

Emma Byrne 0:03

Since I became a parent, I've been reading a lot of fairy tales. They all seem to go like this: handsome prince rescues beautiful princess, and they all live happily ever after. It's a tale as old as time, or at least as old as Hans Christian Andersen via the Disney Corporation. But life is not that simple, even - or perhaps especially - for anyone trying to date while wearing a crown. In his new book, Daniel Smith looks back at the love letters of kings and queens, and what we see is that love is usually hard to find, hard to keep, and that loyalty and respect are actually some of the most beautiful and enduring qualities of any relationship. [intro music] Today's guest is Daniel Smith, author of 'Love Letters of Kings and Queens.'

So, welcome to this edition of NonFicPod with Byrne (that's me)

Georgie Codd 1:08

and Codd. I'm here, hello!

Emma Byrne 1:10

Hello. So what do you reckon to fairy tales, Codd? Big fan? Not a big fan?

Georgie Codd 1:16

I don't know, they're so neat, aren't they? A lot of them it's so neat, and they're quite... I quite like the gory ones, like the original fairy tales, with the old feet being chopped off etc., grandmothers being eaten, that kind of thing. But then I'm not so keen on the general Prince-rides-to-the-rescue and actually, damsel-in-distress, that kind of jazz. No, not interested. The, the mysticism and magic I do like. What about you?

Emma Byrne 1:46

Yeah, since having to read some of these things to my daughter - who is about to turn five - yeah, the gender essentialism of most of them is nauseating. And I try to avoid them as much as I can. But the thing that really gets to me, especially after 16 years of marriage, is the phrase "And they lived happily ever after." What a f*cking cop out! This idea that marriage - sorry, a wedding - is the end of all of your travails, and marriage from that point on is just like, plain sailing. actually marriage is (like any relationship) damned hard work. But where do you fall down on love letters? Do you like a good gushy "I love you my sweetie bab bab"? Or are you more of a, you know, "Get to the point."

Georgie Codd 2:38

Well, firstly, no one's ever called me "sweetie bab bab" and I feel like I've really missed out. I love a love letter!

Emma Byrne 2:46

Oh, well In this episode we get we get to hear some very very glurgesome terms of endearment so yeah, "sweetie bab bab" is nothing. Yeah, so reading this book, 'Love Letters of Kings and Queens' and looking at the love letters from [King] Edward [VIII] to Wallis Simpson, oh, man, there are some nauseating terms of endearment, particularly between Edward and Wallis

Simpson, or from Edward to Wallis Simpson. They did make me want to gnaw my own feet off. And one of the things I noticed is that, yeah, even when you wear a crown - or perhaps especially when you wear a crown - relationships are hard work, yeah?

Georgie Codd 3:21

Hmm. Does make me wonder, you, you're talking about that line, "And they all lived happily ever after." How many people have been skewed by that? How many relationships have never lived up to the fairytales that we heard as kids

Emma Byrne 3:35

The book we've got this week is 'Love Letters of Kings and Queens' and some of those love letters do show that pandemic is nothing compared to your loved one being off, you know, fighting wars in Russia, or trying to sire an heir or something. So I kind of feel like trying to navigate homeschooling in a pandemic is pretty small fry compared to what some of these couples have been through.

Georgie Codd 3:58

So when you tell those fairy tales to your youngest, do you ad lib a bit at the end? [EB laughs] "They all lived happily ever after?' Except they didn't. Because then the in-laws arrived."

Emma Byrne 4:11

Oh, yes. There's always that isn't there. Actually my in-laws are wonderful, my husband's in-laws are terrible. I tend to ad-lib during the story as well. It's like: "'and then he lent over the sleeping princess and stole a kiss.' And that is sexual assault."

Georgie Codd 4:26

Good!

