

"[A] pitch-perfect murder mystery."
—RUTH WARE

Her Majesty the Queen Investigates



THE
WINDSOR
KNOT

A
NOVEL



SJ Bennett

Discussion Guide

1. Before beginning any discussion of Queen Elizabeth II, the character in *The Windsor Knot* or the real woman, it's helpful to understand her legacy and where she comes from. Discuss how she has carried on her family name from her father, King George VI, and how that has influenced the woman she is in the novel.
2. Having an 89-year-old main character presents both advantages and disadvantages, even for a queen. Discuss both as they relate to a protagonist who is attempting to solve a crime.
3. What qualities does the Queen bring to the role that make her a good investigator? Would she be good at solving mysteries outside her royal palaces?
4. The "dine and sleep" event held at one of the Queen's favorite palaces, Windsor Castle, is a unique and very civilized occasion. What role does the Russian soiree play at Windsor, and how might this have factored into the murder of the young Russian pianist Maksim Brodsky?
5. What was it about Brodsky that fascinated Queen Elizabeth? What did he remind her of?
6. Both Brodsky and his father decades earlier died suspiciously. Are their deaths connected, and what role did international relations play in each event?
7. One of the Queen's assistants, Rozie Oshodi, plays a pivotal role in the novel. Why is it that she seems unaffected by the Queen and her royal position?

What is it about her personal background that makes her such an ideal investigator? What kind of relationship does she have with the Queen?
8. It is obvious that the title, *The Windsor Knot*, has multiple meanings. Discuss both the physical and symbolic interpretations.
9. Those holding the highest royal positions are often looked at as merely figureheads. How does this make Queen Elizabeth feel? How do you feel about the royals?
10. *The Windsor Knot* is set in the year 2016. Why do you think author SJ Bennett chose this timeframe?
11. Queen Elizabeth fondly recalls one of her all-time favorite films, *Brief Encounter*. Discuss the irony of Bennett's decision to name the final part of the novel "A Brief Encounter."
12. How does Rachel Stiles fit into the story? Did her eventual death make it more or less likely, do you think, that the Queen would solve the crime?
13. Which of the following do you think was the ultimate driving force that led Queen Elizabeth to involve herself in the murder case: lack of faith in the investigators assigned to the case, the involvement of MI6, the effect on the morale of her household, the potential for it to be part of an international incident involving Vladimir Putin, or something else?

Behind the Book

On a drive one English spring evening, I found myself thinking about an episode of *The Crown*. The young Queen Elizabeth II had picked up a painted soldier from a model battlefield and absent-mindedly returned him to the wrong place. Her punctilious private secretary corrected the mistake. And I thought to myself that, while it made a nice observation about the private secretary, it was something the Queen – the woman I knew – would never have done.

I haven't met her, but my father has, many times. In the course of a long career in the army, he's hosted her at the Tower of London, drunk cocktails on the Royal Yacht Britannia and been awarded medals at Buckingham Palace. The woman my father knows is funny, engaged, well-informed and good company. She would have understood that it's impolite to fiddle with someone else's model battlefield, and if she'd ever moved a soldier it would have been to put him in the right place, not the wrong one.

That got me thinking, here's a woman with a lifetime of learning, who is often thought of as not very clever. But she's recognised as a world expert on horse racing, and there are many other fields besides, such as military history, that she knows extremely well. Also, while we're all looking at her, she's looking out. She must spot things all the time that others don't see.

What a perfect set-up for a detective. The woman I know could do it brilliantly.

The last half-hour of my drive spooled by in a dream as I considered the possibilities. I've been a fan of the Queen since 1977 – her Silver Jubilee year – when I was 11 and somebody gave me a book called *The Queen's Clothes* by Robb and Anne Edwards. It was about how the Queen developed her signature style, making sure she was always hard to copy and easy to see. Poring over this book, I began to tune in to the complexities of her life: the glamour of the designer clothes, certainly, but also the myriad constraints on what she can wear. Skirts can't fly up in the wind, or rub, or crease, or look too sexy or too bland, or too ostentatiously fashionable, or not fashionable enough... It's harder to be her than it looks.

As a detective, she could have access to any information she wanted, but she must never be seen to interfere. Total freedom, infinite constraints... I wanted to write about this woman a lot. Not just one book, but a whole series, following her around all the familiar locations and delving back into her long life.

I've always written books with a feminist element to them, and I'm fascinated by the idea of a 'little old lady' surrounded by men, someone who is deeply respected, but not always taken seriously. In this series, the Queen (my Queen) has learned that she can trust only certain women to keep her secrets. They are her assistant private secretaries, a role I interviewed for myself after a brief career as a strategy consultant with McKinsey. I'll never forget walking across the forecourt of Buckingham Palace. I didn't get that job in the end, and it's still the one that got away.

