

Shame the Devil: A Novel

Debra Brenegan

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Shame the Devil presents Sara Payson Willis, who lived from 1811 to 1872 and was a writer known among the contemporary literati as Fanny Fern. Due to her esteemed company, the book reads like a compilation of biographical incidents involving celebrated figures of the nineteenth century, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Walt Whitman.

An outspoken feminist, Fern dared to publish her diatribes against patriarchy and conservatism in pithy, often humorous editorials in the *New York Ledger*. Her personal life in this attention-grabbing work of fiction was a mixture of highs and lows—widowed with two children, then a violent second marriage followed by a loving relationship with a man eleven years younger, whom she married and stayed with until she died. Much of this excellent novel is likely based on reality. Brenegan’s use of “faction,” a fiction-*ish* offshoot of the traditional biography, is the perfect approach for an insightful look at Fern’s inner world as well as the persona she revealed to the public.

Each of fifty-six brief chapters begins with an excerpt from Fern’s work, giving a preliminary glimpse of the situation that follows. In the opener that appeared in the *New York Ledger* on March 11, 1865, Fern addresses a common problem in the “management” of women as they struggled for equality:

Our insane asylums are full of women, who, leaning on some human heart for love and sympathy, and meeting only misappreciation have gone there, past the Cross, where alone they could have laid down burdens too heavy to bear unshared ... The only ‘day of rest’ to many of them is the day of their death.

A hard-hitting journalist who delivered her statements on a variety of controversial topics in a blunt, unrestrained manner, Fern garnered intense criticism *and* intense praise. Brenegan’s portrayal reflects a strong-willed, individual ahead of her time: “She was unwomanly because she wrote about tough issues. She was unfeminine because she wrote about those issues plainly. She was ungodly because her frank writing often veered toward sarcasm and her wit, more often than not, left a stinging aftertaste. Her writing was the bracing slap society needed.”

Debra Brenegan is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Women’s Studies at Westminster College in Missouri. Her work has appeared in prominent literary journals. The title *Shame the Devil* was part of Fanny Fern’s motto: “Speak the truth, and shame the devil.” This enlightening book collects well-selected snapshots, pieces of interpretive history that will be remembered.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (September / October 2011)

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