

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Maria Vetrano, author of the new novel, *Queen Bess: A Tudor Comes to Save America*, a political fantasy that re-imagines Elizabeth Tudor as a US presidential candidate in 2028. And I should say just for context that we are having this conversation before we know the results of the 2024 election, which I assume would definitely change the context of this conversation. So just know that going in, we don't know what happens if you are listening to this in the future. Now, the premise of your book is that a self-made billionaire is convinced that the only way to save American democracy is by putting the last Tudor queen in the Oval Office. So I guess my first question is why? Seems a bit extreme.

MV: So Dakota has actually, there's a few plot spoilers in here. So she has wanted to have a time travel lab for a very long time because she lost her mother to breast cancer when she was 13 years old. So she is very motivated to, she has this idea that if she goes back in time, convinces her mother and her father to come back to her present with her to 2026 or whenever she's able to get it together, that she'll be able to save her mother's life. So that's why she's been funding a time travel lab in the bowels of her company, which is called CODA, for years. And that was her original intent. It wasn't to go back to Tudor England and retrieve Elizabeth I. What happens is the heinous president of the United States, Robert Vlakas, she's made a personal enemy of him because she had championed his opponent in the 2024 election. And she said some disparaging things about him to The New York Times. And so given that his skin is about a nanometer thick, that offended him. So that would be one thing. So then he, because he took it so personally, and he's such a narcissist, he decides, "well, I'm going to nationalize her company. It's a cybersecurity company. It's critical to our national government." And that's the ruse, is that he's going to take her company from her. She's not going to tolerate that. She's always loathed him, but now he wants her company. So she decides that she has to do something about it. Now she was raised in very modest circumstances by her parents. So not wealthy people at all, educated, not wealthy. And she was raised with a very strong sense of social justice. So she's the kind of tech billionaire that you wish we had more of. She is as far from someone like Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg or Peter Thiel or any of these people than you could possibly imagine because she doesn't have an inflated sense of herself, living her daily life. She has a lot of confidence in her technical abilities. She also realizes that she's in a very unique position as an incredibly wealthy woman to effect change. And in this case, she decides it's not just by funding an opponent of Robert Vlakas, because she's not happy with the way that the Democrats are doing things, as was kind of happening in our real world until relatively recently, we were not very organized. So she decides that really a radical change is needed. She had been reading a biography about Elizabeth I, which kind of jiggled her brain a little bit and decides, "well, this is what we should do. We should get a little specialty team together, go convince Elizabeth Tudor to come to the year 2027 so we can help prepare her to become the most powerful woman in history - again."

AT: So what made you want to write about this topic?

MV: So in about 2018, two years after the 2016 presidential election, I was still feeling gutted that Hilary Clinton wasn't our president. And I was incredulous that to me, the most qualified candidate to ever run for president in the United States, who also happened to be a woman, lost to the worst presidential candidate in recent history. I don't know who would be worse, but certainly he would be up there. So like many Americans, I was very much dismayed, still distraught, depressed - sounds like a song, I know. And I just had this crazy idea that if Hillary Clinton didn't win, what kind of woman would win the presidency in America? And I thought, well, it has to be someone who is bigger than life, a bit ruthless, politically savvy, brilliant, can connect with the average person, very good with people of all education levels, different professions, just very comfortable, very charismatic, and who has no known history to target. There's no emails, there are no decades of voting records, nothing like that. And I combine that with the fact that I've always been a big fan of Elizabeth Tudor. So when I was a girl, I remember watching a Masterpiece Theater program called *Elizabeth R*, in which the wonderful late Glenda Jackson played Elizabeth Tudor when, she must have been quite young at the time. And

