

Quizzical Shakespeare: Balancing information and informality

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Robin Malan, *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* (Pinelands: Junkets, 2022)

In this easy-to-read, extensively illustrated and colourful short book, Robin Malan succeeds in combining silli(e)ness and Shakespeare for readers young and old – a rare feat.

The quiz can be taken individually or in teams. The book poses 200 questions on all aspects of Shakespeare's life and work, with very few stones left unturned; it even asks, "How do we know they [William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway] had to get married?" Where possible, it presents the questions along a continuum that tests the rudimentary knowledge of Shakespearean beginners at one end, with questions such as "In which century was Shakespeare born?", and, at the other end, satisfies the desire of Shakespeare buffs to show off their familiarity with more obscure details.

The book also tests readers' knowledge of Shakespeare's literary and dramatic works, from his sonnets to his plays, and asks questions on characters, plots, well-known quotations and even stage directions – of which my favourite is, "In which play does this famous stage direction appear? '*Exit, pursued by a bear.*'" There are some red herrings along the way: I was relieved to learn that the answer to the question about whether Shakespeare wrote "65 sermons" was a categorical "no" (one struggles to comprehend some of the lewd insinuations for which Shakespeare is famous and homilies on religious subjects originating from the same quill!).

The tone of *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* is lighthearted and the regular interjection of "clues", "notes" and even "objections" within and between the questions lends the book a playful – and yes, at times, "sillie" – feeling. The structure is easy to navigate, with each section (introduction, questions, interlude, answers and appendices) printed on its own paper colour. The pages are artfully decorated with line drawings, cartoons, maps and photographs to complement the content. There are even bonus features such as a "Who said What Where?" match-the-columns puzzle and various portraits of Shakespeare, from Droeshout to Picasso.

In my opinion as a secondary school English teacher, *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* would work exceptionally well with Grade 7 and 8 learners – who, as a follow-up to the question, "Are there still people in the world with the surname Shakespeare?", would be extremely entertained by the instruction, "If no, do nothing except look at your watch impatiently. If yes, what is the 'but ...'?" I imagine that a group of Shakespeare aficionados would respond similarly, especially if the experience was accompanied by a generous glass of red wine paired with an Elizabethan honeycake – the authentic recipe for which is provided on page 46. (In fact, Malan supports this supposition with one of the appendices, "The Oldies and the Quizze!": his account of the book's origins in an event held at Pinelands Grove retirement complex.) The "silliness" of the quiz may, however, be a bit much for senior secondary school learners, for whom "outward shows" (to quote Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.75) are paramount.

With its delicate balance between information and informality, *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* provides a refreshing change from the more academic (boring?) discourse that has become synonymous with

‘the Bard’ and his work. While I applaud this fun approach to Shakespeare, I believe that a book such as this could do more to accommodate the multilingual and multicultural composition of South African society. In Appendix 4, Malan provides excerpts from Deryck Uys’ Afrikaans translations of plays such as *Richard III* and *Hamlet*. These are apt because Uys is one of Malan’s Pinelands peers, but I would have enjoyed seeing alongside them excerpts from Shakespeare translations into other South African languages – such as Sol Plaatje’s Setswana, B.B. Mdllele’s isiXhosa or Welcome Msomi’s renditions in isiZulu.

Furthermore, to capture the interest of senior secondary school learners, I would have welcomed a section that caters specifically for teenagers – who, for instance, relish mastering how to trade insults in Shakespearean language, from “I do desire we may be better strangers” (*As You Like It*, 3.2.262) to “Thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows” (*Troilus and Cressida*, 2.1.45). I also think that teenagers could benefit from (and possibly even enjoy) learning about Shakespeare’s depiction of teen-related issues, such as Miranda and Ferdinand’s ‘crush’ in *The Tempest* and the disastrous outcomes when Cassio imbibes too much alcohol in *Othello*. Finally, in the interests of making Shakespeare relevant for twenty-first century life, it would be wonderful to have a kind of ‘current affairs’ section on aspects of Shakespeare’s plays that deal with what learners experience as contemporary issues: the exploration of bigotry in *The Merchant of Venice*, say, or forbidden love across social divisions in *Romeo and Juliet*. Perhaps Malan might consider a second edition of *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* that incorporates these aspects.

Nevertheless, as a lover of Shakespeare, I thoroughly enjoyed testing myself with this book (I will not disclose my score). And as a teacher, I look forward to using it to expand my junior secondary school learners’ knowledge. For these purposes, *A Sillie Shakespur Quizze* is, as the back cover playfully boasts, “A hit! A very palpable hit!”

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