

THE QUEEN OF THE TAMBOURINE

by Jane Gardam

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“Funny and moving.”—*The New York Times*

“Ms. Gardam’s mischievous, ultimately poignant novel . . . is humorous and expertly controlled from its deceptive beginning to its ambiguous end.”
—*The Atlantic Monthly*

“A hallucinatory shimmy of a novel.”
—*The New Yorker*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Winner of the Whitbread Prize for Best Novel of the Year

Eliza Peabody has begun to unravel. In prose that is vibrant and witty, *The Queen of the Tambourine* traces her emotional breakdown—and eventual restoration. Once young and vibrant, accustomed to traveling the world and supporting her high-ranking husband, she finds herself abandoned and alone in her posh South London home. The letters Eliza writes to her neighbor, a woman whom she hardly knows, reveal her self-propelled descent into madness. Eliza must reach the depths of her downward spiral before she can once again find health and serenity. This story of a woman’s confrontation with the realities of sanity will delight readers who enjoy the works of Anita Brookner, Sybille Bedford, Muriel Spark, and Sylvia Plath.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Queen of the Tambourine* is an epistolary novel. Do you think that Eliza Peabody’s story ultimately benefits by being told as a series of letters?

2. Eliza Peabody is an unreliable narrator because we only have her point of view. However, is the discovery of Eliza's character through this perspective more fulfilling as a reading experience than it would be through a more conventional narrative?
3. How does it make you feel as a reader to be a part of an ongoing conversation that has no response? Though, she actually doesn't know her, who is Joan's character to Eliza?
4. How big of a role does the English suburban setting play? Does it affect Eliza's increasing alienation? What does it mean to be a woman left alone by her husband in this cultural landscape and time?
5. How does Eliza's notion of identity changes throughout the book? What are some examples the change? Does she let others define how she views herself?
6. When Eliza identifies her own madness, does she finally come to grips with her personal traumas, (i.e. her husband leaving her in the beginning of the novel for another man), or does she simply collapse under the weight of her own madness?
7. Is Eliza's return to sanity at the end of the novel too abrupt and, or a fulfilling ending: a build up after a break down? Did you feel satisfied?
8. What is the significance of the title? Is there a clue into Eliza's character through the lyrics of the song, *The Queen of the Tambourine*?

INTERVIEW WITH JANE GARDAM

Q: *Old Filth* and *The Queen of the Tambourine* have many similarities, but the two stories are remarkably different in the way in which they're told. How did you approach writing both novels: were their structures carefully planned, or did you have some idea how each would unravel as you were writing them?

A: *The Queen* was meant to be a novel about a woman in prosperous English suburb with apparently everything in the world she could wish for, going mad with grief about the human condition and the inevitability of death. I thought it could only be made real by giving her, her own sometimes comical voice. Letters were the answer. We do not easily tell the truth in letters unless we are saints or innocents. There is something of both in *The Queen*. I let her write her suburban prose until at last she released herself from her imaginary correspondent and began to face her own self. She cures herself without psychotherapy. The letters are the psychiatrist's couch.

Old Filth was never going to lose his reason. He'd been hardened in the fire by his childhood and disciplined as the true English gentleman not to express his deepest feelings in public or even to himself. His status as senior counsel and one of her majesty's judges was a comfort. So was his wife but he never dared examine her fidelity. As in *The Queen* being very good-looking was a great help. In the end he is granted joy.

Q: How autobiographical is *Old Filth* or *The Queen of the Tambourine*? Does drawing directly from your own past change the way in which you write a novel?

A: *The Queen* was only autobiographical in letter. Someone I knew slightly wrote saying that I was hypochondriac about 'my leg' and it was not fair to my husband. I was venomously angry and Eliza was born.

Q: *The Queen of the Tambourine* is a wonderfully engaging epistolary novel. Part of what makes it so engaging is the use of unanswered letters to create a sense of isolation and madness. How did you decide that the structure of an epistolary novel would be the best way to convey Eliza Peabody's alienation? Did you have this idea from the beginning, or did you sift through different forms until you decided on the epistolary novel?

A: Yes, I did know what was going to happen from the start.

Q: In both *Old Filth* and *The Queen of the Tambourine*, England plays a significant role. What is it about the cultural landscape of England that plays an integral part in the telling of these stories?

A: Both books assume an English old-fashioned middle class culture. Eliza and Old Filth are a dying breed. Until the fifties and the waning of Empire they were thought to be the backbone of England. They will be much missed in novels.

Q: The two characters of Sir Edward Feathers and Eliza Peabody have rich inner lives, and their stories are told almost from the perspective of a furtive adolescence. In a sense, are both of these characters realizing their childhoods to better understand their adult lives?

A: OF never "understood his adult life" and Eliza nearly lost her reason trying to understand hers. Childhood and adolescence was batted down all their lives.

Q: What is the difference between writing from a female perspective (*The Queen of the Tambourine*), or a male perspective (*Old Filth*)?

- A: No difference in writing as a woman or a man. Male novelists from the eighteenth century onwards write in the first person as a woman. (Doris Lessing: "The only thing I cannot imagine is something I cannot imagine").
- Q: Are there writers who inspired you in the beginning of your career, whom you still reference for inspiration? On that note, has reading a novel ever delighted or awakened you enough to immediately begin penning a novel yourself, almost as a response?
- A: I still, whatever I write, ask myself how Dickens or Defoe or Jane Austen or Flaubert would have handled this. Then I just go my own way. "It's a poor thing but it's my own."
- Q: Do you have a specific method for writing a novel that is applicable for other kinds of literature: short stories, children's fiction, etc. . . ?
- A: No. No specific method for writing novels short stories or children's fiction.
- Q: Soon to be apart of Europa's list of titles, will be your collection of short stories: *The People on Privilege Hill*. Did you set out to have a collection of short stories, or did you already have these stories, and discovered that they leant well to one another? In one of the stories, the character of Sir Edward Feathers reappears. Could we perhaps expect the re-appearance of Eliza Peabody in future works?
- A: Collection written over past ten years. Unconnected. OF reappeared in one only because I'm rather in love with the old monster and couldn't kill he off yet. Eliza I couldn't write about again. She's on her own.
- Q: What are you reading currently?
- A: David Footman's *Pig and Pepper* and Linda Colley's *Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*.



BIOGRAPHY

Jane Gardam has won the Katherine Mansfield Award, the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen award, the Whitbread Novel Award (twice), and has been shortlisted for the Book Prize. She was recently awarded the Heywood Hill Literary Prize in recognition of a distinguished literary career. Her most recent novel, *Old Filth*, was a *New York Times* notable book of the year (2006). She lives with her husband in England.