

## The Queen's Gambit

Netflix, 2020

Review by Mark Rivlin

The name Walter Tevis (1929-1984) may not mean much to you. He was a journeyman club chess player ('Category C', 1400-1600 US Chess Federation). But off the board Tevis was a critically-acclaimed author with three of his six novels (*The Color of Money*, *The Hustler* and *The Man Who Fell To Earth*) made into groundbreaking films. And a fourth, *The Queen's Gambit* (1983) was released last month as a seven-episode mini series on Netflix and it has become an Internet sensation.

The novel, originally published by Random House, became part of the *Penguin Modern Classic* stable and as a keen American modern fiction aficionado and qualified chess patzer, I thoroughly enjoyed reading it many years ago. After Tevis's death in 1984, there was some interest in making it into a film, but nothing happened until 2019 when Netflix commissioned the TV series production.

Don't worry, I'm not going to give away any spoilers, but I urge you to watch it (assuming you subscribe to Netflix, or if not then if you can persuade a friend who does to come to the rescue). Beautifully crafted, the production provides an enticing view of the American chess circuit in sixties USA and unlike many portrayals of chess on the screen, keeps it very real. The services of one Garry Kasparov and renowned chess coach Bruce Pandolfini will not have come cheap, but their part in this superb production was immense.

Set in the early 1960s through to around 1970, Tevis's fictional storyline recounts the life of Elizabeth (Beth) Harmon and her rise to fame in the chess world. Nine-year-old Beth arrives at an orphanage and learns chess from the home's janitor Mr Shtabel (a tour-de-force cameo by Bill Camp). Director Scott Frank and

creator/writer Allan Scott provide a masterful interpretation of the protagonist's *flawed genius* character as Beth progresses through weekend tournaments in dimly-lit halls (how we miss them) through to State and National Championships and beyond, eventually seeking to undermine the Soviet Union's stranglehold on the game. (Does this remind you of anyone?)

Three actresses play Beth - Annabeth Kelly as a five-year-old, Isla Johnston in her early years at the orphanage and Anya Taylor-Joy as a teenager and beyond. And this is where Kasparov really earned his corn, showing Johnston and Taylor-Joy how to hold the pieces, press clocks as well as prepping their demeanour at the board. Having studied dance as part of her performing arts tertiary education, Taylor-Joy's comment on Kasparov's input on handling the pieces is as wonderful as her performance: "It's basically just choreography of the fingers."

Such was the attention to detail, that the games portrayed in the film were developed by Kasparov and Pendolfini based on analysis from actual games, and although we only catch glimpses of openings and positions, chess Internet guru *Agadmator* (Anotnio Radic) analyses two of the games on his feed (put *Agadmator Harmon* in a search engine and you'll enjoy analysis on real unreal games as well as another forty-plus minutes of free coaching). And don't worry, these videos have Radic's legendary *Hello everyone* introduction.

Yes, there are moments that are a tad over-dramatic (I cannot recall a live tournament where there is applause at the end of a match while other games are going on, it certainly never happened to me in London League Div 3) but the production's minutiae of detail at congresses, simuls and high-ranking tournaments, including bruised egos and the occasional affair give a rarely-seen window to the chess world. I particularly liked twins Matt and Mike (Matthew and Russell Dennis Lewis) who accepted their chess status as patzers with grace and became Harmon groupies around the US circuit.

Ultimately, the novel and TV production is about much more than chess; it is about failed aspirations (a great performance from Marielle Heller playing Alma Wheatley, Beth's adoptive mother), finding light at the end of a tunnel (Moses Ingram as Jolene, Beth's friend at the orphanage) and coping with addictive behaviour which has sadly found a home and ruined the lives of people who have given us immense pleasure (George Best, Alex Higgins, Tony Hancock, Amy Winehouse and Janis Joplin, to name a few of unfortunately many).

But more than anything *The Queen's Gambit* is about a woman in an arena dominated by men at a time when homemaker was the *expected* sacrifice for women. Tevis's Beth had a very different kind of sacrifice on her agenda with a flamboyant attacking style that sees her turning down draws. And when we get back over the board, it would be good to see more women and girls participating, having been inspired by this remarkable mini series.