

THE ROLAND QUEST LECTURE AT ELMHURST COLLEGE

by Mary Ann Lufkin

On October 14th, New York Times best-selling author, Elizabeth Berg, presented “The Stories Behind the Stories” lecture. Ms Berg has written twenty-two novels. *Open House* was chosen as the August 2000 Oprah Book Club selection, which resulted in sales of 500,000 instead of her usual 25,000 copies. She lives in Oak Park, Illinois.

Elizabeth worked as a registered nurse for ten years. She always wrote. She wanted to work from home when her children were born, so she went to the library, researched the names of editors and started submitting. She wrote non-fiction articles for ten years before she attempted fiction. She was approached by Parents’ magazine with an idea for a book. After that non-fiction book was published, she realized she wanted to write from her own ideas and started writing novels. She was encouraged by her teachers and knew she had a lot to say.



Ms Berg’s program was:

- What you need to have to be a writer
- Three steps to publishing
- The stories behind the stories

WHAT YOU NEED TO HAVE TO BE A WRITER

Ms. Berg believes the prerequisites for being a writer are:

- Being a loner
- Having a sense of drama
- Feeling things deeply
- Acting on a page (dialogue)
- Needing to share
- Possessing a thwarted desire and a continual frustration (to get your thoughts on pages)

THREE STEPS TO PUBLISHING

1. Have something to say.
2. Say it well. You must possess a command of the English language before you can write in colloquy. You must have an engaging style of writing.
3. Send it out (risk being hurt by being run over by a Mack truck); get an agent; magazines are a great start.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE STORIES

The speaker recited a synopsis of the stories behind the stories of all of her twenty-two novels. Alas I cannot write that fast and I couldn't keep up with her, so I'll just present a smattering of her early novels.

She wrote *Durable Goods* for herself, which is fiction yet autobiographical. Writing that book opened a door between herself and her father. She was afraid it would hurt his feelings. She has written a sequel to this book and her fans are clamoring for a third in the series.

Oprah's people called Elizabeth announcing a show on breast cancer and wanted Elizabeth to participate. Elizabeth's novel, *Talk Before Sleep*, is about her friend's battle with breast cancer and was her first New York Times bestseller.

When she researched a historical fiction novel on World War II, she perused magazines from that era. Her novel is titled *Dream Even When You're Blue*. She was inspired by the character of that generation, which includes her parents.

EPILOGUE

Before taking questions from the audience, Elizabeth commented on her personal writing process. She treats her characters with dignity and discovers their inner strengths. She said her process of creativity is mysterious. She does not force herself to write. She writes from the heart, not the brain. She wants to be surprised (she does not plot/outline her novels.)

Elizabeth starts writing early in the morning, when "she is close to the sleep state." Writing is joyful for her. If she is inspired by a real person, that character will change by the time the novel is completed. Her mantra from nursing that she infuses into her prose is "Acknowledge the sorrow but celebrate the joy."

Elizabeth packed the auditorium (mostly women.) She was an animated and inspiring speaker.