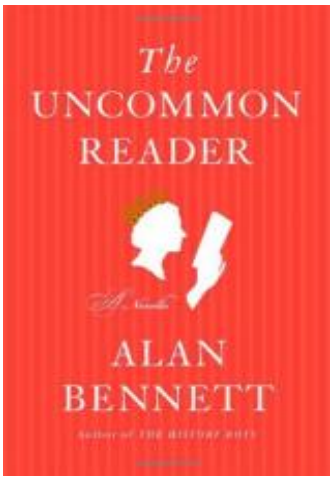
The Uncommon Reader: A Novella

by Alan Bennett



About the Book

The author of the Tony Award winner **The History Boys**, Alan Bennett is one of Britain?s best-loved literary voices. With **The Uncommon Reader**, he brings us a playful homage to the written word, imagining a world in which literature becomes a subversive bridge between powerbrokers and commoners. By turns cheeky and charming, the novella features the Queen herself as its protagonist. When her yapping corgis lead her to a mobile library, Her Majesty develops a new obsession with reading. She finds herself devouring works by a tantalizing range of authors, from the Brontë sisters to Jean Genet. With a young member of the palace kitchen staff guiding her choices, it?s not long before the Queen begins to develop a new perspective on the world?one that alarms her closest advisers and tempts her to make bold new decisions. Brimming with the mischievous wit that has garnered acclaim for Bennett on both sides of the Atlantic, **The Uncommon Reader** is a delightful celebration of books and writers, and the readers who sustain them.

Discussion Guide

1. What play on words did you detect in the novella?s title? In the world of literature, how are commoners defined? What ironies exist in the mobile library?s intended purpose?

2. Early on, the Queen tells Norman that she reads because ?one has a duty to find out what people are like.? The Queen later says to Sir Kevin, ?One reads for pleasure. It is not a public duty.? What accounts for this transformation? Do you read because of a sense of duty, or purely for pleasure (as Norman does)?

3. What books were you reminded of as the Queen?s literary obsession began causing her to shirk her royal duties and pay less attention to her family? When have you preferred to lose yourself in fiction rather than confront reality?

4. Many critics and scholars have debated the ?correct? way to interpret literature, ranging from those who scorn any political or sociological interpretations to those who scorn interpretation itself. How does the Queen seem to interpret

what she reads? What determines whether she likes a book?

5. The Uncommon Reader contains references to dozens of authors and characters, including Joanna Trollope and Harry Potter, writers affiliated with the University of East Anglia (such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan), Alice Munro and Henry James. How did the Queen?s entourage discuss such a broad range with her? What are the implications of name games designed to judge a person by his or her taste in books? What does one?s reading list say about oneself?

6. Would this tale have been as effective if the public leader at its center were not a monarch? Could a democratically elected ruler have generated as much humor? What makes the English Queen ideal for this scenario?

7. What comic elements are at work in the friendship between Norman and the Queen? What sort of literary adviser is he? What would you have advised her to read?

8. What is the effect of reading a novella?more substantial than a short story but not as lengthy as a novel? How did the author?s triumphs as a playwright and television writer shape the storytelling in **The Uncommon Reader**?

9. What is the effect of reading a book about reading books? How might the fictional Queen respond to **The Uncommon Reader**?

10. In her conversation with the university vice-chancellor and the creative writing professor, the Queen debates whether reading softens a person up while writing does the reverse. Do you agree that writing makes us tough but reading makes us soft? How does the Queen handle her transition from reader to writer?

11. A main premise of the novella is that the Queen has no hobbies of any kind; hobbies, we are told, imply preferences, which must be avoided because they can lead to the exclusion of various populations. Is this an accurate portrayal of public life in general? Can you name any public figures who not only admit to being avid readers but who also engage in public dialogues advocating books, or who advocate controversial books or books written by marginalized populations?

12. In the closing scenes, the Queen begins to describe herself candidly as the kingdom?s ?deodorant,? forced to passively oversee or tout dreadful public-policy decisions. In what ways did reading help her arrive at this realization? Is her final decision regarding the throne necessary to launch her career as a writer?

13. In what ways does **The Uncommon Reader** enhance your previous reading of works by Alan Bennett? How might the novella?s Queen have responded to the students in **The History Boys**, and vice versa?

Author Bio

Alan Bennett has been one of England?s leading dramatists since the success of *Beyond the Fringe*, which brought him to New York in the 1980s. His work includes the *Talking Heads* television series and the stage plays *Forty Years On, The Lady in the Van, A Question of Attribution*, and *The Madness of George III*. His debut novella, **The Clothes They Stood Up In**, was a *Today Show* Book Club Pick. His most recent play, *The History Boys*, won six Tony Awards, including Best Play. It was also released as a feature film. His memoir **Untold Stories** was a #1 bestseller in the U.K.,

and he was named the Author of the Year at the 2006 British Book Awards.

Critical Praise

?One of the greatest living English writers.?

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