

On drawing inspiration from your day job



Shakespeare professor and romance novelist Eloisa James discusses the benefits and setbacks of her double life, figuring out what she could contribute to a popular genre, and showing up to do the work.

December 23, 2021 -

As told to Hunter Lang, 1295 words.

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When people ask you what you do for work, how do you respond to them?

I'm a Shakespeare professor. I have a double life. I have a writing life and I have a work life. But my primary me is a Shakespeare professor. And now also a chair of the department. There's the sort of administrative side and then the teaching side, and scholarship. I'm just starting a new book project on Shakespeare in pop culture and it's going to be really fun. I haven't done scholarship in a while because I've been so wrapped up on the other side with Eloisa.

That's been great, but now I have this new book coming out, my first Mary Bly book, and that took four years to write and it was hard to write. There's a lot of learning in teaching. But then Eloisa is sort of this place that I built up, where I'm good at writing romance and I really like it.

Do you find it difficult to balance your life in academia with being a romance novelist?

They help each other a lot. The book that I have coming out, *Lizzie & Dante* is about a Shakespeare professor who got breast cancer, which I had, but I'm well over, and goes to Italy and meets an Italian man. I'm married to an Italian man. There's a lot of discussion in the book about *Romeo and Juliet*, about poetry, the arguments at the dinner table that I've had.

In the romance that I had come out this past spring, a young woman wants to play Hamlet on the stage. And so she does. Writing about those things wouldn't be possible for me, except that I'm teaching these plays practically every day. What I'm teaching becomes what I'm writing.

You have a lot of literary references in your books.

I taught *Romeo and Juliet* every year for the last 20 years, right? So, over and over students say to me, "These guys would not have survived. They would not be together. They'd be divorced." And I know that's true. I decided, okay, I'm going to write my own version of *Romeo and Juliet*. And you know what? That night before the balcony scene would not have been all that much fun either, because they don't even know each other. And sex when you don't know someone can be really great or really not great.

I really learned that lesson from Shakespeare, right? Because you've got that sort of a high-end literary references, and then he's got smack down comedy. I feel that as a writer, the worst thing you can do is write a

book only for the person who you are, right? I often hear writers say, "Oh, I wanted this book. So I wrote it." Which is a good starting point, But after that, I think you need to be thinking bigger and broader.

Did you always want to be a romance writer?

I didn't. My parents are both writers. So, there was no TV in my house. There was only books, really. My parents were very much like, "Okay, what are you writing? What's your project? What are you doing?" It did feel like large parts of my childhood were apprenticed. My parents, my mother in particular, could not abide romance. She thought it wasn't real book.

So, I found my way to romance. I found my way to romance because I was already a Shakespeare professor. And I really started writing to pay off student loans. I'm good at Romance. I love the genre, I love the ins and outs and I understand sort of the core fantasy.

Did you read a lot of romance novels yourself?

I read a ton in high school. I tried [writing] mystery first and I couldn't do it because I really couldn't put myself into the mind of a murderer without giving them this huge backstory.

So, I went to a used bookstore and I said, "I want five books each by two New York Times best sellers." And I mapped them out in the same way that I teach anybody to deal with a difficult test like Hamlet. Why do I think they're a best seller? What do I think the pacing is like? Why do I think this works?. And then, I looked down and I was like, "What could I bring to this?"

So, my first book is based on something that I studied in my oral exams at Yale when I was doing my Ph.D., which is the Earl of Essex who annulled his marriage on the grounds of impotence. And I was like, "Well, if I put a plot around that, no one else will have done it. No one else had."

Do you still use that formula?

No, not at all. Because if you're going to have a long career in writing, you need to be constantly reading in your genre. What you're going to write is going to change. It has to change. Back when I made my map, consent wasn't even on there.

Once you decide to write a novel, is your process the same every time?

It's changed over time. Things change when you have babies, for example. Things change when you're chair of the department and there's a pandemic. I think you have to let things change.

I would say one of the enduring things I learned is that you just have to keep going. *Lizzie & Dante* took me four years to write. So, I wrote the first version in a year and then I gave it to my agent. She shredded it. She just shredded it because it was not a romance, right? It's my first time going into something else. And I was like, "Oh my god." It took me another year to rewrite it. This happened every August, next August, shredded it.

But then I would pick it up again because you can edit a page with words on it. You can edit it until it's good. Even if it really sucks. And I have a feeling, my first version of *Lizzie & Dante* was utterly sucky.

Do you ever have moments where you just burn out on something?

Yeah, I do. But I'm very hard-headed too. I mean, after you spend a year on something, you're going to come back and do it, right? So, I do a lot of writing then I say, "Okay, I know what I'm writing today is utter crap. I'm just going to keep going, because this is my writing time. I only have one hour or 25 minutes. I'm going to write and if it's crap, I'll edit it later." So, always telling people to just get to the end of the pages of that day

or the pages of that month, where the end of the book and worry about editing it later.

It's like parenting, right? Half of parenting is just showing up. Writing is like that, too. I'm never going to be Tolstoy, but I can be the best me writer by just showing up and showing up and showing up.

Eloisa James Recommends:

Go to an island: I recommend Elba—not a fancy island but a magical one.

If that's not possible, let Gerald Durrell's *The Corfu Trilogy* steal you away to Greece.

Slather on Living Libations Best Skin Ever Tropical, to keep your skin happy in the sun.

A fabulous beach read: Talia Hibbert's hilarious *Take a Hint, Dani Brown* (or anything else she's written).

Listen to: Vagabon's ethereal, thoughtful "Water Me Down."

Name

Eloisa James

Vocation

Shakespeare Professor, Chair of the Fordham University English department, romance novelist

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