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JUST A QUEEN

Jane Caro



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Relationships	2
Leadership	2
Tudor England	2
Religion	3
Writing Style	3
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	7
About the Author	8

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SYNOPSIS

Just a Queen follows on from Jane Caro's *Just a Girl*, a historical novel about the life and reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth has outsmarted her enemies and risen above a lifetime of hurt and betrayal – a mother executed by her father, a beloved brother who died too young and an enemy sister whose death made her queen.

Not knowing whom she can trust, Elizabeth is surrounded by men who give her compliments and advice but may be hiding daggers and poison behind their backs. Elizabeth must use her head and ignore her heart to be the queen her people need, even if it means doing the one thing she swore she would never do: executing a fellow queen, her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots.

Insightful, personal and detailed, *Just a Queen* offers an engaging perception into the complicated world of the Tudor era and the woman behind the crown.

THEMES

Relationships:

- Elizabeth's tumultuous relationships with her family impacted significantly on her life.
- Whilst not having the most positive relationships with her family, Elizabeth fostered genuine and lasting relationships with figures such as Kat Ashley, Blanche Parry, Robin (Robert) Dudley, William Cecil and Sir Francis Walsingham.
- Elizabeth craved for her mother, Anne Boleyn, whose execution haunted her throughout her life.
- Elizabeth's relationship with the English people took precedence over her personal need for love and her advisors' desire for her to marry and produce an heir.

Leadership:

- Elizabeth was a strong leader who put her nation before herself.
- Elizabeth had an active role during her reign, rather than being a puppet to powerful men in her court.

Tudor England:

- Tudor England was a bloodthirsty and treacherous era.

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Religion:

- Religious intolerance caused much bloodshed during the Tudor Era.
- In *Just A Girl*, the Protestant Elizabeth went against her Catholic sister, Mary I, almost finding herself beheaded as a result. In *Just A Queen*, Elizabeth must still battle the Catholic church that wants Mary, Queen of Scots, to replace her as their ruler.

WRITING STYLE

Just a Queen cleverly entwines the deepest of Elizabeth's thoughts and emotions with historically accurate events of her reign. Caro's extensive research is clearly evident in the detailed text, which includes extracts from primary source documents such as poetry written by Elizabeth I. It provides an interesting launch pad for many classroom discussions and is suitable for adolescent readers, although adults too will certainly enjoy this read.

STUDY NOTES

- *Just a Queen* is told as a circular narrative; it starts with Elizabeth's turmoil over the execution of her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, and then reflects on the events that led to her death by beheading. Why is this an effective way in which to structure a story? Discuss that readers may 'almost forget' the beginning as they are drawn further into the text? Re-read the first chapter after reaching the conclusion of the novel. How does this help to tie the threads of *Just a Queen* together?
- Reread the depiction of Mary, Queen of Scots' beheading. Discuss the descriptive techniques and language features used by the author to bring this scene to life. Which of these techniques would you like to try in your own writing?
- The emotions that monarchs have as they make difficult decisions are well depicted in *Just a Queen*. How important is it to the reader that they can gain this insight throughout the text?
- What does Elizabeth mean when she says her 'crown is as great a shackle as any set of irons' (p.33)?

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- The religious divide between Catholics and Protestants underpinned much of the Tudor era, but also has had far reaching implications well into the twenty-first century. Conduct an inquiry into the history of religious disharmony throughout history.
- After Elizabeth refuses to guarantee the safe passage of Mary, Queen of Scots through England, she reflects, 'I did not make the decision to refuse her a passport out of strength but out of weakness.' (pp.70-71). What does she mean by this?
- Evaluate William Cecil's advice to always 'give what you can in the game of diplomacy and withhold only what you must' (p.70).
- Use a graphic organiser (a.k.a. mind map, knowledge map, concept map, or story map) to compare Elizabeth I with her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots. How were they similar and different?
- Why does Elizabeth say, 'Kind words have always undone me faster than harsh ones' (p.95)?
- How did the birth of Prince James (Stuart) affect Elizabeth?
- Place yourself in Elizabeth's shoes. Write a journal entry in this role about the way in which other people's decisions are affecting your own life and future. See p.107 to further contextualise this task.
- On p.152, Elizabeth explains that the lack of love she experienced as a child made her a different queen to Mary Queen of Scots. In what way was this true?
- Choose either the analogy on p.154 of the cat and fish head or the tapestry of the ginger cat and the mouse on p.165. How do these analogies represent Elizabeth's life?
- Beheadings were often seen as somewhat of a sport for the commoners, however Elizabeth reflects that having lived under the shadow of the axe, she couldn't take the suffering of others so lightly. Discuss this sentiment.

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- Analyse the poems written by Elizabeth (p.169, pp.231-232 and p.256). What are they alluding to? Why has she written them? How do they fit within the framework of Caro's narrative?
- Compile a profile of Elizabeth's achievements as Queen of England.
- What were Elizabeth's strengths and weaknesses as a monarch? (Use William Cecil's comment about her strengths on p.175 to help.)
- Research more about the massacre of the Huguenots (Protestants) under Catherine de Medici's rule in France. How did this impact on Elizabeth's reign? Use the opening chapter of Jackie French's *The White Ship* to help with this task.
- Elizabeth says she yearns for 'what I have not had' (p.222). What has she missed out on in her life that makes her feel so?
- Why do you think Elizabeth cries 'real tears' for Mary, Queen of Scots (p.247)?
- What has Elizabeth learnt about herself throughout *Just a Queen*?
- Discuss Elizabeth's motto, *semper eadem*, which means 'always the same' (p.271). What evidence is there of this motto in the text?
- Study a family tree of the Tudors to help visualise the structure of this family.
- Throughout the text, Jane Caro shows the depth of the many relationships Elizabeth formed with those around her such as Blanche Parry, Kat Ashley, Robin Dudley and her closest advisors such as William Cecil and later, Sir Francis Walsingham. She also discusses the lack of relationship shared with her mother, father and siblings. Create a sociogram (a mind map of a person's social links with others) that shows the relationships she shared with these characters.

