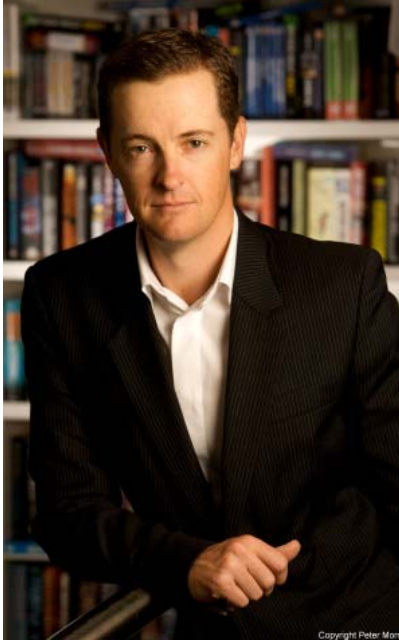




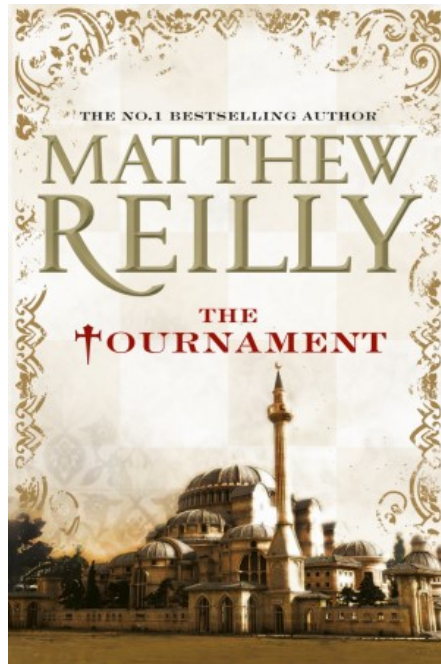
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NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Matthew Reilly



THE TOURNAMENT

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Chess, Ascham claimed, taught many important lessons: to flatter one's opponent, to lay traps and to see them laid, to be bold and to restrain one's tendency to boldness, to appear naive when in truth one is alert, to see the future many moves ahead and to discover that decisions *always* have consequences.

Ascham taught my young mistress well.' (p 5)

'To learn, as far as Roger Ascham was concerned, was the noblest of all human endeavours, and it was an *active* one.' (p 18)

Set in 1546, this historical thriller imagines the teenage Bess, later to be Queen Elizabeth I, witnessing a chess tournament organised by Suleiman the Magnificent, the increasingly powerful Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. After the Moslem ruler issues an irrefutable challenge to the kings of Europe, 'YOU ARE INVITED TO SEND YOUR FINEST PLAYER OF THE GAME KNOWN AS...CHESS TO COMPETE IN A TOURNAMENT TO DETERMINE THE CHAMPION OF THE KNOWN WORLD' (p 16), Bess joins her teacher, esteemed scholar Roger Ascham, as part of the English delegation to Constantinople. Also included in the entourage are English chess master, Mr Giles, the insufferably priggish Ponsonbys, and Bess's beautiful and licentious friend Elsie.

Initially, Bess marvels at the wonders of the Ottoman capital and the illustrious dignitaries attending the tournament. But her awe is too soon supplanted by horror when a violent murder takes place in the palace, and the Sultan enlists Ascham's aid to catch the killer. As more murders follow, diplomatic rivalries intensify and the chess tournament itself is shown to be a daring move on a much larger board. From the glories of the Hagia Sophia to the debauchery of the palace after dark and the seediness of the backstreet bazaars, Ascham and Bess discover appalling secrets worth killing to conceal. In a city that is as depraved as it is extravagant, startling events and tragic consequences give Bess a harsh education in the wondrous and horrifying ways of the world, shaping her into the future Virgin Queen.

