

News

Five Questions for June 17, 2011: Debra Brenegan

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By Chris Fitz Gerald

Debra Brenegan is author of the recently released book “Shame The Devil,” which is published by the State University of New York Press in Albany. A native Midwesterner who grew up in Milwaukee and teaches at Westminster College in Fulton, Mo., as an Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Women’s Studies, Brenegan is fascinated with the history of New York City, particularly during the 19th Century when Fanny Fern became one of the top female writers in the nation at that time. Brenegan, who has published several short stories, is also working on another novel.

Q What is your book about?

A The book is about Fanny Fern, who is a 19th Century writer who was extremely popular and successful; she was Walt Whitman’s mentor and just absolutely took the country by storm. It’s a historical novel based entirely on her life. She was very influential and was a novelist, journalist and feminist — she had a great following and was a multi-millionaire ... She had admirers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson and Susan B. Anthony. She was great friends with Harriet Beecher Stowe, was really close with Harriet Jacobs. She was right in the middle of this great and wonderful circle of writers and artists.

Q How interesting did you find Fanny Fern?

A She had strong ties to New York after she grew up in Boston where she started her writing career. ... I got interested in her because I was amazed that more people hadn’t heard of her because she was the highest paid writer of her era and the most popular — she was like the 19th Century Oprah.

Q What are your favorite places to travel?

A We love to go to New York (City), we try and get there at least once a year; we have favorite restaurants and things like that, the city is just so vibrant and exciting. We also love to go skiing in Colorado and that’s usually a family trip with all four kids.

Q What have you discovered about New York?

A This book was an eight-year undertaking, so I spent a lot of time in Massachusetts and did make several trips to New York City to find her old houses; she lived in Brooklyn too for a while. The house that one of her husband had built for her is still there and it’s still gorgeous, so I really got to see a lot of the places she frequented. I spent a good deal of time researching there and sort of imagining what life was like there 150 years ago, like there were ferries where there are famous bridges now; the whole experience was really fascinating.

Q What authors inspired you to become a writer?

A I love Virginia Wolfe and when Michael Cunningham wrote his book “The Hours” he brought Virginia Wolfe back to life for people and later he wrote “Specimen Days” when he brought Walt Whitman back to life. ... I also love Edith Wharton, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemmingway and Kate Chopin, they’re just so many writers that I adore.

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