doubt find utopian and in a sense dangerous, even if they don’t acknowledge it, and that is the unselfishness of Beth, as well as Jolene and Mr. Shaibel.

How could Shaibel teach a little girl to play chess? How could Jolene give Beth the money to travel to Moscow? How could Beth tell the State Department chaperone she is not interested in a dinner at the White House? This aspect, the rejection of the prevailing ethos of selfishness and wealth accumulation, is bound up with the issue of identity politics, directed as it is not toward the fight for equality and against discrimination, but rather toward personal advancement and power. The upper-middle-class critics instinctively recoil from this theme, and try to ignore it as best they can.

Young people see their experiences and their hopes embodied in the characters on screen. They exhibit a growing and healthy distrust of the claims for gender and racial “diversity” even while the status quo remains firmly entrenched. We repeat, the appearance and reception of *The Queen’s Gambit* are indeed hopeful signs of things to come.



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