

E. LYNN HARRIS

b. June 20, 1955

d. July 23, 2009

AUTHOR

“I want people to know they don’t have to live their lives in a permanent ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ existence. Truth is a powerful tool.”

E. Lynn Harris is one of the nation’s most popular authors. Considered a literary pioneer, Harris introduced millions of readers to characters rarely seen in literature—black gay men who are affluent, complex and sometimes troubled. With 10 consecutive New York Times best sellers, he remains one of the most successful African-American novelists.

Harris was born Everette Lynn Jeter in Flint, Michigan, to unmarried parents. At age 3, he moved with his mother to Little Rock, Arkansas. Everette’s surname was changed to Harris after his mother married Ben Harris. When Everette was 13, his mother divorced his stepfather, who had abused the boy for years.

Harris attended the University of Arkansas. In 1977, he graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism. He was the school’s first black cheerleader.

After graduation, Harris worked as a sales executive for IBM, eventually settling in Atlanta. He remained in the closet for many years, which led to depression, heavy drinking and a suicide attempt in 1990. Writing helped him find the will to live.

His first novel, “Invisible Life” (1991), was self-published and quickly rose to the top of the Blackboard bestseller list of African-American titles. Harris sold the books door-to-door from the trunk of his car to local beauty salons and bookstores. After the success of his first book, Doubleday signed Harris and became his long-term publishing company.

“‘Invisible Life’ had to be the first book out of me,” Harris said. “It helped me deal with my own sexuality.”

Harris wrote more than a dozen novels and paved the way for the next generation of African-American novelists. His books are accessible to the masses and appeal to a diverse audience. He always made time for his fans, whom he said changed his life. He would answer up to 200 e-mails from readers every day.

Harris received numerous awards. His honors include three Blackboard Novel of the Year Awards, the James Baldwin Award for Literacy Excellence and three nominations for NAACP Image Awards.

Harris died from heart disease. “People loved him,” said Tina McElroy Ansa, a fellow author and friend. “A spirit of joy followed him through his life.”

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