

Deborah James: Bowelbabe in Her Own Words review - the incredible woman who made us check our poo

★★★★☆



📷 A brilliant campaigner ... Deborah James. Photograph: @Bowelbabe/BBC/Zinc Media

In this moving and powerful film, the trailblazing cancer campaigner shares her story hilariously and candidly - right up to the moment of her death

What kind of cancer patient will you be? If you don't already know, you're likely to find out: half of us will be diagnosed with the disease at some point in our lives. Dame Deborah James was a remarkable cancer patient. After she was told she had stage 3 bowel cancer in 2016, aged 35, the then-deputy head teacher threw herself into raising awareness of its symptoms and sharing the reality of such a diagnosis, initially via her blog Bowelbabe; then a column in the Sun; a lively and hugely popular social media presence; and the hit BBC podcast You, Me and the Big C, which she hosted alongside fellow cancer patients Rachael Bland and Lauren Mahon.

James did all this with equal parts glamour and candour - no easy task when you have "the poo cancer," as she christened it on the podcast. "There's nothing pink about my cancer," she continued wryly. "It's just brown."

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This stubbornly irreverent sense of humour never left James, even when her body stopped tolerating treatment and she began receiving palliative care. It means this documentary chronicling her experiences with the bowel cancer that eventually took her life in June 2022 is shot through with laughter, silliness and, most importantly, life. It is suffused with her own voice: assembled from her Instagram and TikTok posts - including many choreographed dance routines with family and friends - plus snippets of the podcast, TV appearances, voice notes and footage filmed in hospital for this programme, it allows James to narrate her own story, right up to her final appearance on *You, Me and the Big C* in May. Though clearly distraught, she signs off with her humour undimmed. "Come on, I can't leave on any other word apart from: check your poo."

James's determination to educate people about the signs of bowel cancer - a quest that included a high-profile campaign with daytime TV show *Lorraine* - saved lives. Towards the end of hers she was given a damehood for her work, personally presented to her by Prince William at her family home in Surrey, where she chose to spend her final days. It is facts like this, alongside the accompanying news reports about her illness, that hammer home how impressively outsized her impact was: she did so much to rid bowel cancer of taboo and raised millions in the process. Yet this is not solely a tribute to James's activism. Despite being largely compiled from public content, *Bowelbabe in Her Own Words* is a deeply intimate and frank portrait of how it feels to experience incurable cancer - an existence that is as physically gruelling, anxiety-ridden and grief-stricken as you could imagine.

The grief alone is stomach-churning. When her podcast co-host Rachael Bland dies from breast cancer in 2018, leaving behind a young son, the loss feels unbearable. Later, Kelly Smith - also known by her social media handle *Kickass Kell* - dies from bowel cancer after her treatment was paused due to the pandemic, also leaving behind a little boy. Smith had contacted James when she was diagnosed and the pair became friends. James mourns both of them and their deaths force her to reckon with the fact she will also ultimately leave her two children behind. But when? She feels like "a ticking timebomb" who is "flying on the wings of science", as she so beautifully puts it.

James was a brilliant communicator, something that brings a strange joyfulness to this incredibly sad film. She had an evocative way with words, a magnetic personality - perfect for breakfast TV - and was an impressive and engaging public speaker (partly thanks to her previous career as a teacher). Documenting yourself extensively on social media can be seen as narcissistic, but James's Instagram presence felt like a gift. The pictures and videos she posted of herself dancing and looking glitzy and gorgeous had a point: she was proving you could have terminal cancer and still be desirable and full of life. The content she posted at her lowest ebb, meanwhile, acted as a virtual handhold for those going through similar horrors.

And the treatment really is a horror of its own, a fact this documentary doesn't shy away from. We are party to the steroids given during chemotherapy that stop James from sleeping (she does the macarena to pass the time), the medicines that make her slur her words, the allergic reaction - a bright red rash on her face - caused by a type of chemo she must continue with regardless.

We also see something of the gradual encroachment of death itself: the weight loss, the physical weakness, the fiery energy that once saw James jog to hospital appointments fading to a lukewarm glow. James desperately does not want to die: that is the reality. This is not consolatory television. Like its subject, it tells it like it is - and it makes for a powerfully affecting film.

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Aside from the poo-checking, James's final appearance on *You, Me and the Big C* saw her espouse another final message; a parting kindness. "Please, please enjoy life," she says, voice cracking. "It's so precious." For the thousands mourning this honest, generous, trailblazing woman, who worked so hard to seize her last days, all you can do is take heed.

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