

The Crown abdicates without a successor

My viewing experience recapitulated a running theme of the show: the question, *Why are we doing this?*

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This month, the Netflix series *The Crown* reached its conclusion. I came along with it through six inconsistent and sometimes downright sour seasons, watching to the end out of what must have been an unaccountable loyalty to the series. In that sense, my viewing experience recapitulated a running theme of the show: the simple question, *Why are we doing this?* I could find no answer, either in the show itself or in my own pleasure as a viewer. But I couldn't stop, and I guess that's why this show, for all its missteps and false notes, has been allowed to play to the end of its story.

For most of the last two seasons, Elizabeth II (played perfectly by Imelda Staunton, using her facial expressions as eloquently as Olivia Colman used her vocal inflections in the previous two seasons) receded into the background as the melodrama of Charles (Dominic West) and Diana (Elizabeth Dibecki) took center stage. The series never succeeded at making those characters equal to the media frenzy that surrounded them, and the telescopic focus on the last few weeks of Diana's life did not help. Her last paramour, the unlucky Dodi Fayed, comes off as harried and lightweight, while Diana herself is a melancholic blank, pretty and tenderhearted but possessing no real interest apart from her fragility.

In the worst scenes of the whole series, both Diana and Dodi appear after death, respectively to her ex-husband and his father, to hold the hands of the bereaved characters and the audience toward moments of unneeded and undeserved closure. The dominant figure in the first half of the sixth season is Dodi's father Mohamed Al-Fayed, a socially ambitious businessman looking for an acceptance into the British elite that equals his wealth and deference to its culture. When his share of the grief at the death of his son in the accident with Diana—and his gestures of friendship—are callously ignored by a royal family that seems determined to downplay its connection to an Arab Muslim, it feels inevitable that they will return in the form of conspiracy theories.

But in the last five episodes (released December 14), Elizabeth is back, facing the agonies of old age and mortality in parallel with the coming of age of her grandson William (Ed McVey). Her hard-living sister Margaret (invested with pathos and lingering glamor by Lesley Manville) is paralleled by William's younger brother Harry (Luther Ford), who struggles, as his aunt once did, to find a place in a system of primogeniture that doesn't need him. West does yeoman's work to make Charles grave and sympathetic, but by the end, everyone else is just a Greek chorus around grandmother and grandson.

In one charming episode, Elizabeth is inspired to look under the hood of the royal household to find out what all the odd, antiquated jobs actually do after Tony Blair (Bertie Carvel) urges her to cut them out of the budget. It turns out that the crown's swan guy has some interesting things to say, thus saving the inefficient grandeur from the spin doctors. Even this is not quite enough, however, so the previous incarnations of Elizabeth (Colman and Claire Foy) pop up to stage dialogues with Staunton as she contemplates abdicating.

We know, of course, that she did not abdicate, and the show's writers are as clear as observers at the time were that she must have considered her heirs unready. But one imagines the conflict here might have been more pointed if the show had given us a queen who had any real interests or personality apart from the job.

A life of unimaginable privilege and stern but less than exhausting duties allows for the cultivation of hobbies and curiosities more grand and demanding than horses and corgis. But you can't picture Elizabeth writing a monograph on botanical specimens from Balmoral Castle or sitting in on rehearsals for a crown-funded opera company or having anything at all to think about apart from her role. Her husband becomes a pilot, her sister plays piano and learns raunchy poems by heart and gets drunk every day, but Elizabeth is simply the queen. Foy's Elizabeth asks Staunton's Elizabeth about the woman who was sacrificed to become queen, but she has been little in evidence.

That the role of monarch is or ever was coterminous with the life of the person playing it is, inevitably, a storytelling conceit. The royal family appears, in the show, as a lavish but essentially public bureaucracy. Their vast, private, off-the-books wealth is only barely mentioned, and their roles as landlords and investors are not even hinted at. A story of the royal family that focused on their accountants and lawyers rather than their picturesque, antiquated retainers would have been more fun and, in some ways, more true to life.

By the same token, the elegiac final scene left me wanting *Animal House*-style postscripts: *After attaining his goal of winning a third general election, Tony Blair was forced out of office by his own party, which has not won an election since. He started a think-tank funded by Saudi Arabia. Harry moved to California and recorded some episodes of a podcast. Charles ascended to the throne in 2022. The internet was worried about his oddly swollen hands.*

Playing up the smallness of all these once-grand figures would have broken the spell of a rather heavy-handed, though effective, last episode. But the faint imprint of gravitas on these people and institutions is itself a delusion, a trick of nostalgia. *The Crown* gave us a queen who was interesting for her role but whose views of, say, the National Health Service or Brexit could hardly be imagined to exist, let alone be worth hearing out.

The Crown began in 2016, in a very different world both for the UK and for Netflix. The premier streaming service, then flush with investor cash and making a play for

market dominance, has suffered in the general downturn of the streaming industry. The show got more seasons than the business model of streaming platforms or the financial environment of high interest rates would normally allow. It was sometimes great, sometimes bad, and often mediocre. But it was grand and ambitious—and, like its subject, it's the sort of thing one misses when it's gone.