Emma Byrne 4:27

"Consent is important, yo! This is gross! 'And then the wicked stepmother was asking who was the fairest in the land.' Because as women we're taught to value ourselves depending on our desirability and our appearance, and we'll be having none of that." So yeah, I get a little right-on which means... it's worked brilliantly because it means my daughter will not let me read her those sorts of post-Disney version fairy tales. So yeah, the original ones, the gory ones, she doesn't like 'cause they're gory as f*ck, but the Disney ones she doesn't like Because Mummy gets a little... She gets her feminism on. My favorite book [series] to read her actually is 'Arabel and Mortimer', which has a delightful young girl and her pet raven, and nobody's rescuing anybody

Georgie Codd 5:11

Great!

Emma Byrne 5:12

So yeah, I think at the moment, she would much rather be Arabel, or possibly Mortimer, than a princess. I'm trying to remember if I went through a wanting-to-be-a-princess phase. Do you remember having one of those?

Georgie Codd 5:23

I was wondering that actually, while you were speaking, and trying to remember it. And I think possibly I did want to be a princess, but my mum couldn't afford the Disney-themed, like, Princess Jasmine outfits or whatever. She was the princess that I most wanted to be, obviously because she had the flying carpet, man. No, I'm... I think I mostly wanted to be a farmer. A bit different.

Emma Byrne 5:45

Right! Yeah, I wanted to be a nun for a while because I heard that they get to basically do a lot of reading. Nobody told me about the slightly limited range of things you're meant to read if you're a nun. Then, after that, I wanted to be a fighter pilot.

Georgie Codd 6:00

Where did that come from?

Emma Byrne 6:01

Yeah, I just... I saw 'Top Gun' when I was very young, probably too young to have seen it. I just wanted to go very, very fast, very, very high up. Yeah, I think in terms of literary characters I quite fancied being Heidi; I wanted a goat, and to live that kind of rural life, which is bizarre because I grew up in Yorkshire and I actually legitimately hated it. Because you know, there are no buses and I was miles away from anywhere, but for some reason 'Heidi' made it look good.

On this episode, Daniel Smith has written over thirty nonfiction books, including the hugely successful 'How To Think Like' series. His book, 'The Peer and The Gangster' was described by The Observer as "revelatory and hilarious," while 'The Ardlamont Mystery' is "an enthralling, real life murder mystery," according to The Daily Mail. His next book, 'The Love Letters of Kings and Queens' is out in February. Welcome, Daniel.

Dan Smith 6:57

Hello, thanks for having me.

Emma Byrne 6:59

I really enjoyed, I got a sort of voyeuristic thrill out of reading 'The Love Letters of Kings and Queens.' And one of the things that really struck me was this consistent theme of "I suck, but you're divine!" that runs through so many of these love letters. Were you surprised at all, that even kings, queens, and emperors are occasionally a little insecure when we woo?

Dan Smith 7:18

Yeah, I guess so, up to a certain point and... But then some of them you just think are these, are people just pulling their best moves. So, the [King] Henry the Eighth letters, you think: "Which

wife do you have to be before you start wondering if he really means all this stuff that he's saying?" [EB chuckles] So you have those kind of ones. But then yeah, I was really struck by for instance, the [King] Charles the First letters, written at a time of civil war and utter crisis for the monarchy, and you still get this, you get a real insight into the real-life relationship, and that the marriage between Charles I and [Queen] Henrietta Maria wasn't always enormously happy. There was an underlying affection and respect there that comes out in those letters, and as the civil war progressed, you could see the power balance sort of changing between the two of them, so that Henrietta almost became the guiding hand really, and she was instructing Charles as to what he should be doing. So I found those kinds of methods really interesting, and when you see these figures that you know from history in quite a different light. And then you have people like [King] Edward the Eighth, and maybe these are some of the most romantic letters; in other respects, they're some of the most cloying as well, they use a sort of baby talk and nicknames, and they can be slightly cringy. But then, we have this vision of Edward and Wallis, but he did give everything up for her. So actually, you know, behind all of that, you've got, again, a man who was (albeit briefly) king but you know, who also was this highly emotional character that utterly comes out on the page, and pages of his love letters, yeah.

Emma Byrne 8:47

It does, doesn't it? He's utterly besotted with Wallis.