again, when I was a girl, so this would have been very early 1970s, maybe it was '72, '73. You'd go to your local school library and there were very, and there were very, very few books about powerful women. I remember reading about Annie Oakley, who was a fantastic shot with a gun, that's how she became famous. Babe Dedrickson was a great athlete, Marie Curie, but not many, not many women. So to me, Elizabeth I was someone completely and fundamentally different from anyone I'd ever read about or seen. And I just loved how commanding she was and how confident, and that she managed to survive every threat leveled against her. And I became more cognizant of that as an adult, of course, because mostly I was impressed by her clothes and that she had, all these men would obey her. So I combined those two things. And my first idea was, "man, this would be such a cool mini series" because I really am a consumer of pop culture TV shows to an extent. And I've always loved historical fiction. And then I realized, well, I know even less about how to write a screenplay than I know how to write a novel. So I thought, "well, I better start with a novel." So that's how I came up with Elizabeth I. And I must say that during the prior president's administration, it brought me a lot of relief to imagine this other person, this out of time, incredible version, my version of Elizabeth Tudor, so not Elizabeth Tudor as she probably would actually be, it gave me a lot of relief because I'd think, "well, how would Elizabeth handle this? Or how would Elizabeth handle that?" So it allowed me to live in that world a little bit and it gave me some respite from reality. So I've been working on the book for a long time. I certainly didn't know that Trump was going to run again. I certainly couldn't have, hard to imagine that, but I also didn't know that Biden would defeat him in 2020. Still, I just hope that reality and fantasy kind of come together a little bit now that Kamala Harris is running and maybe we will actually have the first woman president of the United States.

AT: I know that you've said that you have this personal history with Elizabeth being a source of inspiration and a role model for you when you were young, but in the context of all of the historical queens that we have had and other amazing historical figures, what is the reasoning for why Queen Elizabeth I specifically would have been able to beat your not-Trump?

MV: Well, one, she's English-speaking. She actually was brilliant. She spoke seven languages. She was politically savvy, incredibly intelligent, high energy, and for a Renaissance queen, she actually did some progressive things. So religious tolerance was not widespread. She lived during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Her own sister, Mary Tudor, burned many Protestants at the stake. The Protestants were slaughtered and the Huguenots were slaughtered in France during her reign. There was a lot. Jews were particularly badly treated. Protestants were badly treated. Jews had been unfortunately badly treated for centuries. So she practiced more religious tolerance than her peers. You could live in England and as long as you weren't proselytizing completely, you were fine. You could be Catholic. Her own personal physician for a time was Jewish. He was a Spanish Jew, which was kind of interesting. So she has that. She also was smart in terms of financial management. So she shored up the treasury. Her father, Henry VIII, had really diluted the currency to afford all these endless wars in which he engaged. So she restored the value of the currency. Toward the end of her reign, she really felt a sense of personal loss and suffering and grief when there was famine, and there was natural famine at the time in England. So toward the end of her reign, she installed the first price controls on grain so that people who were profiteering when there wasn't enough food to go around were not able to charge these exorbitant prices, and therefore grain was more affordable for more people. Literacy was increased dramatically, even for women, because women and girls were not educated at the level that men were.

So she was also very gutsy. She survived multiple assassination attempts. She was clever. She was in a position where she had to balance ruling the country with negotiating with people in her own Privy Council at times who would have been very happy to take her place. So there were warring factions. Talk about enemies, foreign and domestic. She had them both. She faced them both. She was an inspirational speaker, a fabulous orator. This book is the first in a trilogy, and in the second book, I can't wait to start writing this. I already have parts of it in my head. There's going to be a debate between Elizabeth and Robert Vlacas in which

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she'll decimate him.

And also she was very athletic, so she danced, she played music. The other thing that she did in terms of not just being an elite was, every summer she would go with many of her personal staff and members of the court, and they would go on progress during the summer. So that means that hundreds of people would be trotting around the countryside, and they would go to the estate of one of the nobles and descend on that person, and they would go into debt and try to have all the best entertainments for Elizabeth and her court. But during the period of getting from London to one of these homes in the country, she would get off her horse. She would meet with people. She would talk with children. She would have a meal with someone. She would have a drink with someone. So she was very invested in loving her people and having them love her. So she often used the symbolism of, "I'm a mother to my people," or "I am married to my people," because she vowed from early on that she would not marry a man, which she didn't, that she was either married or a mother to her people. So she liked to be adored, and she was very charismatic. So if you were on her good side, she would radiate joy and love and happiness at you. She also did have a mercurial temper, but that's not the part that would make her a great leader. She was a Tudor, after all. So that's why I think she has some of the inner ingredients or components or personality traits that could make her, she was a very, very strong, capable leader. She ruled in a world of men for 45 years. She was 25 years old when she ascended the throne, and she died at the age of 69. She would have lived longer had she not used probably Venetian ceruse, which was a mixture, a lead-based paint on her face. That's what the historians think killed her. And then in my vision of Elizabeth, my version is that a big part of what happens when you start reading the book is that she has to learn how to live in the 21st century. So there's a lot of really fun stuff. And she has quite a character arc as she becomes more used to living here. There are some things she loves about it. There are some things that she finds distressing, but she will evolve and she will grow. So there have been some other great women rulers in history, of course. But to me, I think Elizabeth is one of the most impressive. I think that if she were acculturated into modern sensibilities by someone like Dakota and this little cohort of trusted people that are around her, because there's a little group of people around her, there's a real ensemble cast here, that she could be a heck of a leader.

