

# AMERICAN CHRONICLE

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## Interview with Debra Benegan, author of 'Shame the Devil'

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Dorothy Thompson



**Debra Benegan** grew up in the Milwaukee area and graduated with a B.A. in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She worked as a journalist and taught at Milwaukee Area Technical College before beginning her graduate work. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she also taught. She teaches English and Women's Studies at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. For her fiction, she has received a Ragdale residency and was a recent finalist for the John Gardner Memorial Fiction Prize, The Cincinnati Review's Schiff Prose Prize, and the Crab Creek Review Fiction Prize. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in Calyx, Tampa Review, Natural Bridge, The Laurel Review, RE:AL, The Southern Women's Review, The Cimarron Review, Milwaukee Magazine, Phoebe, and other publications. Debra Benegan's novel, *Shame the Devil*, is a historical account of nineteenth-century American writer Fanny Fern (SUNY Press, Excelsior Editions). She is currently working on another novel, set in Missouri, and on a short story collection. During the school year, Debra lives in a 130-year-old house in Fulton with her husband, Steve, and their elderly cat. They spend summers and school breaks in their native Milwaukee. When not teaching, writing, spending time with family or driving back and forth to Wisconsin, Debra enjoys cooking, gardening, reading and traveling.

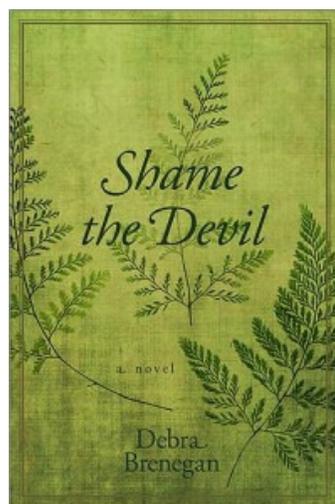
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**Q: Thank you for this interview, Debra. I received your book a few days ago and am absolutely loving it. Can you tell us why you wrote it?**

In graduate school, I took a nineteenth-century American Literature class with a professor who told me, "I know a

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writer you're just going to love." This writer, Fanny Fern, wasn't on our reading list that semester, so, at my request, he added her book, *Ruth Hall*, to the reading list of a course I took with him the next semester. And, he was right – I adored her! Fanny Fern was the highest-paid, most-popular writer of her era. She served as a literary mentor to Walt Whitman, earned the respect of Nathaniel Hawthorne and was friends with Harriet Beecher Stowe. Fern's personal life was a rollercoaster of highs and lows. She was widowed, escaped an abusive second marriage, then married a third man, eleven years her junior. I became so interested in Fern and her amazing life that I started writing papers about her. I applied for and got a graduate school fellowship to visit Fern's archives at Smith College in Massachusetts. As I learned more about Fanny Fern, I couldn't stop telling people about her. And people were amazed with her rags-to-riches story. They couldn't believe that *they* had never heard of her. When it came time to write my dissertation, I combined my interest in creative writing, literature and Women's Studies to write a historical novel about this forgotten journalist, novelist and feminist. I wanted everyone who hadn't heard of Fanny Fern to learn about her; I wanted to bring her back to life.

**Q: The writing is superb. Which part of the book was the hardest to write?**

The hardest parts for me to write were probably also the most painful parts of Fanny Fern's life for her. I don't want to be a spoiler, so I won't give specific details, but Fern had to face a number of very difficult moments – abuse, poverty, and the loss of several loved ones. I had to put myself in her shoes and to write about her pain and desperation. That is never easy.

**Q: Most authors can remember back to the day when they wrote their first piece. Do you remember when the writing bug hit?**

I do! I was in first grade. We had those sheets of papers that had space on the top for a picture and ruled lines underneath for writing. It was winter and we were supposed to draw a winter scene. I drew a snowman with snow falling down around him and a house in the background. Then we were supposed to tell the story of our picture in words. I wrote my snowman's story. But, when I hit the end of the page, I wasn't finished. I took my problem up to my teacher and she stapled another whole sheet of ruled lined paper to the bottom of my page. I went back to my desk elated and wrote and wrote and wrote. I filled the whole second page by the time she collected our work. I don't remember the details of that story, but I remember the thrill I got writing it. How easy it was! How fun! And, later, when our teacher hung up our picture/stories around the room, I loved looking at my double long one from across the room.

**Q: Besides books, what else do you write? Do you write for publications?**

I started out as a journalist and, so, wrote lots of newspaper and magazine articles. I'm convinced that my journalistic training taught me how to write quickly and clearly. I eventually wanted to branch out a little more with my writing and so started writing creative work, too. I have since written and published poems, short stories and now, this historical novel.

**Q: Do you have a writing tip you'd like to share?**

Everyone has heard this before, but it is the absolute truth – writers write. If you want to be a writer, sit down and write. Write some more. Revise and rewrite after that. Commit yourself to your craft and good results must follow. It's

easy advice, but is the hardest thing for all of us to actually *do* consistently.

**Q: Where's your favorite place to write at home?**

I sit at my computer, at my desk, in my office at home. I love to have a cup of tea or coffee at my side. My desk is usually a war zone of papers, books, notepads and writing utensils. Many other books are on bookshelves within easy reach. I like to look out the window when I'm thinking. Often, my cat comes and sits on my lap. Sometimes a bird will sit on the sill and look at me. The sun doesn't shine directly in. It is completely silent – and perfect.

**Q: What do you do to get away from it all?**

When I am totally stressed and exhausted, my favorite place to be is beside some body of water. In Milwaukee, I'll go to a Lake Michigan beach and will alternatively nap, read a book, or stare out at the waves. Even a half day of this is blissfully restorative. To really indulge, my husband and I go on beach vacations. We find some lovely beach, slather on the sunscreen, open the shade umbrella, order a fancy little something to drink, and crack open our novels. We nap, read or stare out at the waves. We talk when we're not reading or napping. We snack on things like guacamole and chips. It's heaven.

**Q: Are you familiar with the social networks and do you actively participate?**

My editor told me from the first that getting on facebook, etc was probably a good idea. I didn't completely believe him at first, but I put my toe in the social network water, and joined facebook. That proved to be so much fun that I've since set up twitter and linkedin accounts and even have my own blog. Social networking is fun, but it can take a lot of time. I try to limit myself on all of the networks so I can still have time to write.

**Q: How do you think book promotion has changed over the years?**

I think authors used to do more face-to-face promotion. They'd do readings and book signings and would physically crisscross the country trying to get as many people interested in their books as possible. For all but the super blockbuster authors, this seems like it was expensive, time-consuming and, often, inefficient. Although I have several readings set up and hope to line up more of them, I'm putting more energy into Internet-based promotion. Hopefully, I'll be able to reach more readers who are likely to be interested in my particular book this way.

**Q: How do you think book publishing has changed over the years?**

I think like every industry, the economy has had an effect on book publishing. There are fewer publishers and those publishers are able to publish fewer books profitably. There are fewer bookstores, especially independent ones, and fewer people who frequent those bookstores. Electronic books have certainly come into their own and I have no judgment for or against them. I, personally, have always loved the feel, smell and texture of books. I can also see getting an electronic book device sometime in the future – especially to take on those beach vacations. I think every industry evolves and people must evolve with their culture. Although book publishing is different than it used to be, it is still a strong and vital part of our society.

**Q: Thank you so much for this interview, Debra. We wish you lots of luck with future books!**

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