Unknown Speaker 8:51

And probably more than she was with him as well. I think the tone of some, several of her letters, well she absolutely gives him get-out clauses all the time, and you sort of suspect that she wouldn't have minded too much if he'd taken one or two of those get-out clauses along the way. But no! You know, he just kept on going in there full throttle. Quite what she made of it all is less clear, perhaps, I think, still.

Emma Byrne 9:13

That's one of the interesting things about where we have both sides of the correspondence. One of the ones that really struck me - we've got Rosie Wilby on this season talking about 'The Breakup Monologues' and the notion of conscious uncoupling - which is thought to have originated with Gwyneth Paltrow - actually pre existed there. But Prince [Regent] George's first letter, the breakup letter is quite a conscious uncoupling letter: "It's our fault, we don't get along, why not live apart and be happy?"

Dan Smith 9:39

Yeah.

Emma Byrne 9:40

But then when you see [Princess] Caroline's letter, she's not exactly on the same page. First of all, do you find yourself ever rooting for one partner over the other, are there a few were that you're sort of thinking: "That one's a bad egg"?

Definitely, definitely. I mean, I think George, Prince George is one of those ones (later [King] George the Fourth) you know, he was a cad and a bounder, and that's pretty clear, you know, all the way through. So yes, I think it's difficult not to pick a side there, as it is with Henry the Eighth as well. When when you know how the story is going to end each time, it's difficult not to think: "I've got your card marked mate!" So, but yeah, in other other ones, I think it's less clear. I mean, a lot of these relationships that are documented in the book, it's... They open a window onto the complexities of the relationships, and very often it's women with very little choice in what's happening to them in terms of marital decisions. But also, it's men quite often being awful, but themselves not having a huge amount of the ability to dictate their own fates. You know they're, they're so born to duty that's expected of them and utterly defines their lives as well. So I think often, you get to the end of whichever chapter with whichever coupling and I kind of feel sorry for both parties very often. You think, "Yeah, nobody's really come out of this very happily." And, of course, it's from an age and strata of society, which... These were not love marriages, and certainly George and Caroline, oh I don't think they'd met until about three days before the marriage, he'd already had an unofficial marriage (which was never publicly acknowledged), it was not a great start to a relationship. And then Caroline's in a situation where really her choice is to stay in the marriage and get as good a life out of it if she can create, and she just comes up against this force of George, who's beyond caring very shortly after the wedding, what happens there. And it's just horrible, really, it's horrible to read, but fascinating, as well.

As you say, that idea of duty and expected roles, and particularly sort of quite narrow roles for women, but also the way that those of us who are commoners never have to worry about things like begetting an heir. So you talk about Napoleon and Josephine and the fact that, yeah, they had to split up so that Napoleon could could beget an heir. When you're reading that, the tearing between love and duty, is there anyone you particularly admire in the book, for having either succumbed to duty or stepped up for duty, or do you quite like the rebels who go "Forget duty, I'm going to run off with this American divorcee.

Dan Smith 12:16

Looking at it from our moment in history, where we basically believe in love marriages, it's difficult to look at any of these marriages where whoever it might be's engaged to their partner at the age of seven, or something like that, you know, they meet 12 hours before the wedding, and... It's very difficult to ever think: "Oh, what a marvelous setup that is." I quite like the rebels. Like I said, I think Edward the Eighth is a very divisive figure, and in many ways, he's very unappealing. But within the fairly narrow confines of whether you go for your duty or for love, I think there's something at least intriguing and kind of appealing that the story played out as it did there. So I quite like that as a story. I think that's probably where I am with it more; I like the stories rather than necessarily massively respecting the characters within them. Yeah, and then you have, you know, figures like Napoleon and Josephine. It's a tragedy, isn't it? I don't think I admire Napoleon that he gave up his one true great love, so that he could get a male heir. I don't think [laughs] "What a guy!" for doing that. But you know, you have complete sympathy with the situation, and you see how difficult it must have been for both of them. And I think Napoleon and Josephine are quite intriguing as well, because that's one of the correspondences where there's an awful lot from the the male figure and not a lot from the female figure. And I

