

# The Fatal Flaw of “The Queen’s Gambit”

By Sarah Miller

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*Netflix's adaptation of "The Queen's Gambit," starring Anya Taylor-Joy, copies virtually everything from Walter Tevis's novel, apart from its central tension. Photograph by Charlie Gray / Netflix*

I picked up Walter Tevis's novel "The Queen's Gambit," from 1983, at Skylight Books, in Los Angeles, sometime around 2002. It was a staff pick, and the blurb on the blue index card taped underneath said something like "sleeper gem by dude who wrote 'The Man Who Fell to Earth,' about an orphaned chess prodigy addicted to downers—read this now." On the cover, Michael Ondaatje, the author of "The English Patient," said that he reread it "every few years—for the pure pleasure and skill of it." I read it in two days, and over the years I have reread it probably a dozen times. From its first sentence ("Beth learned of her mother's death from a woman with a clipboard") to its last, it was my platonic ideal of a novel. I loved its respect for the fact that the

shortest distance between two points is a straight line (“From the back row Beth put up her hand. It was the first time she had done this”) and how this general efficiency made its richer emotional and physical details stand out, like brightly wrapped Christmas gifts set under a sparse tree. “Do I have to care about chess?” people would ask when I recommended the novel. I promised them that anyone who has ever felt lost, rejected, or underestimated while nurturing a fierce, mute hope that something residing deep within them might somehow save their life would love this book.

Following its début in October, “The Queen’s Gambit,” according to Netflix, became the streaming platform’s No. 1 show in sixty-three countries and its most-watched “limited scripted series” ever. (The show also appears to be responsible for compounding an ongoing, pandemic-induced chess boom, as measured in online chess activity as well as sales of chess sets and accessories.) I began watching the day it came out. I felt a twinge of familiarity in the austere rows of metal beds in the Methuen Home—the orphanage where Beth lives after her mother’s sudden death—and in the matchy-matchy décor at the home of her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, in suburban Lexington. But I could not summon any similar spark of recognition for Beth herself. As Beth’s chess career took off, I was interested in where it took her—drab gymnasiums, then grand Midwest hotels, then grander international hotels—but I did not care much what happened when she got there. At the same time I was being given the gift of seeing this imagined world come sumptuously to life, it was also being taken away, and the reason for the sense of loss was obvious: Anya Taylor-Joy is way too good-looking to play Beth Harmon.

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