Behind the Book *(continued)*

The latest APS to work for my Queen is Rozie Oshodi. It is 2016, and she's a Nigerian Londoner in a multi-cultural, post-colonial world, where a Black woman can work with the Queen at the highest level. In fact, the real Queen's current equerry is Lieutenant Colonel Nana Kofi Twumasi-Ankrah, a Ghanaian-born British army officer. Like Rozie in the book, he's a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. The world is changing and at the heart of the plot is the UK's shifting position in it. The Queen is as likely to Google something on her iPad as to ask for someone to research it. And when President Obama asks difficult questions she must, in the parlance of Prince Harry's generation, 'style it out'.

I tell my writing students that a good plot, like a good martini, should always have a twist. There's a twist to the telling of these stories, because the Queen's uniqueness as an investigator is that she can't take the credit for solving the crime. And so the reader watches Her Majesty piece together the clues, pick out the red herrings and find out what she needs to know, but each time, she arranges it so that someone else – usually a senior man – thinks that he's solved it for himself. The denouement is all about how he explains it to her. In *The Windsor Knot*, he even gets knighted for it.

I had fun picturing the Queen behind the scenes, but in an affectionate way. President Obama called her 'an astonishing person and a jewel for the world' after that visit in 2016. Back then, in her ninetieth year, things were going well for her and her family. Four years later, her life, like ours, is more complicated. The Pantone shade of 2020 (Classic Blue) was chosen because, 'We are living in a time that requires trust and faith.' Perhaps that's why I wanted to write about someone solid and dependable. When she was twenty-one, Princess Elizabeth declared to the Commonwealth 'that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service'. She has tried to do that ever since. She is the sort of the person I like to imagine quietly in charge of things, working courageously to make sure good prevails. Isn't that what we hope for, in detective stories and in life?

SJ Bennett, London, May 2020



SJ Bennett gained her PhD in Italian Literature from the University of Cambridge and was a strategy consultant at McKinsey & Co before becoming a professional writer. She has published ten books for teenagers, winning the Times/Chicken House Competition for *Threads* in 2009 and the Romantic Novel of the Year award for *Love Song* in 2017.

Interactive Map

Click to learn more about rooms featured in *The Windsor Knot*



"[A] pitch-perfect murder mystery... If *The Crown* were crossed with *Miss Marple*..., the result would probably be something like this charming whodunnit."

—RUTH WARE

Characters

QUEEN ELIZABETH II

is 89 when this story starts in the spring of 2016, with her ninetieth birthday fast approaching. She is staying in her favourite home, Windsor Castle, for what is known as the 'Easter Court' — a month of peace and privacy where she can go out riding each day and see friends. Known as 'the Boss', she is responsible for a household of 500 people who live and work at the castle while she is in residence.

PRINCE PHILIP

At 94, he is shortly going to retire. But for now, in 2016, he is as busy as ever, overseeing the estates, attending official events, helping Her Majesty host hundreds of guests for her various birthday celebrations, and gently teasing his wife behind the scenes whenever he gets the opportunity.

ROZIE OSHODI,

the Queen's new Assistant Private Secretary. Rozie is a Nigerian Londoner who grew up in a council estate in Notting Hill and went on to serve in Afghanistan as a captain in the British Army. She is quick-witted, brave and somewhat amazed to find the Queen is asking her to do increasingly unusual things. The Queen has a secret life that Rozie is only just discovering.

MAKSIM BRODSKY,

a Russian-born pianist, brought in to entertain the guests at a 'dine and sleep' event. The following morning, he is found dead in his castle room and soon the police suspect murder. Brodsky ran a political blog. Does this have something to do with his death?

SIR SIMON HOLCROFT,

the Queen's efficient Private Secretary. Sir Simon is smooth, suave and sophisticated. He always has everything under control and his greatest desire is to protect the Queen from anything difficult or unsavoury. Which means that when the Queen wants to poke about in difficult or unsavoury areas, she has to find clever ways to find out what she needs to know.

Characters

MASHA PEYROVSKAYA,

wife of a Russian oligarch and guest at the dine and sleep. Masha is very beautiful, deeply romantic, and was a friend of Maksim's.

MEREDITH GOSTELOW,

architect and guest at the dine and sleep. Meredith is dramatic, creative and unhappy. When she arrives late at the breakfast table after the night of the dine and sleep, it is clear she has something to hide.

RAVI SINGH,

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, is officially in charge of the police investigation. He gets on well with Her Majesty, although she reminds him a bit of his scary old headmistress.

GAVIN HUMPHREYS,

Director General of MI5, believes the Queen has underestimated the threat to her household from a foreign power. He suspects spies, and is keen to find them, whatever the cost. Her Majesty does not always agree.

SANDY ROBERTSON,

the Queen's page. He is often at her side, and is the one to pour Her Majesty's daily cup of Darjeeling. He spends more time with her than almost anyone. Is MI5 right to suspect him of being a spy? Is the Queen right to think they are being ridiculous? After all, spies have been known to work in her household before...