

My Royal Story: Victoria

Discussion Guide

Queen Victoria ruled Britain and its empire for sixty-three years. Her reign was marked by a tremendous expansion of the British nation in terms of social and scientific improvements, growth in its imperial power and its political role in the world, and a flourishing of the arts, from painting to the writing of great literature. Victoria's love for her family of nine children and her husband, Prince Albert, set a tone for her nation that emphasised the importance of family and, in her later years, earned her the reputation of the 'Grandmother of Europe'.

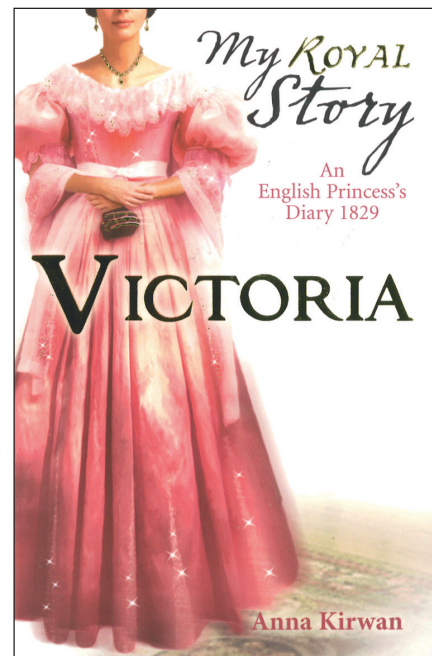
In *My Royal Story: Victoria*, author Anna Kirwan takes readers inside Kensington Palace at a time when Princess Victoria is ten years old. Through her diary entries, the princess offers glimpses of courtly customs, royal power struggles, political plotting, and her ultimate ascension to the throne.

Anna Kirwan, the author of four other books for young readers, recalls that when she was growing up some of her favourite books were written by Victorian authors Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. Of her first book in the Royal Diaries series, Kirwan says, 'When I started my research for *My Royal Story: Victoria*, I didn't know how much I would like the Princess Victoria. But after all, her life was the inspiration for many authors whose books touched my heart and amused me when I was a kid.' With this book, she introduces readers to this inspiring and fascinating monarch.

Summary

'I had to hide my little journal, the reason is that I do not wish anyone to know that it exists. Really, I must have a place to pour out my curious thoughts and sort through them. I never get to be truly alone,' writes nine-year-old Princess Victoria, niece of King George IV. Always surrounded by attendants and her over-protective mother, Victoria is expected to behave perfectly, to be seen and not heard. She remembers nothing of her father 'Duke Papa', who died in 1820 when she was eight months old, and she misses her closest confidante, older sister Feodora, who has married and moved away.

Since the only playmate Victoria has is sneaky Toire Conroy, daughter of Captain Conroy, the overbearing financial advisor to Victoria's mother, the young princess spends much time playing games and making crafts with her governess, Baroness Lehzen. Her days are filled with lessons taught by various tutors, and there are elaborate birthday parties, holiday dinners and royal balls. A special time is a visit to Uncle Leopold (Mamma's brother) at



Claremont and then to Ramsgate for a vacation by the sea.

Although the elegant life seems perfect, Victoria worries about Captain Conroy's treatment of her mother. He seems to control Mamma's every movement. One evening when Victoria overhears loud voices, she sneaks down to see what the cause is and witnesses Conroy physically hurting her mother. Afraid to confront him herself, Victoria appeals to Baroness de Spaeth (Mamma's long-time lady-in-waiting) to intervene. She does, but the next day the Baroness is dismissed from the household and sent away to live with Feodora. Victoria feels guilty and is both sad and 'very angry'. She writes, 'I miss Baroness de Spaeth. I deplore my own mother's behaviour. I shall never trust Captain Conroy, not ever more.'

One day, Victoria reads a letter addressed to Mamma from Aunt Adelaide suggesting that Victoria be allowed to have other friends, 'for she might be a queen in the future'. Victoria is shocked and surprised by such news, but dismisses it, thinking there are other family members who will rule when her 'Uncle King' dies. Later, while working on a history lesson, charting the family tree, Victoria realises that 'I am closer to the throne than I thought'. Baroness Lehzen confirms this, stating, 'In all probability, you will be Queen of England.' Victoria writes, 'No crown will ever weigh on me more heavily than those words.' Soon after, Uncle King 'passes on to Divine Justice and Reward' and Uncle William IV rules Britain. Then, her beloved Uncle Leopold is invited to be King of Belgium, and he accepts and departs.

Though only twelve, Victoria knows her world is changing forever. She writes, 'So I take [my journal] up again, to record my days. There is much to love and admire in the world, but much that I shall never understand. There is much that causes regret and sorrow.' Less than six years later, King William IV dies, and Victoria becomes Queen of Britain and its vast empire.

A Book Club Blackline Master

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Thinking about the Book

1. Do you think Victoria had a happy childhood? Use examples from the diary to support your answer.
2. What do you think about Victoria's mother? Is she strong or weak? How does the young princess feel about her mother?
3. Baroness de Spaeth was Mamma's lady-in-waiting for many years. Though she is loved by Victoria and others at Kensington Palace, she is banished. Why does Mamma take this drastic action against her loyal servant? Why does Victoria feel responsible?
4. Captain Conroy is, perhaps, the most unlikable character in *My Royal Story: Victoria*. In your discussion group, see if you can come up with at least three ways author Anna Kirwan causes readers to dislike the Captain.
5. Victoria loves to read and write. In her diary she uses some words that readers might not be familiar with. What does each of the following mean?
 - Bilious
 - Griffin
 - Vexed
 - Marzipan pigs
 - Equerry
6. Re-read the diary entry for 14 September. What are the three things the fortune-teller told Victoria's father? Do these things come true?
7. Queen Victoria reigned for sixty-three years. Take a look at the epilogue and the historical note at the end of her royal diary. Was she a good ruler? What were some of her accomplishments?
3. In Victoria's time there were unusual remedies for pain and sickness: laudanum, leeches, almond aloe, physicks and caraway poultices are mentioned. For what were these used? What would today's doctors use to treat the same illnesses?
4. The time of Victoria's reign is often termed the Victorian Era, and this refers to a certain style of architecture, home décor, clothing, food and so on. Find out how a Victorian family lived in 1876. Investigate how this family celebrated Christmas. Try making some Victorian crafts or treats.
5. There are many unusual words and terms in Victoria's diary. Choose three of the following and explain their meanings to your group.
 - Treacle
 - Syllabub
 - Barouche
 - Farthingale
 - Topiary
 - At sixes and sevens
 - Pottage
 - Falderal
 - Epaulets
6. In the epilogue it is stated that Victoria, when she was queen, took drawing lessons from artist Edward Lear. He wrote limericks and other poems. Look up Lear's *A Book of Nonsense*. Select several limericks and share them with your group.

Student Activities

1. On 29 December, Victoria writes about getting a gift of a toy called a thaumatrope. Re-read that entry to see what this toy does. To see how this toy really works, learn how to make a thaumatrope of your own.
2. Victoria writes of enjoying the story 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses'. Find a copy of this tale and read it. Why do you think Victoria liked it?

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