

THE WINDSOR KNOT
By SJ Bennett
Behind the Book Essay

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 hard to see, 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.

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 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