

The National Book Festival

The Library of Congress invited Eloisa James to talk at the 2012 National Book Festival, making her the first romance author to speak at the festival. She claims that genre fiction transforms individual lives by resonating with reader emotions. We hope you enjoy the following selections!

Eloisa James: I have to do something I promised, which is give a shout out to my daughter who's here somewhere—age 13 back there.

Eloisa James spoke at the National Book Festival in 2012 about the power of popular romance in her life as a reader and a writer.

Eloisa James: I just want to start by telling you how I got into this place. I really have two identities. I am, as she said, Dr. Mary Bly, so I am a Shakespeare professor at Fordham University; and I'm also Eloisa James and I've written 22 bestselling romances. And romance in a sense is the bottom of the literary canon, so I go from the top, to the bottom.

Eloisa James: My father was Robert Bly. He won the National Book Award for poetry. Yay! He was invited to this festival. I grew up in a very literary household. We didn't have a television. The house was completely full of books. My mother, Carol Bly, was a short story writer, so our entire lives revolved around great literature. I was the Philistine in this family because my father liked poetry and would recite it every night at dinner; my mother preferred lugubrious Russian novelists and would constantly bring them up. I just liked passion. I wanted

anyone. I would read Jane Austen. I would read *anyone*. And this bothered my family a lot. So finally my father made a deal: For every romance you read you have to read a classic. I know you are all literary readers, but I bet I'm the only one who has read the entire collective works of Mark Twain. My grandmother had a lot of Barbara Cartlands, and I had to get there.

Eloisa James: The biggest thing I can say about romance, the biggest definition of romance is the hope that there is a secret, hidden order to the world. I don't mean this religiously. I just mean that there is a secret architecture and at the heart of it is love. Whether that is love between a man and a woman, between women, between women and children, doesn't really matter; the romance promises that that's important, and that it's the most important.

Eloisa James: When they ask me what is the book, I keep getting asked this, what book—what decision to read what book put you on the path where you are? I would say it was the first time I picked up a Georgette Heyer, because she had that incredibly intelligent approach to writing that worked for me, that I could analyze.

The other thing, of course, was Jane Austen. I read Jane Austen over and over and over and over. And I read it in a very. . . Jane Austen was not frightening. My father was always talking about poetry, but you didn't rewrite Yeats, right? You just admired Yeats. You would read him over and over out loud. And my mother was talking about Tolstoy. You didn't read a Tolstoy novel and say, "Hey, I could do this much better." But you know, Austen, I would look at *Pride and Prejudice* and was like, "You know what? I don't really like her. I think I could do better." She wasn't frightening, and I think that may be one of the reasons romance is one of the great meritocracies we have left. It's a place where you don't have to have graduated from Harvard, Oxford, and Yale. You don't have to have done that to write romance.

What makes a good popular romance novel?

Eloisa James: So when you're writing a fairy tale, or you're writing any kind of genre fiction, the key thing is that you surprise the reader within the bounds of what they already know. In a literary fiction, anything could happen. In a romance, you know from what you pick up that the dream of that book is that you can have a long sensual, thoughtful, respectful relationship between two people of whatever gender. It's already promised, so I have to surprise the reader within the bounds of that. I have to make them think, "This book isn't going to work." Right? That's what you have to do in a mystery too, "This one isn't going to be solved." There's a dream at the heart of every genre fiction that has to be dispelled in the middle. Well, if you add in a fairy tale, I now have to surprise a reader who knows perfectly well how *The Ugly Duchess* ends or what "Beauty and the Beast" is about, right?

Eloisa James: What I'm trying to do then, if a literary fiction teaches you to fight your own world, perhaps, to learn what you should learn and what to fight against, mine teaches very small lessons. So *The Ugly Duchess*, the book that just got all those starred reviews, it has one very small lesson: "ugly" is a word that we never use to describe, always to insult, always to hurt. So, how am I going to shape a book around that realization without just turning it into a moral lesson, which is incredibly boring, right? So I chose a heroine in the 1800s, and I based her on a supermodel now with an extremely strong, mannish face and body, which of course was incredibly ugly in the 1800s; so she is my ugly duchess. She's married to a man who is tremendously beautiful, and the marriage falls apart. He goes away, and becomes a pirate—because I like pirates, my first pirate—and he gets tattooed, and he comes back. Now he's singing like Leonard Cohen, right? He is now ugly. He has a tattoo on his face. He has a broken voice. They switch places, so the ugly becomes the beautiful because she, like Coco Chanel, by the time he comes back from being a pirate has become the arbiter of beauty in London and Parisian society.

What lessons have you learned from reading romances or other genre

novels? If you read romance while you were growing up, what did your parents think? Did you have to strike a deal like Eloisa James?

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