AT: So your version of Queen Bess is not coming into this competition with the brand recognition. They're not presenting her as "the last Tudor queen has time traveled." (MV: Oh no.) They are creating an entirely new person for her to slot into, so to speak.

MV: That's right. Her name becomes Elizabeth Rex when she arrives in the 21st century. Because she's brought here by these cybersecurity experts, these people are brilliant. Everybody's got a PhD pretty much who works at Dakota's company. A lot of them do. So they are able to get past any firewall, including the Social Security Administration, everything. So they invent a birth certificate for her. They invent her college transcript and everything. Her whole history is invented. And there's no one to really disprove it, which is also kind of funny. And you'll see when you read the book that her history is constructed in such a way that her parents traveled a lot and they were academics. And she went to Hampshire College and it's so disorganized that it would be very easy to falsify any sort of academic records there. But she could also just say she also attended classes at the other colleges that are part of the five-school system in Western Massachusetts. So who knows where she really was? So yeah, they invent this whole history for her. So you can't really say, "well, this is what she said in 2006" because that would just be invented, which they do anyway. She's a real person and yet she's also an invented person.

And so one of the things I think that's different about Elizabeth in our world at all is that there's a duality to her. She's got one foot in the 16th century and one foot in the 21st century. And she's always trying to figure out kind of where she is and what she's doing. And yet because she had such a strength of character and was such a survivor, she learns how to adapt. Plus there's the allure of wealth and power, which is attractive to her. And that's not the only way that they get her here. One of the things, basically the people who go and convince her to travel show her what a woman her age might look like in the 21st century. So she was a bit vain, so she's going to look a lot better. She's going to have, we'll get her dental veneers. We're going to do this whole

rejuvenation process when she gets here. And it's a challenge, right, to be the most powerful person in the world. That's the challenge before her. And that she also, remember, this is someone who grew up thinking that she was a divine right monarch. So she also has the sense that, well, she *is* the right person for the job. And there isn't another queen in history better than her. In fact, she particularly is unhappy when she learns that on this Buzzfeed list that Queen Victoria was number two and she was number five. It really pisses her off because she doesn't think Queen Victoria did much except popped out a lot of children.

AT: I love that you're humanizing her because something that comes up a lot on the podcast is how different people get either villainized or idealized. And I think Queen Elizabeth is definitely one of those ones where you see a lot of depictions of her that are maybe ignoring the fact that, like you said, she could be vain. She could be petty at times. She had a temper. And none of that makes, well, you can argue about whether that makes her a less fit ruler. I think it depends on the outcomes of these traits and how she's behaving in ways that actually impact other people significantly. She's not her dad, who just kept beheading wives. So on the scale of Tudors at least, she's doing okay. But I really like that you have made her more three-dimensional. This isn't the necessarily version that you were seeing when you were a kid, for example.