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- How would you describe Elizabeth's relationship with Robin Dudley? Why do you think it did not progress beyond flirtation and friendship?
- Elizabeth has recurring dreams about her mother, Anne Boleyn. How do these dreams reflect the events that surrounded Anne Boleyn's death and the impact this had on Elizabeth.
- Investigate the fashion and customs of the Tudor Court. What can be discerned about health and hygiene in this era by the use of things such as wigs and makeup? How did Elizabeth's sense of style influence the general style of the aristocracy of England?
- In small groups, select a scene from *Just a Queen* to dramatise and perform.
- View various portraits of Elizabeth that were painted during her reign. How do these compare with your mental image of her having read *Just a Queen*?
- How is Elizabeth's relationship with God pivotal to her leadership and decision-making processes?
- In what way did William Cecil become somewhat of a father-figure to Elizabeth?
- Why do you think Elizabeth chose to remain single? Do you agree with her decision? Why?
- Write and perform a monologue in the role of one of the characters from *Just a Queen*.
- Read the Author's Note at the end of the text (p.308 and over the page) which gives a comprehensive context from which this novel was written. Discuss Caro's use of primary and secondary sources to form the basis of this historical narrative.

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- Compare *Just a Queen* with Jackie French's *The Dog Who Loved a Queen*, which gives Mary, Queen of Scots' perspective on the event leading to her death.
- Having read *Just a Queen*, compare Jane Caro's depiction of the queen with satirical portrayals of Elizabeth from shows such as *Blackadder II* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfTdnWLMLDA>) and *Horrible Histories* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HujNLAoixXw>).
- In your opinion, is Elizabeth deserving of being called a great queen? Justify your response with reasoning and evidence.
- Critique excerpts from Hollywood versions of Elizabeth's life such as *Elizabeth* or *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. How do they compare with *Just a Queen*?
- Even though this story is set many centuries ago, the theme of religious intolerance is still relevant today. What can modern leaders learn from the tumultuous history of the Catholic and Protestant divide to help secure a more peaceful society today?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Like its predecessor *Just a Girl*, *Just a Queen* is a novel, not a biography. This gives me special privileges. I can invent conversations, thoughts and feelings to give life to my characters and (hopefully) make them feel as vivid as they did in their real lives. As an avid fan of this period of history and of Elizabeth Tudor herself, what I have not done, however, is invent any characters, major events or incidences.

There has been no need to do so. Elizabeth Tudor – as a neglected princess in *Just a Girl* and a powerful queen in *Just a Queen* – lived an exciting life in very turbulent times. What happens within these pages actually happened; how those involved reacted to these events, however, I have imagined.

Occasionally, where appropriate, I have even used their own words, although I have simplified the language to make their meaning more accessible to the modern reader.

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The driving force behind these two books has been my own curiosity about how it must have felt to be Elizabeth Tudor. In *Just a Girl*, I explored Elizabeth's early life, from birth to coronation, a time when she lived in real fear for her safety. In *Just a Queen*, Elizabeth is still in danger but is now much better protected due to her status as monarch. This second volume is really an exploration of what it must have been like for a woman – an unmarried woman – to wield power in such a patriarchal society.

It is also, of course, an exploration of the fatal rivalry between Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots. But, as it is Elizabeth who tells us her story, Mary is always seen through her eyes. I leave it to another novelist to bring this equally fascinating female figure to life.

As a novelist I owe a particular debt to the historians and biographers on whose brilliant books I have relied to research my story. I owe a special debt to Alison Plowden's biography *Elizabeth I* (Sutton Publishing Ltd, 2004) and Peter Ackroyd's *Tudors: the history of England volume II* (Pan Macmillan, 2012). Their attention to detail, lively writing and different perspectives meant their books were the ones I turned to over and over. However, all the books mentioned in the bibliography have had an influence on this novel. If reading *Just a Queen* has awakened a further interest in Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart, the books listed in the bibliography would be a great place for you to start learning more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Caro is an author, novelist, journalist, broadcaster, columnist, advertising writer and social commentator. She spent thirty years as an advertising writer and her creative work has won many national and international awards.

She appears in the media regularly, including weekly spots on *Weekend Sunrise*, *Gruen Transfer* and *Sunrise*. She has created, written, presented and co-produced a six-part radio series for the ABC. The series *For Better, For Worse* will be produced as a four-part TV series for *ABC Compass*, which she will write and present. Jane has also appeared on *The Drum*, *Q&A*, *The Project*, *Daily Edition*, *Mornings on 9*, *Studio 10* and *Today*. She writes regular monthly columns for *Mt (Management Today) Magazine* and the *Sun Herald's Sunday Life*. She is also in demand as a speaker, workshop facilitator and MC. *Just a Queen* is the sequel to her first young adult novel *Just a Girl*.