

# Barbara Kay: Roy Dotrice is a story-teller for the ages

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Roy Dotrice

It all began in Grade Seven. My enjoyment of having stories read to me, that is. I suppose it should have begun in early childhood, with bedtime stories. But my parents weren't ones for prolonged pre-sleep rituals.

My Grade 7 teacher, Mr. Davies, used to read to us for the last 15 minutes of the morning class. I remember these sessions quite vividly — Mr Davies perched on the edge of his desk as he read *Glengarry School Days* in a calm, mellifluous tone, me enthralled in the third chair back in the second row from the window.

I made sure I read to my children. I read *The Hobbit* to them over one summer. It was a great success. Now my son is reading it to his children. Last winter we were talking about fantasy novels, and my son told me I had to read George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series. I said I was sure to be disappointed, because how could it be as good as *Lord of the Rings*? He said, "You have to try it. It's actually better than *Lord of the Rings*. It's Tolkein, plus sex, minus the boring elf poetry — and it's right on that perfect cusp between trash and legitimate literature." I said, "I'm too old for that stuff." He said, "Get it."

Since I can't read in the car because I get nauseous, I compromised by purchasing the saga (*Game of Thrones* is the first in an epic narrative called *A Song of Fire and Ice*) in audio form for our frequent trips from Montreal to Toronto and Maine. Then I had to convince my husband Ronny, whose idea of a good audiobook is a fast-paced spy novel that can be heard in a single trip, that an unabridged, gory medieval fantasy was just the listening ticket for the probable rest of our travelling lives.

The storyline was at first bewildering, the characters very hard to keep straight. It was disconcerting to come to know and love certain characters — members of the Stark family, and other "good guys" — and find, dismayingly, they are "allowed" to die. (I actually gasped aloud when a certain central character got beheaded. I was sure he would be saved at the last minute. Ronny felt so betrayed he wanted to quit listening; I had my work cut out to convince him to go on.) This is not your typical good vs evil fantasy.

Ronny was persuaded in the end because we couldn't bear to part ways with the narrator. The telling of the story in and of itself — the performance of the actor-narrator, Roy Dotrice — is mesmerizing.

The 89-year-old (!) Dotrice could be reading the proverbial telephone book, and I would be more than happy to pay to listen to him. As long as he produced a different British regional accent for every name in it. (Most of the action in the books takes place on a fictional island very roughly analogous to Great Britain.) Which is only a slight exaggeration for what this interpretive genius does for the characters in *Game of Thrones* and beyond (we're now immersed in the second book, *The Clash of Kings*). Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Yorkshire, cockney, Oxbridge and every regional accent in between: Virtually every character's voice and tone is unique and instantly recognizable. (My favourite? Same as yours and everyone else's: the high-born dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, brilliantly realized in the TV series by actor Peter Dinklage.)

This was not my first encounter with Roy Dotrice. Almost 40 years ago, on our first trip to London, we stayed at the Mayfair Hotel, which had a small, but perfectly appointed theatre off its lobby. Roy Dotrice was on the marquee, performing the role of John Aubrey in *Brief Lives*, a role he had already played hundreds of times before in other London theatres and on Broadway, and for which he would eventually end up in the Guinness Book of Records for the greatest number of solo performances by an actor (1,782).

Because the theatre was right there, we bought tickets. And because it was designed for intimacy, we could observe every twitch of Dotrice's expressive features as he brought the shuffling, rheumy-eyed, garrulous old 17th-century antiquarian gossip — and Aubrey's era — to vivid life. I laughed so long and heartily at every comic turn, Dotrice actually stopped to bestow a bemused glance right at me. I went back alone for the matinee the next day and loved it every bit as much the second time as the first.

*Brief Lives* was one of the all-time entertaining theatre experiences of my life. Today my "theatre" is a Jeep Cherokee, and George R.R. Martin's amazing world has become one of the all-time absorbing narrative experiences of my life. And both thanks to Roy Dotrice, an actor and a story-teller for the ages.

