



Interview: Debra Brenegan, Author of Shame the Devil

By April Pohren, BLOGCRITICS.ORG
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Growing up in the Milwaukee area and graduating with a B.A. in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Debra Brenegan went on to work as a journalist. Ms. Brenegan also taught at Milwaukee Area Technical College before she began her graduate work. Debra Brenegan went on to receive her M.A. and Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she also taught. Ms. Brenegan currently teaches English and Women's Studies at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.

Debra Brenegan has received many awards for her works of fiction, including a Ragdale residency as well as being a recent finalist for the John Gardner Memorial Fiction Prize, The Cincinnati Review's Schiff Prose Prize, and the Crab Creek Review Fiction Prize. Ms. Brenegan's work has recently appeared or is soon to appear in *Calyx*, *Tampa Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Laurel Review*, *RE:AL*, *The Southern Women's Review*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Milwaukee Magazine* and *Phoebe*.

While teaching, Ms. Brenegan resides 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.

Readers can learn more about Ms. Brenegan and her works by visiting her website, Twitter, Facebook or the FB page for *Shame the Devil*.



Please tell us a bit about your book, *Shame the Devil*, and what you hope readers take away from reading it.

Shame the Devil tells the remarkable and true story of Fanny Fern (the pen name of Sara Payson Willis), one of the most successful, influential, and popular writers of the 19th century. A novelist, journalist, and feminist, Fern (1811-1872) outsold Harriet Beecher Stowe, won the respect of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and served as literary mentor to Walt Whitman. Scrabbling in the depths of poverty before her meteoric rise to fame and fortune, she was widowed, escaped an abusive second marriage,

penned one of the country's first prenuptial agreements, married a man 11 years her junior, and served as a 19th-century Oprah to her hundreds of thousands of fans. Her weekly editorials in the pages of the *New York Ledger* over a period of about 20 years chronicled the myriad controversies of her era and demonstrated her firm belief in the motto, "Speak the truth, and shame the devil." Through the story of Fern and her contemporaries, including Walt Whitman, Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Shame the Devil* brings the intellectual and social ferment of mid-19th-century America to life.

I hope readers will come to know this long-forgotten writer, Fanny Fern, and will appreciate the amazing contributions Fern made as a writer and social crusader.

Who are your favorite characters in the story?

Of course, I love Fanny Fern, but I especially enjoyed writing the chapters from the perspective of Fern's famous brother, N. P. Willis, who was a fop, a dandy, and a rake. It was luxurious fun to write about his excesses.

Do you have a favorite line or excerpt from your book?

Fanny Fern had many favorite sayings, but one of them was: "Marriage is the hardest way to get a living." In the book she says or thinks that line several times in order to call attention to the fact that women could and should be prepared to support themselves instead of relying completely on the men in their lives to do so. This was revolutionary thinking for the mid-1800s and Fern came under fire for promoting such unfeminine beliefs. Yet, her immense popularity

proved she wasn't the only woman thinking such things, even if she was one of the few women saying them out loud.

If your current release were to be turned into a movie, who would you love to see play what characters and why?

Meryl Streep would play Fanny Fern; Kelsey Grammer would play N.P. Willis, Tom Hanks would play Oliver Dyer, Natalie Portman would play Grace Eldredge, George Clooney would play Charles Eldredge, and Pierce Brosnan would play James Parton.

What are your favorite aspects of writing?

I really love revising. After the draft is down, the tinkering and polishing stage is oh so satisfying.

Your least favorite aspects of writing?

It's enormously frustrating for me to try to schedule writing time into my life. Even though writing is so important to me, writing time sometimes gets put at the bottom of the list. I'm constantly trying to figure out how to keep it a priority.

Who are some of your favorite authors/books?

I list about 50 of my favorite authors on my website and I'd say that list is on the short side. Off the top of my head, some of my favorite books are Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

What are you reading right now?

I just finished reading A. Manette Ansay's *Sister* - I loved it! Next up: Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder*.

If you could have a dinner party and invite five authors - dead or alive - who would they be and what would you serve them?

I'd invite some of my favorite strong women writers: Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Fanny Fern and Toni Morrison. I think we'd have a rollicking good time with some nice wines, shrimp cocktail and a cheese plate for starters. Then, we'd move on to the main course of lovely grilled beef tenderloin with mushrooms and Béarnaise sauce (for Fanny), an assortment of side dishes and several of my homemade fruit pies with Wisconsin custard for dessert.

What is a book that you wish you could say that you had written and why?

I would have loved to have written Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. He so wonderfully portrayed Virginia Woolf and captured what her writing meant to people, not to mention getting the Pulitzer Prize for his efforts.

What is the greatest piece of advice (for writing and/or just living) that you have heard?

For writing: "Speak the Truth and Shame the Devil" - Fanny Fern (and others)

For living: "Have no judgments and no expectations" - Krishnamurti

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