think there's been quite a lot of suggestion over the years that again, they definitely loved each other. But Napoleon might well have loved her more than she loved him. Very often, his letters he absolutely lays his soul bare for her. And then the next letter that he writes, sort of starts with something along the lines of: "You know, I sent you that one three weeks ago, and I've not heard anything back from you yet." And you kind of have some interesting power balances going on there as well with some of these figures that you do think well, theirs was a love match. And I think theirs was but you know, they both had a lot of affairs very shortly after they were married, you know, they didn't stay faithful for very long. And then, you know, they come to the conclusion that, well, there's no male heir on the horizon and so, well, we'll knock it on the head for now. And it's, it's a difficult one. Who, who do you admire in those situations? I don't know.

Emma Byrne 14:25

I did like, as well, the fact that, as you mention, most of those letters, most of what we know about Napoleon's relationship with Josephine are from Napoleon's letters. And there is that sense in his letters that occasionally, she's slightly ghosting him.

Dan Smith 14:39

Yeah. Definitely.

Emma Byrne 14:40

Yeah, what do you do when you have, one half is very clearly written? You've already alluded to the fact that it's never safe to conjecture the entire state of the relationship based on just what one person is writing.

Dan Smith 14:52

I was just gonna say! I think you just have to read them bearing that in mind, that we are inevitably getting only part of a story. Even when there's copious correspondence on both sides, you know, it's an insight. And it's to be treated as an insight rather than chapter and verse; you never know the state of somebody else's relationship do you? So you can only work from the evidence you've got, what we're able to do in a quite sort of joyful and fun way with these, I think, but not to think that we know the full picture all the time.

Emma Byrne 15:21

And it is a lot of fun. You mentioned earlier, the fact that while these love letters, they're not always necessarily entirely ardent, there is a lot of: "And here's this other stuff going on, what ought I to do?" How does that feel when you basically look back through history and see these phenomenal partnerships?

Dan Smith 15:35

Yeah, I find these, in some ways, the most interesting, because like I said, I think the [King] Charles the First letters are really fascinating, just because you know what is going on in quite a lot of detail in terms of historical political background, and, and to see these two people who ultimately come across as (albeit a highly powered and entitled people, but you know) essentially normal, ordinary people with normal ordinary feelings of fear, and uncertainty, and

affection, and all those kinds of things. I think it comes across very clearly in their relationship. So I found those particularly interesting, I also found that the Victoria and Albert ones great from that point of view, as well. In some ways, they're hilarious. To begin with, they're hilarious. So you have Queen Victoria writing to to her favorite uncle, Leopold, King of Belgium, basically saying: "I don't want to get married, and you're sending your nephew, Albert over, and I'll see him but I'm making no guarantees!" and all this kind of stuff. And then, seemingly about five minutes after she's seen Albert she's just utterly besotted. And it's: "When can we get married?" [laughs] You know, I think I think she proposed to him in about, about five days after they met. And I think that's great, that she was the one that did the proposing, it's fantastic. And then it's not long before you get this other, these other aspects that come in, where Albert is trying to manoeuvre so that he can have, he can nominate his own staff, and define what his role is going to be. And Victoria writing these slightly testy letters back basically saying: "Albert you've not understood at all, and you're going to have to play by my rules, our British rules." And so that's quite interesting to see. And I read an article recently, actually, about them. And Albert really struggled for a long time to define what his role was going to be. And he in the end, he accepted that he was going to play second fiddle to Victoria in public life, but there seems to have been this, then within their private life he was very much into "keeping her in her place" domestically, and he would fire members of her staff and dictate how domestic life should be run, and she seemingly was praying to tantrums that he, would really extremely frustrate him, and he would tell her off for them. And apparently, he used to then give her certificates of improvement [Byrne squeals in horror] when she apologized, and said she wouldn't do it again. So you know, awful insight into their domestic life! Yeah, I actually found that out after I'd edited this book and I thought "Wow, that's very interesting." Those letters are very interesting, because there's this real difference between, clearly Victoria recognizes she is a public figure and a private individual, and obviously, a source of some friction for the two of them. Going back to your question, yeah, I love those ones, which really reveal not necessarily the grand passions all the time, but sometimes more the mundaneness of married life, even for these people.