MV: No. And she has a trauma history. I'm reading a book right now actually by Tracy Borman, which is fabulous, about Elizabeth and Anne Boleyn. It goes into this a bit more, but certainly I've read it in other books as well, that she was terrified, in the sense that if she married, she would lose her power. Look what happened to her mother. You also saw women die of childbirth. But from what we know, she had maybe something similar to panic attacks at times. She was a survivor in the sense of she was also imprisoned in the Tower when she was maybe 21, the Tower of London by Mary Tudor for a few months. Mary Tudor could have said, "that's it. She's a threat. I agree. She's part of this plot to overthrow me. That's it. That's the end of Elizabeth." That wasn't the only time that happened to her. But in terms of her being more of a real person, yes. You will also see this in the book. There is a character who is one of Dakota's best friends from college. Her name is C.C. They went to undergraduate together at MIT. Dakota stayed at MIT and got her PhD in cyber cryptography, whereas C.C. got her PhD in psychology and becomes a practicing psychologist. And C.C.'s also Black. So when C.C.'s read into this whole we're going to bring Elizabeth Tudor here, she's not really thrilled about this, talk about privileged and white woman coming to the 21st century to rescue us. So she does confront her about slavery, because there are some things about Elizabeth that I don't really want to know, but I want to know them. I can invent my own Elizabeth in a way, but I also want to be true to some of what historically what she was like. Sir John Hawkins was the first person to bring enslaved people into England. The first time he did that, it was not financed by Elizabeth. There were all these pirate-y kinds of people like Walter Raleigh, the same thing. They would go and attack Spanish ships or Portuguese ships and take all their gold and take all their, whatever they were carrying. Well, in this case, the Portuguese ship that he attacked had enslaved Africans and that turned out to be a lot of money for the English crown. So she did finance his second trip to capture enslaved Africans, which she will learn is very, very bad. At the same time, there was no slavery in England at the time. There were some Africans in England at the time, many of them were Moors, so they were from North Africa, maybe some of them had been living in Spain, they might have been artisans, they could be musicians, they were sometimes entertainers in the court, but they were not enslaved people. It's also not clear that her version of racism is the same as what we see now in America or what we saw during the Civil War. That's not clear. It's not clear that she thought of people of color as inferior beings. We don't know that. I don't know that there's any way to prove or disprove that, but this was before that kind of concept was more prevalent, where the Europeans thought that non-Western European people were somehow inferior, or indigenous Indians.

AT: So this isn't the Boomer version of saying "it was a different time." This is the 1600s version of saying "this was a different time."

MV: Right. And so what you'll see is that she becomes more humanized through her close associations and even loving relationships with people in this century. Now, she also has to learn about hundreds of years of history. Part of her acculturation, and there are two professors from Harvard who are part of her little new Privy Council. One of them is a professor of history, one of them is a professor of English, and they're two of the three people who go back to the year 1588 to convince her to come to the year 2027. She learns about World War II and she's just horrified at how efficient we've become at the mass slaughter of other people or the scale of the genocide of the Jews. It would be horrifying to her. It's just unthinkable. This was not a reason, in her worldview, you would have gone to war, you would have conquered someone else. Maybe you would have conquered someone else because you wanted land or access to natural resources or something else, but not the extermination of a people. And the fact that we have these nuclear weapons and there's so many things that are truly terrifying in our world that she didn't have. Global warming. There are things that she just didn't have to think about, that she has to think about now. And should she win in 2028, she will be tasked with helping to address these major environmental, cultural, societal issues that we face.

AT: Okay, but speaking on behalf of myself and many of the historians that I talked to, I am begging you to include, if not in this book, then in the next one, a scene where she is watching historical dramas and yelling at the TV about inaccuracies.

MV: Oh yeah, that sounds great. Now she does watch *The Crown* in this book, and so there's this one period where she's like, "oh, I really want to meet this young queen." And they're like, "well, no, she's not really young and plus she's gone now." So there are things like that. But yes, I think that that'd be a fun thing in book two, because there's this show about Victoria on Masterpiece Theater. Well, that's going to piss her off because she really has this thing about Victoria. Plus they make her young and pretty and all these things. So she does not like that. And I'll have to think about how to bring in some of those Cate Blanchett movies without necessarily mentioning Cate Blanchett by name. There aren't many real people in the book who are living today. There might be at least one person in the next book who is living today that would be funny to include. But yeah, I think that's very true. Oh, and there is another thing too, which you will pick up, that is a historical inaccuracy, a couple things that she picks up. Because the historian and the English professor from Harvard, who are two of the travelers who go to 1588, they wrote a book called *Queen Elizabeth: Heart and Stomach of a Lion*. She's like, "no, no, no. It's heart and stomach of a king. I said heart and stomach of a king." There's things, she supposedly said at that one point, "I may be a weak and evil woman and yet I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too." And there are a couple other things that she will do like that. Yes. She does get into some pop culture stuff. It's true. She gets into *The Bachelorette*. *Poldark*, has a thing for Aiden, whatever his name is, the guy who plays Poldark, she definitely has a thing for him. And then in book two, she's going to start watching things like RuPaul's Drag Race because she's totally fine with men dressing in drag because that's that's what they did. Drag was Shakespeare saying dressed as a girl. That's where it came from.

