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Opening Extract from...

The Uncommon Reader

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AT WINDSOR it was the evening of the state banquet and as the president of France took his place beside Her Majesty, the royal family formed up behind and the procession slowly moved off and through into the Waterloo Chamber.

'Now that I have you to myself,' said the Queen, smiling to left and right as they glided through the glittering throng, 'I've been longing to ask you about the writer Jean Genet.'

'Ah,' said the president. 'Oui.'

The 'Marseillaise' and the national anthem made for a pause in the proceedings, but when they had taken their seats Her Majesty turned to the president and resumed.

'Homosexual and jailbird, was he nevertheless as bad as

he was painted? Or, more to the point' – and she took up her soup spoon – 'was he as good?'

Unbriefed on the subject of the glabrous playwright and novelist, the president looked wildly about for his minister of culture. But she was being addressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

'Jean Genet,' said the Queen again, helpfully. 'Vous le connaissez?'

'Bien sûr,' said the president.

'Il m'intéresse,' said the Queen.

'Vraiment?' The president put down his spoon. It was going to be a long evening.

IT WAS the dogs' fault. They were snobs and ordinarily, having been in the garden, would have gone up the front steps, where a footman generally opened them the door. Today, though, for some reason they careered along the terrace, barking their heads off, and scampered down the steps again and round the end along the side of the house, where she could hear them yapping at something in one of the yards.

It was the City of Westminster travelling library, a large removal-like van parked next to the bins outside one of the kitchen doors. This wasn't a part of the palace she saw much of, and she had certainly never seen the library there before, nor presumably had the dogs, hence the din, so having failed in her attempt to calm them down she went up the little steps of the van in order to apologise.

The driver was sitting with his back to her, sticking a label on a book, the only seeming borrower a thin ginger-haired boy in white overalls crouched in the aisle reading. Neither of them took any notice of the new arrival, so she coughed and said, 'I'm sorry about this awful racket,' whereupon the driver got up so suddenly he banged his head on the Reference section and the boy in the aisle scrambled to his feet and upset Photography & Fashion.

She put her head out of the door. 'Shut up this minute, you silly creatures' – which, as had been the move's intention, gave the driver/librarian time to compose himself and the boy to pick up the books.

'One has never seen you here before, Mr . . .'

'Hutchings, Your Majesty. Every Wednesday, ma'am.'

'Really? I never knew that. Have you come far?'

'Only from Westminster, ma'am.'

'And you are . . . ?'

'Norman, ma'am. Seakins.'

'And where do you work?'

'In the kitchen, ma'am.'

'Oh. Do you have much time for reading?'

'Not really, ma'am.'

'I'm the same. Though now that one is here I suppose one ought to borrow a book.'

Mr Hutchings smiled helpfully.

'Is there anything you would recommend?'

'What does Your Majesty like?'

The Queen hesitated, because to tell the truth she wasn't sure. She'd never taken much interest in reading. She read, of course, as one did, but liking books was something she left to other people. It was a hobby and it was in the nature of her job that she didn't have hobbies. Jogging, growing roses, chess or rock-climbing, cake decoration, model aeroplanes. No. Hobbies involved preferences and preferences had to be avoided; preferences excluded people. One had no

preferences. Her job was to take an interest, not to be interested herself. And besides, reading wasn't doing. She was a doer. So she gazed round the book-lined van and played for time. 'Is one allowed to borrow a book? One doesn't have a ticket?'

'No problem,' said Mr Hutchings.

'One is a pensioner,' said the Queen, not that she was sure that made any difference.

'Ma'am can borrow up to six books.'

'Six? Heavens!'

Meanwhile the ginger-haired young man had made his choice and given his book to the librarian to stamp. Still playing for time, the Queen picked it up.

'What have you chosen, Mr Seakins?' expecting it to be, well, she wasn't sure what she expected, but it wasn't what it was. 'Oh. Cecil Beaton. Did you know him?'

'No, ma'am.'

'No, of course not. You'd be too young. He always used to be round here, snapping away. And a bit of a tartar. Stand here, stand there. Snap, snap. So there's a book about him now?'

'Several, ma'am.'

'Really? I suppose everyone gets written about sooner or later.'

She riffled through it. 'There's probably a picture of me in it somewhere. Oh yes. That one. Of course, he wasn't just a photographer. He designed, too. *Oklahoma*, things like that.'

'I think it was *My Fair Lady*, ma'am.'

'Oh, was it?' said the Queen, unused to being contradicted.

'Where did you say you worked?' She put the book back in the boy's big red hands.

'In the kitchens, ma'am.'

She had still not solved her problem, knowing that if she left without a book it would seem to Mr Hutchings that the library was somehow lacking. Then on a shelf of rather worn-looking volumes she saw a name she remembered. 'Ivy Compton-Burnett! I can read that.' She took the book out and gave it to Mr Hutchings to stamp.

'What a treat!' She hugged it unconvincingly before opening it. 'Oh. The last time it was taken out was in 1989.'

'She's not a popular author, ma'am.'

'Why, I wonder? I made her a dame.'

Mr Hutchings refrained from saying that this wasn't necessarily the road to the public's heart.

The Queen looked at the photograph on the back of the jacket. 'Yes. I remember that hair, a roll like a pie-crust that went right round her head.' She smiled and Mr Hutchings knew that the visit was over. 'Goodbye.'

He inclined his head as they had told him at the library to do should this eventuality ever arise, and the Queen went off in the direction of the garden with the dogs madly barking again, while Norman, bearing his Cecil Beaton, skirted a chef lounging by the bins having a cigarette and went back to the kitchens.

Shutting up the van and driving away, Mr Hutchings reflected that a novel by Ivy Compton-Burnett would take some reading. He had never got very far with her himself and thought, rightly, that borrowing the book had just been a polite gesture. Still, it was one that he appreciated and as more than a courtesy. The council was always threatening to cut back on the library and the patronage of so distinguished

a borrower (or customer as the council preferred to call it) would do him no harm.

'We have a travelling library,' the Queen said to her husband that evening. 'Comes every Wednesday.'

'Jolly good. Wonders never cease.'

'You remember *Oklahoma*?'

'Yes. We saw it when we were engaged.' Extraordinary to think of it, the dashing blond boy he had been.

'Was that Cecil Beaton?' said the Queen.

'No idea. Never liked the fellow. Green shoes.'

'Smelled delicious.'

'What's that?'

'A book. I borrowed it.'

'Dead, I suppose.'

'Who?'

'The Beaton fellow.'

'Oh yes. Everybody's dead.'

'Good show, though.'

And he went off to bed glumly singing 'Oh, what a beautiful morning' as the Queen opened her book.