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Editors: Dr. Alexander Howe, Faculty Advisor
Charles C. Ferguson, EGSA President

Welcome to the

English Department

UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

4200 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.

Washington, DC 20008

(202) 274-5639



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Dorothy Phaire
Professor of English
English Department
University of the District of Columbia

Interview with Dorothy Phaire

BY



Charles C. Ferguson

The study of literature is the pursuit of graduate and undergraduate students of university English departments throughout the country. Such study is usually concerned with the analysis of literature to determine what literature is. During this my second interview with Prof. Dorothy Phaire, author of the Murder And The Masquerade and Blind Delusions, and lecturer at the University of the District of Columbia, we focused on the opposite of literary analysis – we discussed the synthesis of literature – the creative process.

As an author, Prof. Phaire, is very concerned with the creative process which she feels is greatly misunderstood by many, including English teachers and would-be authors. She recounts that once at a creative writing workshop, which she conducted, an aspiring writer said to her, “before I take the time

to write my book I want be sure it'll get published.” To Prof. Phaire, this statement is troubling because it says to her that this “person is not a writer. A writer writes for the joy of writing, and getting published is not his or her first thought.” She is also concerned that such a statement by a person who has not yet written anything or an unseasoned writer demonstrates a lack of understanding of the creative process and the amount of work it takes to create a novel or other literary work.

Prof. Phaire believes that the creative process requires the full participation of the author. The process begins with putting the words down on paper, but this is sometimes not so easy. The would-be writer must be aware that there will be times when his first attempt might not be good enough for others to read or he might have a block. She notes that this should not frighten a new writer and he should try to write through these times. “I would write something down even if my first attempt is garbage as it oftentimes is,” says Prof. Phaire. The creative process requires writing and re-writing. Prof. Phaire indicates that she has had to “go back and change it again and again.” A writer should not be afraid of having to re-write passages or fear writing garbage to the point where he has writers’ block. The writer should expect that a good piece of writing takes patience with self and many changes in the drafts. Says Prof. Phaire, “Don’t hold me to anything until after the third draft. This may be a cliché, but it’s true...writing is re-writing. I do lots of revisions along the way.”

In talking about Blind Delusions, the second book in the Mystery/Romance series, and what is likely to be Renee’s next adventure, Prof. Phaire notes that in book three, which is still in the first draft and fact-finding phase that all writers should be prepared to research facts as part of the creative process. “The internet, Prof. Phaire says, “is a great vehicle for saving time and finding out an answer quickly, especially in the early draft phases.” But she also advises the would-be writer that the internet should not be the only means of research; it should be a secondary means, for she likes “to conduct personal interviews with subject matter experts” as much as she can. Prof. Phaire continues that the creative process that resulted in her previous three books required continuous research, re-writes, and discussions with close friends and confidants who could provide unbiased critiques of the work in progress. Many characters were reshaped, merged, or simply written out of the final product. As we talked about what will happen to characters like Renee, Mel, Deek, Bill, and Brenda, Prof. Phaire notes that her audience should be prepared for a stimulating third book. The story will be told from the point of view of the male characters –this promises to be a fast-paced third book.

As with the first two books in the Mystery/Romance series, the creative process, says Prof. Phaire, requires that the writer be true to his craft and voice and style. This, she says is most important for developing fan and reader base. Prof. Phaire says the would-be writer should not sacrifice style and voice because of criticism:

I’m not interested in countering a critic’s claim as everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. I’m not the type of writer who will write a story to disprove a critic’s claim. That would only result in manufacturing an artificial plot and fake characters that no one would enjoy. I won’t change my voice or style to try to win over an audience that is not my audience anyway. I’m writing for myself and for those who also enjoy my style – they are my audience.

To the would-be writer, Prof. Phaire insists that he take the time to develop style and voice that should not be sacrificed for any reasons. Style and voice are not easy to develop and require patience:

Voice and style should be uniquely the writer’s own. Voice and style can take years to develop. While it’s important to read other writers’ work, one cannot simply copy that author’s voice and style. That simply doesn’t work. Aspiring writers can maybe do some

copycatting initially, but with practice and patience a writer will discover his or her own voice and style.

Voice and style are important to determining author authenticity. And while early in a writer's writing career there is a kind of copycatting, it does not mean plagiarism, which is stealing another's ideas and words.

The would-be writer while developing style and voice as part of his authenticity and part of the creative process should also pay attention to other parts of the writer's craft which include developing the ability to tell a convincing story using such means as flashbacks, developing characters and plot. Prof. Phaire notes that "characterization is very important, yes, but so is plot. It's very important to learn how to handle flashbacks without confusing or losing a reader. All these skills are needed." The would-be writer would do well to develop all these skills as part of the creative process.

Though Prof. Phaire does not advise would-be writers to invest time and energy in publication before writing their best work, she does recognize that once a writer has a well written piece he should not limit his chances for publication. She advises new authors to pursue all avenues for publication:

There are so many untapped readerships out there. And the growth in technology is another way to make reading accessible to people who feel they are too busy or just not interested in the traditional way they may think about reading. For instance, there are graphic novels that appeal to many young readers today – that market is growing. There is also an interactive e-book taking off where readers can click on a link and it will take them to other plot scenarios or more information about the characters or even historical references. New writers need to embrace technology and envision other ways of attracting readers through other media as well as the printed book.

Prof. Phaire explains that Technology is opening up other doors to creativity and accessibility. All writers should embrace it and not wait for the gatekeepers of the old traditional publishing world to open the door for them.

Prof. Phaire notes that these changes and opportunities that are available may be of particular interest to the African-American writer who may feel especially left out of the publishing loop: "yes, the market for African-American writers may not be as widespread among the mainstream readership; however, that does not mean that an African-American writer or any other writer of a different cultural or ethnic descent cannot find their audience." But, she says, "create the work first and then the next step will follow."

Scholars and teachers of literature should not be fearful of examining the creative process from the point of view of synthesis. Such an insight would greatly expand the understanding of literature and certainly add to the dimension of study and teaching. Says Prof. Phaire, "it's such a struggle trying to find time for my writing because teaching can be demanding. Right now it's about a 80/20 split with teaching in the lead, but I enjoy teaching." The student can attest to the demands of studying but should allow his love of the totality of literature to motivate an experience of the creative process.
