



FILM: **THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT**

FDG RATING: 4.8 ☺☺☺☺☺

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Scott Frank: *director*
Anya Taylor-Joy: *actress, Beth Harmon*
Marielle Heller: *actress, Alma Wheatley*

DATE: January 3, 20121

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT**

The Netflix TV mini-series, *The Queen's Gambit* (title refers to a strategic opening chess move that temporarily sacrifices a pawn to gain control of the center of the board), shatters our preconceived mold of a teenage chess nerd in the 1960s. The fearless chess prodigy is an extremely intelligent young female, Beth, who evolves into a glamorous fashionista while she wins progressively more competitive tournaments, all while being addicted to those little green pills, a popular tranquilizer, that she was first given in the orphanage as a way to keep the young wards from getting out of hand. In a sport where females are a rarity, Beth gains the admiration, respect, and support of her male counterparts who are in awe of her exceptional skill as she travels nationally and then internationally, finally culminating in her sober rematch/win in Moscow against the world champion Borgov. She has achieved her obsessive dream, to be the best chess player in the world.

The series has an enchanting vibe that almost all discussion film participants thoroughly enjoyed though one less enthusiastic viewer described it as a bit "Hallmark-y" in tone. But most of us were hooked beginning with the opening scene of a young woman waking up in a disordered Paris hotel room and quickly washing down some pills with minibar booze while racing to dress for a Very Important Game of Chess. Set in the cold War era, we appreciated the authenticity of the film, revealing the culture of the 60s, the attitude toward women, Beth's stereotypical "house wife" adoptive mother, the music, the sets, costumes, and especially the chess games. Master chess players were consulted to make sure the chess moves, the pace, gestures, and ambiance were as authentic as possible including the personalities and quirks of typical chess players. One viewer noted that the coming of age story could be enjoyed on many levels.

Anya Taylor-Joy's performance is outstanding as the troubled young woman who medicates herself with chess. All the actors were excellent and their characters were interesting. The story pulls you in as pivotal incidents continually occur that seem to foretell something sinister, then you are relieved when nothing bad happens, and the incident is actually a positive experience. For example, early in the story, at age 9, after she survives a horrific car crash in which her mother dies. Beth is sent to an orphanage where she meets the janitor in the basement as she is doing a small errand. We hold our breath hoping his intentions are not malicious, as she asks about the board game he has in front of him and asks him to teach her how to play. Mr. Shaibel teaches her chess and becomes her chess mentor. The game immediately makes sense to her — when nothing else in her life does. He recognizes her uncanny aptitude for the game, so although she is forbidden from going into the basement, she escapes there repeatedly, quickly advancing her chess skills. At night she runs through the moves he teaches her on an imaginary board she sees on the ceiling among the shadows of the prisonlike dormitory where she sleeps. Shaibel eventually arranges her to meet the local high school chess team coach who was so impressed with her skills that he invited her to come play the members of the chess club, where Beth easily defeated all of them. Shaibel later loans Beth the \$5 she needs to enter her first national tournament.

Another unexpected twist is when, as a young teen, she is adopted by a suburban couple, Alma and Allston Wheatley. We dread that the husband might have salacious motives for adopting a teenage girl but he could care less about Beth (as well as his alcoholic housewife), hoping the young teen will provide company for his wife since he is always on the road. We then envisioned a destructive relationship between the mother and adoptive daughter, but after an awkward start, the two bond as Alma realizes Beth can earn them money as she wins progressively more competitive tournaments. She unfortunately enables Beth's substance abuse but enthusiastically helps plan and then accompanies her on her travels, acting as her manager. Alma is also responsible for inspiring a sense of fashion in Beth who in the beginning has a geeky, drab wardrobe.

We enjoyed Beth's friendships with the male chess players, who, surprisingly, were extremely supportive not only teaming up to help her strategize how to win games but also helped her through struggles with addiction. Beth's addiction was, in fact, a universal criticism of the series, because a chess player would not have been able to perform as she did while being on drugs.

Although the characters lacked depth and nuance which would have led to a more thought provoking story, we were entertained and enjoyed it from beginning to end. Beth has some stumbles as she progresses from local fame to international sensation, but she overcomes great odds and that is extremely satisfying. *The Queen's Gambit* was a winner in our nine year tournament of film discussions, earning our highest cumulative score since the group began in 2012. We gave it a 4.8 on our scale of 1 to 5. 5 is the best.



See you at the movies!

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