Book Talk *Fatal Throne
The Wives of Henry VIII Tell All* by:

Candace Fleming: The woman who gathered the various authors and put the book together. Wrote Katharine of Aragon, Wife #1. Known for writing children’s picture books, fiction, and biographical books.

<https://www.candacefleming.com/about/biography.html>
Matthew Tobin Andersen: Notably, the only male who wrote for the book. The voice of Henry VIII and a surprise character. Author of *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing.*

<https://mt-anderson.com/blog/about/>
Stephanie Hemphill: Wrote Anne Boleyn, Wife #2. She doesn’t have her own website. Wrote *Hideous Love*, an imagining of Mary Shelley’s life.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanie_Hemphill>
Lisa Ann Sandell: Wrote Jane Seymour, Wife #3--Historically, Henry’s “one true wife.” Author of *A Map of the Known World*, *Song of the Sparrow*, and *The Weight of the Sky*.

<http://lisaannsandell.com/>

Jennifer Donnelly: Wrote Anna of Cleves, Wife #4. Known for *A Northern Light*.

<https://www.jenniferdonnelly.com/blog/>

Linda Sue Park: Wrote Catherine Howard, Wife #5. Author of *A Single Shard*.

<https://www.lspark.com/bio/biography.html>

Deborah Hopkinson: Wrote Kateryn Parr, Wife #6. Has written more than 50 books for children and young adults, ranging from picture books to historical fiction. In her bio, she describes her work as “well-suited for STEM, STEAM, and CCSS connections.”


<https://deborahhopkinson.com/pages/bio>

Summary:
 *Fatal* *Throne* might best be described as a historically-inspired, but still fictional, account of King Henry VIII, who ruled England from 1509 to 1547. The book was written by seven different authors who all have a background in YA lit.
 After parsing through numerous essays, analyses, and historical accounts from the time of Henry VIII’s reign, they collaborated to create an emotionally charged tale that hopes to give character and perspective to each of Henry’s six wives, as well as Henry himself. *Fatal Throne* is a story of love, betrayal, political intrigue, and clashing personalities bound together by one man and the weight of a burgeoning empire, showing us that every story has more than a single side, and that morality is a matter of perspective and--more importantly--power.

Quotes:
First and foremost, I will say that in order not to spoil the contents of the book, I have chosen only quotes by Andersen’s Henry VIII that, for the most part, do not contain names. I think it is very fitting as Henry is often the center of discussion when we think of his reign and his marriages, and so to learn the full story and the implications of his actions, you have to actually read the book.
**Quote 1:**
 “It is no good thinking of those things now. The years of--I will not call it failure, for it was not my failure--let us rather call it judgment…when my seed hit Katharine’s morbid, chilly womb, my sons withered. So I’ve been told by several physicians--and I paid them enough to get to the truth of the matter.” (Andersen, pp. 59-60)

**Analysis:** This quote shows the King’s inability to see himself as wrong, which is the major cause of complications. His first wife, Katharine, mentioned that he seems like a child who never grew up. Here and in many other parts of the book, he justifies his “Kingly” actions as for the sake of his bloodline and the nation, without considering for a second that his morals are deteriorating. Yet none of the characters, except in times of shocking clarity, realize their actions that range from harassment, seduction, and infidelity, may not be fair either. Henry just takes it all to a whole ‘nother level. This quote sets up the story and shows us why Henry is so narcissistic.
**Quote 2:**
 “When we were first in love, I was charmed by her bravery in speaking her mind to me--her frankness, as I thought it--her boldness...I sat in silence, reading the dispositions of her lovers. I hoped that it was not true.” (Andersen, pp. 137)

**Analysis:** Though kind at first and, as he said, charmed by Anne’s bravery in speaking her mind, this quote tells us that Henry only loves in a way that is convenient for him. At this point in the story, he is only on his second wife, and yet he grows tired of her personality because she attempts to become involved in politics and education. He is easily swayed by how other people, mainly his ministers, see him, and we could perhaps say that because he so easily uses people grows tired of them, he is just looking for a convenient reason to get rid of them. It is telling that though he “hopes” the accusations were not true, he does not even talk to Anne herself. It is rather telling how quickly he moves from wife to wife, though he always justifies it in some way.
**Quote 3:**
 This is what the doubters an intriguers don’t understand. The wives--all of them--they were necessary. I needed them for heirs...My body might fail me now, but my loins never did.” (Andersen, pp. 362-363)
 **Analysis:** On some level, I believe this story tells us about abuse and manipulation in relationships, especially when Henry gaslights his wives and attempts to spin the story to be sympathetic to himself. Although in the end, it is really up to the reader to decide if they would like to sympathize with him or not. Despite all his crimes and his terrible personality, it is true that he was under pressure as the man in the highest station of England. Even in his wives’ parts they all comment on the majesty of his presence and the weight of his and their duty to sire heirs. However, I do believe that the story is pointing us toward the fact that we, the readers, are allowed to judge each and every one of the characters for what they’ve done to each other, there is indeed a point in which actions are morally wrong. In this case, Andersen sets Henry out to the dogs because he still tries to justify his actions with rather flimsy reasoning, and the last line is very ironic and humorous considering the context, and especially in the light of the final chapter. We can feel sorry for Henry to some extent, but because we know that basically all the problems were caused by Henry’s insatiable loins, the tone is less sympathetic and more “I can’t believe he’s still going on about this.”