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There are some things that Elizabeth will learn to understand in the 21st century that she wouldn't have understood in the 16th century. One of them is there is a gay character, quite a major character in Queen Bess who's Dakota Winfred's other best friend. So he went to MIT with her. And so they have a whole conversation about being gay and what that meant. And he's very hurt about something that he reads in the biography of Elizabeth. And so that touches her. And again, it's her personal connections with people in our century that starts to shape and change the way that she perceives others around her. Anyway, she was very comfortable with drag queens because of course, in Elizabethan England, all the roles were played by men or boys. So drag stands for dressed as a girl. One of the things that she will have a more difficult time with and will have to become more acculturated over time is something that didn't exist in the same way in the 16th century was the concept of transgender, not in Europe at the time. She wouldn't understand intellectually if she thought it was a voluntary choice and not a biological necessity, why someone who was assigned male at birth would then

identify as transgender and want to lose all the privilege, the male privilege that she was very, very cognizant of. So she'll think about things in a different way. It's not judgmental in the same way that there are some people who would judge that. She's not looking at it that way. She thinks of it differently, but she has no problem with dressing as either gender or any gender or, it just doesn't bother her at all. She's very confident in how she appears. It's not important. What's important is the kind of person you are and what you do in your life and how you treat other people and what you accomplish. The other thing is she is very, in book two, we'll see a little bit more about her political platform. For example, with abortion in the 16th century, I read that people believed that the fetus wasn't a baby until the woman could feel the baby quicken in the womb. That's maybe five months or something like that. She wouldn't think of it as a baby because it's not really alive in her view. She looks at abortion as a healthcare issue. It's not a moral issue. I'm not a religious scholar at all, but I even think that probably 2,000 years ago or 1,500 years ago, whatever, the Catholic church probably had a different view of when life begins as well.

AT: Well, she also would be coming from a context where she's used to women dying in childbirth. (MV: That's right.) And in fact, even today, the US has significantly higher maternal mortality rates than any other developed country in the world. I think it's like three times higher than, say, South Korea's.

MV: It's horrifying. One of the things that she thinks is very, very important is that no child should go hungry. There's no reason to have famine in this country. There's no reason for a child to starve. We have enough food. It's a question of distribution. This whole concept of price controls, who knows if she's going to want to bring that back? Her policies around import-export will be interesting, but she thinks you should be shamed if you allow people to go hungry in this country. There's no need. We have enough food. The other thing about Elizabeth that I like is that because she decided not to marry, she was not thrilled if anybody else decided to marry. And legally, what anyone was supposed to do who was in the court, was ask her permission before marrying. Now, that did not always happen. And when that did not happen, she could get very angry. So there were some parts of her that were not ideal. Now, on the other hand, if someone died close to her or someone that she cared about lost someone, she would feel that loss very deeply, have a lot of empathy for them. And I think she had a lot of emotion. I think she had a wide expression of emotion. So from great sorrow to panic to love and elation to anger, this is my impression of her, the way that I read about her.

AT: Now, obviously, you couldn't have known when you were writing this that it was going to come out like a month before we might have not only the first woman president, but also the first Asian-American president. I mean, we didn't know that a few months before this book is coming out. So it was very sudden. I love it. But it was definitely not something you could have probably anticipated. So how do you think that your book coming out in that specific context, because that is a very unique context in American history for this to be published, so how do you think that that's going to change how audiences are going to receive the book?

MV: For a long time, I began to feel absolutely gutted. It was absolutely hopeless. And here we go, the Democrats are a total mess, and they're disorganized, and they don't have it together, and we're going to lose in a big way. And that's what I thought. And so then I thought, "well, I guess worst case scenario is, we have this fantasy of Queen Elizabeth I, and that's our woman president." Now, hopefully, we have an image of a real actual physical living woman president. And we can just kick back and relax and enjoy the whimsy of Queen Bess during this period and beyond it. That's what I hope.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.