



Shame the Devil

Credits: Debra Brenegan

Transport yourself to the 19th century with Debra Brenegan's 'Shame the Devil'

By [Dorothy Thompson](#), Virginia Beach Publishing Examiner

Our guest today is a terrific writer and accomplished author. Debra Brenegan, author of the historical fiction novel, *Shame the Devil*, 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 Brenegan'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.

Thank you for this interview, Debra. Can you tell us a little about yourself and how long you've been writing?

I was a journalist for years before starting my first novel. I soon realized I had no idea what I was doing, so enrolled in a M.A. creative writing program to learn how to go from being a journalist to a novelist. I loved graduate school so much that I kept going and got my Ph.D. I did finish that first novel, but it still isn't published (although I haven't given up on it). Besides my many journalistic articles, I've published poems, short stories, and now, my novel *Shame the Devil*.

Can you tell us briefly what your book is about?

***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 nineteenth 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 eleven years her junior, and served as a nineteenth-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 twenty 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-nineteenth-century America to life.**

Who is your intended audience? Have you been able to crossover into other audiences as well?

The cool thing about this book, I think, is that it appeals to a lot of audiences. The book is historical fiction, certainly, and women's fiction, but will also appeal to people who like nineteenth-century literature and/or who are interested in early American media and the rise of the celebrity. Like the film *Midnight in Paris*, the book is peppered with real American writers like Walt Whitman, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is fun to see how they interacted with one another. I just visited with an all-male book group who adored the book. We sat and chatted about it for two hours!

Why did you choose your particular genre?

I wrote this book as my Ph.D. dissertation project. I had been doing a lot of research about Fanny Fern and was writing a lot of papers about her and her work. I wanted to combine my interest in American Literature (specifically, Fern), Women's Studies and creative writing to write a historical novel that would entertain and inform.

Do you ever experience self-doubts with your work?

I think every writer experiences some measure of self-doubt. After my dissertation defense, which was quite thorough, I left the room thinking mostly about the critiques I had heard. It took me a

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few weeks to remember some of the praise, too, and to realize that those critiques were gifts to me. I could take them and make the book a better book.

Where do you write? Do you have a favorite place?

I like to write at home, in complete silence, preferably with nobody else around. If my husband is home and he walks by and sees me writing, he knows to just keep going. When my kids were home, I'd shut the door to my office when I was writing and they knew not to disturb me unless there was blood.

What kind of research did you have to do during the writing process?

I spent about two years reading everything I could find about Fanny Fern. I read her original writings and the work that other scholars had written about her. I visited the Fern archives at Smith College in Massachusetts and spent many days combing through everything there. I took pages of notes and made many copies. I also researched the era I was writing about – the mid 1800s – and visited museums, read books and watched films about those times. I made a few trips to New York City to better envision Fern's world and even got to go into her former house. For nit-picky details, I'd search the Internet to try to understand the era's currency or to see when exactly people could buy ice cream from a Boston street vendor. I'm sure I've got at least a few things wrong and am counting on eagle-eyed readers to let me know all about those errors. ;)

Who is your publisher and how did you get accepted by them? Did you pitch your book yourself or go through an agent?

My publisher is SUNY Press, Excelsior Editions. I pitched the book myself, at a writer's convention, directly to the acquisition editor. He graciously listened to me, more graciously consented to reading the manuscript. It took a little while, but eventually, he and the rest of his editorial board decided to take on the book. SUNY has been wonderful to work with from day one. I'm extremely grateful to have found the perfect publisher for this book.

How are you promoting your book thus far?

My SUNY editor told me some time ago that social media was the way to go. SUNY has been instrumental in helping get the word out, but authors must help, too! I've been working with facebook, twitter, linkedin and blogger to let readers learn about my book, and to help revive interest in the wondrous Fanny Fern. I also started a bookmark project – friends and family in 35 cities have volunteered to help distribute bookmarks about my book to local coffee shops, bookstores, diners, hair salons and pizza joints. Hopefully, this little grass-roots project will help further spread the word.

If you could give one book promotion tip to new authors, what would that be?

Be generous with others and they will be generous with you.

What's next for you?

I just finished the draft of another novel, a contemporary fiction work tentatively titled *Motherless*. This book is about an edgy college student who tries to hide her pregnancy while interacting with a group of dysfunctional characters in a town far away from her roots. I hope to find an agent/publisher for this work soon. I also have a short story collection, *Standing Heat: Stories by Debra Brenegan*, currently circulating among publishers.

Thank you for this interview, Debra. We wish you much success!

You are very welcome!

You can visit Debra's website at www.debrabrenegan.com or visit her at Twitter at www.twitter.com/dbrenegan or Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/debra.brenegan>; <https://www.facebook.com/#!/shame.the.devil.book>.

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[Dorothy Thompson](#), Virginia Beach Publishing Examiner

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