**Ways to Teach Using *Fatal Throne:*** 1. In a teaching setting, one way to use this book would be in a creative writing sense. When writing stories, it’s easy to gravitate toward the didactic; there is “right” and “wrong,” a “good” side and an “evil” side. Though *Fatal Throne* has seven main characters each written by different authors, the important thing to note is that each character has different motives, aspirations, and reasoning for the dissent they sow. Above all, they believe they either hold the moral high ground or the greatest duty, and so they, like people in real life, believe they can’t possibly be wrong.
 2. Another way to teach using this book would be to show that authors can base their writings on research or history and still be entertaining. I can imagine an exercise in choosing a historic figure and presenting their story in a way that is sympathetic or simply different from how we would usually think them, much like how the musicals *Wicked* and *Hamilton* gave us different versions of stories that had been a one-way street entrenched in our minds.

3. *Fatal Throne* can be used to study English history in a way that is easy to understand. Before jumping straight into Chaucer or Shakespeare, it can be used to set up a background that makes it easier to understand the religious, racial, and political implications of early England.
 4. Another exercise would be in analytics. *Fatal Throne* can easily be analyzed through a Feminist lens that covers topics such as power dynamics, patriarchy, and gender roles. The historical setting allows us to think of how women have been treated throughout the ages, and because much of this book is written to be easily understood by young readers, we can connect it to modern day issues.

 The most appropriate age range would be, I think, early high school age, though I am not discounting Seniors. There are some mature themes in the book, ranging from sexual to the caveats of mortality, though none are particularly gorey or brutal. These the ages that I think would be the most likely interested in reading the book, especially because they have probably had at least some exposure to English history around this time. This book would fit chapter 4 from *AitSfM,* books about real life experiences, because even though it is a different time period, the characters each face moral dilemmas and come up with realistic solutions to face those dilemmas. It might also fit chapter 7, books about courage and survival, as many of the wives face abandonment or death for not complying to their family’s wishes, and have to find ways to somehow get around that.

Why teens should read this book:

* Because unrealistics demands may be put on them, and it is not their fault if they cannot or do not want to meet those expectations.
* Because there are many different types of people in the world and therefore just as many points-of-view, and each one perhaps deserves a listening ear before judgments are passed.
* Because historically, women have been disadvantaged and discouraged from positions of greater power, but single actions can make a large difference. In the same vein, men have systematically held positions of power and so can conversely help undo this.

Text Complexity: From one excerpt analyzed, *Fatal Throne* tested very simple. ReadabilityFormulas.com yielded the following:

* Flesch Reading Ease Score: 83 (with 100 being the easiest)
* Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Coleman-Liau Index SMOG Index, Automated Readability Index: A range of Grade 5-6 (10-11 year olds)
* Linsear Write Formula: 8.3 (Grade level 8)
The ATOS yielded:
* ATOS Level: 7.5
* Average Word Length: 3.9
* Average Sentence Length: 17
* Average Vocabulary Level: 3.3

While I believe the analysis of the text complexity is accurate as *Fatal Throne* is written with simple sentences and vocabulary, this goes against my own view of what grade it suits. As said before, I think it would be suitable for early high school because they will have already gotten a basis or would be going into a basis of historical English texts, likely due to Shakespeare being heavy in the curriculum. There’s also the subject matter itself, which revolves mainly around politics, marriage, and fidelity. I feel fifth and sixth graders might find it difficult to hold interest. The analyses on these analyzers might have also skewed lower due to the excerpt I chose, however. First of all, it was rather short and filled with short sentences because much of the book, in the character’s inner monologues, are written in choppy prose so as to give impact and dramatic pauses as well as to imitate real speech or thought processes. I chose an excerpt by Henry VIII, who was angry in that passage, which may have contributed to how choppy it was, and so I believe other parts of the book might text for at least an eighth grade reading level, especially depending on who wrote it as there were seven authors.
 In general, the themes of *Fatal Throne* have to do a lot with the notions of duty and culpability, love vs. lust, crossing perspectives and cultures, and death. Each of Henry’s wives are faced with the burden of being queen and all choose to cope with it in different ways, especially when Henry starts becoming less stable and more volatile in his affections for them. The emotions and outcomes are, in my opinion, a bit on the heavy side and should definitely not be used to teach until at least late middle school, even if the readings are simple enough that early middle schoolers could probably understand most of it.