The reader is presented with fascinating insights into the Ottoman culture, both in the 16th century and further back in history, including the clash between moderate Sunni and fundamentalist Shia branches of Islam (p 270), the history of Moslem veils (p 213) and the rise of Suleiman's empire. Also explored is the interaction between Ottoman and European cultures, epitomised by the game of chess itself, which originated in Persia (p 13) and was adopted and adapted across Europe. While there is a serious military threat (pp 20-21), the cultural appreciations and commercial interactions between the Ottomans and the Europeans, such as the preservation of the ancient philosophical works (pp 268-9), and the conversion of the Hagia Sophia (p 75) as well as the trade between the Orient and Europe (p 82) illustrates the complex relationship between the two cultures. When Elizabeth I learns of the decline of Constantinople and the Ottomans (p 392), she no doubt experiences contradictory feelings.

The role and power of religion are central to the novel, in as much as they were central to life during that period. All branches of Christianity and Islam are shown to be intricately linked not only to ecclesiastical influence but also to political power and social repression. Further, while the virtues of religion are shown, through the figure of Ignatius de Loyola, who Ascham describes as a 'truly pious man' (p 224), and the Catholic patronage of Michelangelo (p 108), the corruption and depravity of organised religion are also demonstrated with frightening realism. This includes the selling of indulgences in Catholicism (p 205), intolerance and violence (p 95) and the abuse of children (pp 192-3).

Ethics and morals are another thematic thread. Bess learns that religion and ethics are not as closely linked as she once believed, 'For my whole life I had thought priests and ministers had a special, higher relationship with our Lord. Now I could see otherwise. Priests were simply men with the same flaws and desires as other men' (p 225). Bess is actively developing her personal code of beliefs and ethics, demonstrating an interest in Lutheran doctrine (p 215) and a thirst for understanding of foreign practices (p 38), while feeling both enticement and revulsion towards Elsie's promiscuity. While Bess clearly believes in certain moral absolutes, Ascham demonstrates a pragmatic moral relativism,

about slave-giving (p 88) and the treatment of the kitchen staff (p 186), and questionable duty of care with both Elsie and Pietro, which would be influential in the future queen's moral development.

The rule of law and the nature of power are also explored. Ascham challenges Bess's notion that England is a more civilised society than the Ottomans, declaring 'We are not so civilised ...Your safety is guaranteed by the violence at your father's disposal.' (p 44) Bess has long understood the abuse of power thanks to her father, but in Constantinople, she witnesses the abuse of power, by ordinary people, by priests and by sultans, princes and kings. She also grows to understand that power can be self-contained, 'I realised that the truly powerful do not need to put their power on display at all times' (p 112), while Ascham enforces the importance of diplomacy and avoiding conflict where possible 'Be it a stupid tavern brawl or a naval battle, a scrap avoided is the best result for everyone concerned.' (p 46)

The importance of education and reason also feature heavily. Ascham's unconventional and progressive attitude towards Bess's education allows her a well-rounded understanding of traditional subjects, including languages, but also broadens her world view and encourages independence of thought and personal growth. Ascham says, 'I intend to make you *formidable*', (p 45) knowing Bess will need more than needlepoint and piety to survive and thrive. Ascham's use of deductive reasoning to investigate the murders is a contrast to common superstitions, demonstrating by example the importance of looking beyond the obvious for logical explanations, 'We just have to find that reason. The acquisition of knowledge, the sheer pleasure of finding things out, is the greatest gift in life.' (p 18)

The major themes and issues in the novel provide an entertaining and informative experience for the reader but also cleverly link with historical fact. While it is fiction, the people and events witnessed by Bess provide an enthralling background to the reign of Elizabeth I. As the author says, 'This is the key to the book: everything that occurs in it is about what we know happens after it.' (p 406)