Emma Byrne 18:30

I'm wondering about two centuries hence, when historians have fully had access to the the love WhatsApp messages, or the the courting TikToks of grains of wheat, are we doomed to lose these sorts of human insights into ephemera do you think?

Dan Smith 18:44

We are really, sadly, in terms of, in terms of the sort of book that I've just been editing. Yeah, it's difficult to imagine that there's going to be a similar volume of material that makes it through the centuries. You know, you have that sense of we're being an incredibly well-documented age, but perhaps that's to the detriment of history. We're becoming so well-documented that there's piles of digital information, and quite how we're going to be able to get through those and find find the needles in the haystacks of it all. I don't know, I think we probably are gonna lack some of this sort of material in times to come. And I think that's really sad. If that is the case. I hope it isn't.

Emma Byrne 19:24

I'm really glad that you have had access to this incredible body of literature, and of correspondence. And I have to say anyone who has been enjoying 'Bridgerton' should really get hold of a copy of this book, this is the trials, the strifes, the the triumphs, the mundanity, all of it is entirely glorious. And I just want to say thank you so much to Daniel. You can find Daniel Smith at danielsmithbooks.co.uk, and as DanSmith_writer on Twitter, thank you so much for joining us on NonFicPod Daniel.

Dan Smith 19:57
Thank you very much.

Emma Byrne 20:05
What are you reading? Other than Of course, the ardent love letters that have been sent to you.

Georgie Codd 20:10
Well, I... Yeah, the one love letter that my mom sent me when I was six years old. It was blank. No! What have I been reading? I've been reading Rosie Wilby, 'Breakup Monologues.'

Emma Byrne 20:22
Oh, yeah, this is brilliant from the: "Oh, my darling, I love you. Please, please love me too, my widdle snookums" to "F*ck you! It's over!"

Georgie Codd 20:30
Yeah, yeah. "And it's good that it's over. And I'm glad!" So that's quite, that's quite exciting. For those of you listening who are not already aware of our schedule, we have Rosie Wilby as one of our interviewees in a few weeks' time. So yes, I'm plunging headfirst into the world of broken relationships. And it's juicy. And it's quite, it is nice to read about the not happily-ever-afters. Makes you feel a bit less like a loser, methinks.

Emma Byrne 21:04
Yeah, I think sometimes a good breakup can be better than than a lousy relationship.

Georgie Codd 21:08
Sorry, sometimes? All the time Emma. All the time. A breakup is better than a lousy relationship.

Emma Byrne 21:13
Okay, this... No, this is true. All the time. A good break-up is better. You're right.

Georgie Codd 21:18
Anyway, what about you, lady? What have you been reading?

Emma Byrne 21:22
Yeah. I mean, I'm jumping on Rosie's podcast and listening to the heck out of that. She actually has a podcast called The Breakup Monologues, which I'm catching up with, but I've got some really good reads coming up for the series. I've just been sent a copy of 'Aftershocks' by Nadia

Owusu, and have also been sent 'The Disordered Cosmos' by Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, and I cannot wait to dive in.

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Georgie Codd 22:15

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Emma Byrne 22:29

And if you're backing as at Silver Nib level or above then please stand by for the Extended Cut of this episode and the 'Sh*t I Wish I'd Known', in which this week's guest will tell you more about their writing and publishing experiences.

NonFicPod is brought to you by Beatrice Bazell, Emma Byrne, Georgie Codd, and Mike Wyer. Our Patreon supporters are Claire and Alexander, David Corney, Alessandra Coyne, Nicola Mirams, and Mike Wyer. [music]

... copious pinas colada. [GC laughing] What's the plural of pina coladas?

I like 'penis colada'!

No idea. Is it like attorneys general?

Georgie Codd 23:23

It's definitely 'penis colada'!

Yeah.

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