

The Queen's Gambit

Walter Tevis

Reviewed by: Madison Li, 16

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The Queen's Gambit, set in the 1950s, tells young Elizabeth Harmon's thrilling journey to adulthood and the chess world championship. Eight-year-old Beth first learns chess from a janitor working at her orphanage. They quickly discover that she's a prodigy, and she begins entering tournaments, shooting up the ranks as she grows up. Her cold ambition and unmatched talent take her all over the country, but despite her steady streak of professional victories, Beth grapples with serious personal challenges. Along with struggling against isolation, insecurity, and sexism, she develops a dangerous habit of soothing her nerves with drugs and alcohol. The author evenly intertwines Beth's gripping chess games with her addiction and coming-of-age experiences, setting the context for her rise to international stardom.

The cleverness of this novel is in its morally grey characters and its refusal to resolve every conflict. Bad acts are not always punished, and good acts are not always rewarded, so the progression of events can be displeasing to modern audiences. Beth's temperament further characterizes the greyness of her world, as she's detached and calculating from the very start. This is far from the typical story of an orphan seeking answers about their past. Instead, Beth's disinterest in finding family or friends means that she is tethered to nothing. She's independent and blunt, unapologetically chasing her own goals. On the other hand, she's also emotionally removed. Beth values certain relationships to an extent, but she's mostly distant and remains absorbed in chess. Her lack of parental figures translates to both unimaginable freedom and unbearable solitude.

This book is not meant to be a lesson on morality, but neither is it a satire. Rather, *The Queen's Gambit* is neutral, straightforward, and starkly realistic: a story for the sake of a story, with a well-crafted ebb and flow of action. There are surprising moments of brevity between scenes of high tension, and readers will ache for relief from the suspense. Although the chess games will no doubt exhilarate chess lovers, they'll also sweep away other readers with Beth's fast-paced reasoning, shrewd perception, and feverish passion. I would recommend *The Queen's Gambit* to young adults, since the author uses explicit language and incorporates mature themes. An award-winning adaptation is also on Netflix, if you want to see the story come to life!

Recommended Titles:

The Royal Game by Stefan Zweig

Looking for Alaska by John Green

The Hustler by Walter Tevis

Anne of Green Gables by L.M. Montgomery

The Stranger by Albert Camus