WRITING STYLE

1. **Historical fiction generally relies on the use of 'faction'** (a portmanteau of 'fact' and 'fiction'). The author has researched the youth and reign of Elizabeth I and her teachers Roger Ascham and William Grindal, the rise and decline of the Ottoman Empire, and the history of chess. He has outlined in his notes that less is known of Bess's formative years than of her reign and has used both documented fact and the lack of information as creative space. How does this blend of fact and fiction further our understanding of historical figures and events?
2. This novel is also a **thriller** and a murder mystery. The author employs a number of techniques of these genres to enhance the plot and keep the reader entranced. Which of these techniques do you think was employed most effectively and why?
3. This novel is **structured with a prologue and epilogue** as a framing structure for the central narrative. Re-read the prologue. Do you interpret it differently on this second reading? Why?
4. **A number of other texts** are referenced throughout the novel, including extracts from books on the history of chess and quotes attributed to Elizabeth. In what ways do these enhance the reader's experience?
5. **Chess acts as a narrative and allegorical device**. How did this enhance the reader's experience? What other symbols did you notice?
6. **This novel is filled with vividly drawn characters**, many of whom are actual historical figures (such as Ivan the Terrible) and others who are fictional (such as Mr Giles). Which do you think would be more difficult to portray? Who do you think is most convincingly depicted?
7. **Many scenes, particularly Elsie's, are conveyed through later conversation with the narrator**. What challenges does this present to the author and in what ways were they overcome?

THE AUTHOR

Matthew Reilly is the international bestselling author of ten novels: *Contest*, *Ice Station*, *Temple*, *Area 7*, *Scarecrow*, *Hover Car Racer*, *Seven Ancient Wonders*, *The Six Sacred Stones*, *The Five Greatest Warriors*, *Scarecrow and the Army of Thieves*, and a novella, *Hell Island*. His books are published in over 20 languages, with worldwide sales exceeding 4 million copies. www.matthewreilly.com

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Every nation thinks their own culture is the pinnacle of civilisation and that all other cultures are primitive and barbarous. It is a sad but natural prejudice of the human mind. That is why one must travel as much as one can. Travel is the finest form of education.' (p 62) Discuss.
2. 'What people do in the name of religion is not necessarily religious. It often has baser reasons behind it.' (p 74) What are some examples from history you can provide to support this statement?
3. 'If aggression meets empty space it tends to defeat itself.' (p 290) Discuss.
4. Matthew Reilly says he was inspired by *The Name of the Rose* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (p 403). In what ways have those works influenced this book? In what ways is this book different?
5. The author says the inclusion of explicit content was essential for the story he wanted to tell. Do you think this imagining of Elizabeth I's experiences in her youth is a convincing explanation of her status as the Virgin Queen?
6. 'Many have wondered at the life I have led, Gwinny: a queen who never married or bore heirs; a woman with no military training who fended off Philip's armadas; a Protestant ruler who continually executed Ignatius of Loyola's Catholic missionaries and who on more than one occasion rebuffed proposals of marriage from the Russian tsar, Ivan.' (p 6) How well do you think the novel answers questions about Elizabeth I's reign?
7. The Ottoman Empire is shown at the height of its power. What did you learn about Ottoman history, faiths and customs? Investigate further its rise and decline.
8. How much of the Ottoman and Islamic cultures have been incorporated into Western cultures? What influence do you think this has had, historically and in the present, in science, architecture, literature and the arts?
9. How would the treatment and actions of other women have influenced Bess? What could she have learned about gender, sex and power from her mother, Primrose Ponsonby, Elsie and the Hürrem Sultan, Roxelana?
10. The novel shows terrible child abuse at the hands of members of the Catholic Church. How relevant is this today?
11. Cardinal Farnese's prejudiced views of Islam led to Imam Ali calling for a *fatwa* against him (p 91). How 'Christian' was Farnese's behaviour? How 'Moslem' was Ali's?
12. 'It would please me best if, at the last, a marble stone shall record that this Queen having lived such and such a time, lived and died a virgin.' (*Elizabeth to Parliamentary Delegation*) How well does this novel explain this statement which was reputedly made by Elizabeth I?

THE TOURNAMENT

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Macmillan Australia

Hardback - ISBN: 9781742612393

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Sydney NSW 2000

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