

THE GRADUATE NEWSLETTER

**HE WHO STUDIES BUT DOES NOT THINK IS LOST;
HE WHO THINKS BUT DOES NOT STUDY IS IN DANGER.**

Confucius

Welcome to the
English Department
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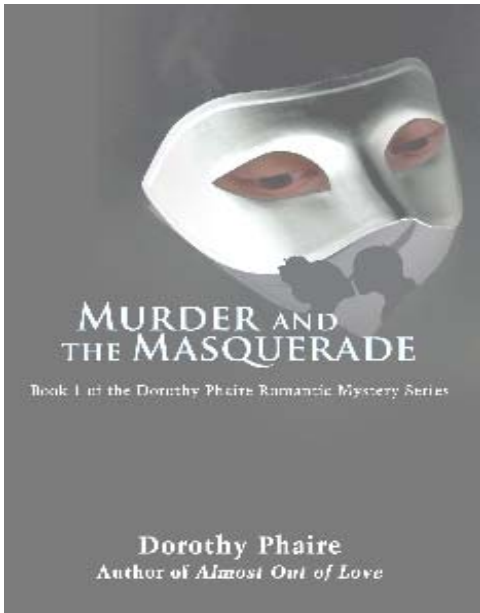
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The Graduate Program in English Composition and Rhetoric

Knowing how to communicate effectively is central to all personal and professional transactions. Clear and meaningful communication helps to build not only sound personal relationships, but also professional careers. Critical analysis, clear thinking, appropriate word choice, and well-organized expression are at the basis of all meaningful communication. Acquiring the habit of questioning and re-examining established norms of thought and behavior for their validity and current relevance, cultivating the ability to see beyond the apparent and to grasp the essence of things, and finding ways to apply pragmatic approaches to complex problems are all part of learning how to communicate effectively.

To that end, the University of the District of Columbia renders an invaluable service through its graduate program by preparing its students as writing specialists. Enrolling in the graduate program, however, does not mean simply obtaining a degree to get a job. It means that one has made a conscious decision to devote a certain amount of time and energy for self-growth; it means to deliberately set aside a period of time in order to cultivate one's writing ability in a disciplined way. A sound command of effective communication skills in English is absolutely essential for almost any vocation, whether it be teaching at an academic institution, employment in government service, or in the independent sector.



Professor Dorothy Phaire



Are You A Writer?

Charles C. Ferguson

When is a writer ready to write? According to Professor Dorothy Phaire, who recently published the first in a series of books Murder and the Masquerade, only when the writer has fully conceived of his characters. For Professor Phaire, this process is not only essential to a good novel, but vital to the development of a good plot and theme. Professor Phaire very candidly confided that the development of a good character can take “many years.” She sheepishly admits to keeping detailed files on each character. Professor Phaire’s claim of how much the flow of the novel is dependent upon the characters is evident in her two main characters: Dr. Renee Hayes and her patient Veda Simms. The complexities of the characters are evident in their parallel stories: Renee, the successful, married doctor lives in upscale Northwest Washington, D.C. in a professionally decorated home, while Veda lives from paycheck to paycheck in a small and cramped Northeast apartment. These women parallel each other in the many issues with which they are faced: marriage, divorce, children, childlessness, boyfriends, adoption, child abuse and

abandonment. This novel is refreshingly realistic in the myriad of difficult choices and consequences that the characters must handle. Parallelism also occurs between other characters such as LaMarr Coleman and Kenneth Blackwell, and Bill Hayes and Degas “Deek” Hamilton.

“The writer must know the characters,” says Professor Phaire. This closeness between writer and characters cannot be over estimated. For it lends to the smoothness of the story, allowing it to flow naturally, thus creating a “character driven novel rather than a plot driven one.” Professor Phaire points out that a character driven plot allows the story’s easy flow to generate natural and realistic dialogue and situations. One such instance is the difficulty which Renee finds in outwardly scolding younger women for neglecting their children in favor of their own expensively pampered bodies. Inwardly, however, she gives the women a good tongue-lashing. This natural conflict between what Renee thinks and does results from what is natural to her character, a kind of character floor. Internal conflicts run the whole story as the lead women battle with their demons real and imagined.

As the plot is character driven so too are the flashbacks, which Professor Phaire employs with consummate ease to fully develop, for the reader, the characters and their histories. Professor Phaire reveals how she like many committed writers read avidly both works of fiction and “just about every how-to-book.” She also admitted to going to many workshops,” but it was only after many tries that she finally cracked the difficult art of flashbacks that lend credence and substance to character and plot alike. It is these flashbacks that help the reader to understand the psyche of the characters and why they behave the way they do.

Character development, plot, and flashbacks aid the development of theme and issues in Murder and the Masquerade as the characters move through the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. Professor Phaire is meticulous in presenting, for the readers who know the area and those who are not so familiar with it, a pretty realistic Maryland, Virginia and D.C. as a metropolis. The intrigues of murder and love are also developed through the scenes of the area as Veda plays lover to LaMarr, a lawyer with whom she works. Renee too plays the games of the “masks” as she grapples with a difficult marriage and the intrigues of forbidden love of the younger detective, Deek, and LaMarr plays a triangular love affair with both Veda and Kenneth.

Professor Phaire, in true bohemian fashion, writes a story that in many ways tells the story of the District. For woven into the machinations of adult love and betrayal is the suffering of the innocent baby Susanne, an HIV infected infant, who in a sad but realistic way, portrays one of the District’s very real victims of love gone awry. Susanne and those who care for her are like those innocent victims in the love intrigues of the down low (DL) brother; this is a realistic portrayal of the sadder side of the District. True to character, Renee cares deeply for children who suffer and demonstrates a compassion that one might not expect in such a novel. However, in my view, it only makes more vivid the multidimensional issues and characters in the book and how these characters realistically deal with the complexities of life.

It is my hope that all the students and faculty of UDC will read Murder and the Masquerade, which is on sale in UDC’s book store. This book will offer an opportunity to those of us who are caught up in the everyday challenge of classes to deepen our area of study, literature, by reading contemporary literature. For students, Murder and the Masquerade should serve a deeper

meaning than just additional reading; it should serve as a point of reference for would-be writers as well as those who might have to teach future writers about what goes into making a well written novel.

I particularly wish to introduce Professor Dorothy Phaire and Murder and the Masquerade to graduate students as they study rhetoric and composition. For, Professor Phaire speaks quite passionately about words and their power “to help people make decisions, to think, and to change their minds.” Students in the graduate degree program at UDC are well placed to take advantage of the indirect mentoring provided in Murder and the Masquerade as it, like all literature, is an expanded composition with many opportunities contained therein to persuade as well as entertain.

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