



# Reading Group Gold

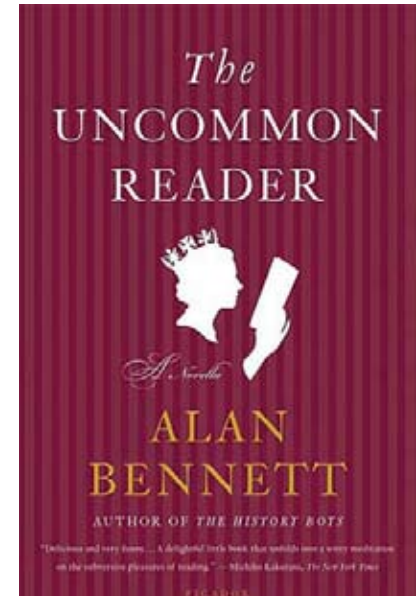
## The Uncommon Reader

A Novella

by Alan Bennett

### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Uncommon Reader* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Uncommon Reader*.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42764-1 | 2008

### About the Book

The joys of reading sometimes come to us late in life, but whether we are old or young, rich or poor, commoner or royal, books do not discriminate against those who read them. In Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*, the Queen of England, takes her first foray into the realm of literature, late in her reign, when her corgis lead her to a mobile library parked outside Buckingham Palace. Beginning with Ivy Compton-Burnett and Nancy Mitford, then on through J.R. Ackerly, Jean Genet, Henry James, and finally Proust, her majesty embarks upon a royal tour through literature both current and classic. And, book by book, reading transforms her life, inspiring her to empathize with her subjects, and to become a more independent person.

As *The Uncommon Reader* shows, books have the power to inspire, to provoke, to send ripples through a monarchy, and, of course, if they are good, to make us talk about them.

### Praise for *The Uncommon Reader*

"Bennett's deadpan, self-deprecating humor translates perfectly." —David Gates, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"There is probably no other distinguished English man of letters more instantly likeable than Bennett." —Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post Book World*

"A prose stylist of disarming grace and sly humor." —*The New York Times Book Review*



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## About the Author

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.

## Discussion Questions

1. Does your group meet regularly? If so, how do you think the queen, as fountain of honor, would appraise your list of reading so far?
2. The queen says that she reads because, "One has a duty to find out what people are like." Yet she begins by reading Nancy Mitford and Ivy Compton-Burnett, hardly a stretch for Her Royal Majesty. How did you begin your reading career? Was it Anne of Green Gables or Barbara Cartland? What treasured books on your group's list closely reflect your own world and background? Do you read to understand others? Is anyone present at this meeting a member of the titled aristocracy?
3. Early in *The Uncommon Reader*, the queen explains that she has resisted reading because it is a hobby, and therefore an expression of a preference—preferences exclude people and are to be avoided. Why does she fear that reading will exclude people – haven't we been brought together today by reading? Is your reading group very exclusive? Have you ever denied membership to someone who wanted to join?
4. "Herself part of the panoply of the world, why now was she intrigued by books, which, whatever else they might be, were just a reflection of the world or a version of it? Books? She had seen the real thing." Do you believe there is a difference between reading and experiencing? Isn't the act of reading a form of experience, or is that vein of thinking distinctly privileged?
5. At first the queen says that her purpose in reading is not primarily literary: it is for analysis and reflection. Why exactly do you read; is it a lofty endeavor or a fundamentally human one?
6. What do you think of the queen's values as a reader, for example her insistence upon reading a book all the way through to the end, regardless her level of engagement? Surely most of us would put a book down if within fifty pages it proved to be a tedious waste of time. Have you ever attempted to discuss a book you haven't read?
7. Authors, the queen decides, were probably best met within the pages of their novels, left to the imagination like their characters. Have you met any famous writers? What were they like? Was your experience



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anything like the queen's?

8. The appeal of books, according to the queen, lay in their indifference: there is something undeferring about literature, she says. Books do not care who reads them or whether one read them or not. All readers are equal, herself included. Do you agree? Have you ever felt unequal to a book? Superior to one?

9. When the queen first meets the man in the book mobile, she refers to herself as a pensioner – this is clearly a joke. Talk about how Alan Bennett gives voice to the queen and draws humor from her. How had your feelings for this seemingly inaccessible figure changed by book's end?

10. Why is Norman fond of Cecil Beaton, David Hockney and J.R. Ackerley, what do these three people have in common, besides being British artists and writers?

11. Should our leaders spend more time engaged in the arts, particularly in reading literature (for what it's worth, Bill Clinton said he loved Walter Mosely)? What would be the effect?

12. When the queen begins to ask her subjects what they are reading, she is usually met with a shrug (or the Bible, or *Harry Potter*). Are people intimidated by reading, or are they just lazy and dim?

13. As the queen reads, she grows less interested in her royal duties, and even her appearance (the "permutations" of her wardrobe) goes into decline. Is she becoming more normal, more common? How has reading endangered her ability to carry out her role as a focus for British identity and unity? Isn't that role just a little too much for anyone to shoulder?

14. The queen finds that one book often lead to another; that doors opened wherever she turned ("the days weren't long enough for the reading she wanted to do"). Has *The Uncommon Reader* opened doors for you? Has it inspired or emboldened you to try a book you've been putting off. Proust, perhaps?

15. At first the queen does not like Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* ("oh, do get on!"), but she finds that reading is like a muscle that needs to be developed, and later she changes her mind about James. Have you ever had a similar experience, upon revisiting a challenging book? Would you consider reading *The Uncommon Reader* again, in order to glean further nuance from its pages?