

From “Musing – A laid back lit-journal” published on the 21st of May, 2015

Deborah Harkness doesn't do anything halfway. A professor of history at the University of Southern California, she writes award-winning historical nonfiction that has been published by Cambridge University Press and Yale University Press. When she decided to try her hand at fiction, her first novel, *A Discovery of Witches*, debuted at #2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The sequel, *Shadow of Night*, debuted at #1, as did the latest in that trilogy, *The Book of Life*. She has received the Fulbright, Guggenheim, National Science Foundation, and National Humanities Center fellowships, among others. Oh, and just for fun, she keeps a wine blog, *Good Wine Under \$20*. In keeping with the Deborah Harkness way, the site has been recognized by *Saveur.com*, *Wine & Spirits* magazine, and *Food & Wine* magazine. Of course.

Can't wait to find out what this wonder woman will be up to next? Come hear Harkness speak when she [visits Nashville next Thursday, May 28](#) as part of the [Salon@615 author series](#). Meanwhile, enjoy getting to know her a bit more here:

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It's so much fun to “binge read” a series all at once. What's the last series you read and loved?

DH: It was probably Dorothy Dunnett's fabulous historical [Crawford of Lymond series](#). I moved straight from it into the prequels, [The House of Niccolo series](#). It was a long time ago that I did that binge read, but I still remember it!

Summer is a time when many people get to catch up on reading they haven't had time for earlier in the year. What new or recent books are you tossing into your suitcase this summer?

DH: Naomi Novik's [Uprooted](#). Between my job as a professor (where I read lots of academic nonfiction) and my own writing, it's a rare treat to read fiction, so I'm looking forward to it.

Your books have been called “realistic fantasy.” How did you find your way to this genre from the nonfiction you were writing before? And who were your influences?

DH: I think in some strange way the books are a mixture of my research into alchemy and sixteenth century London, combined with A. S. Byatt's [Possession](#), Anne Rice's [Mayfair Witches](#) series, and some Dorothy Dunnett and Umberto Eco thrown in for extra spice!

What would you say to someone who hears the word “fantasy” and puts up a mental wall? What are they missing out on?

DH: I would try to figure out what they're allergic to, first. For me, I know I have an allergic reaction to strange-sounding names. Ridiculous, I know — and I can work around it. But I do understand why some elements of fantasy can make it hard for people to enter into another world. I've never met anyone who disliked everything about fantasy. Once you start talking to them, you discover they can't tolerate elves, or 12-syllable names, or (heaven forbid) vampires. Then you can find something that they might like to try. Good fantasy books are, for me, a perfect, fun escape. I think that's what the fantasy-averse are missing out on.

In your books the issue of “interspecies love” — relationships between witches and vampires, for instance — is a constant source of conflict. Was there any way in which writing these stories enabled you to make a statement about race and cultural issues in the real world?

DH: I certainly hope so. I am struck by the seeming contradiction between the modern passion for stories about different, special, unusual, and unique creatures and the hostility there is to perceived difference (racial, ethnic, class, religious, etc.) in the world. I'm really not sure what's going on, but I do believe that fiction helps to develop empathy because you need to try to see the world through another person's eyes. The world needs a good strong dose of empathy at the moment.

You're so well versed in so many things: science... history... wine! Are there any subjects that don't interest you?

DH: I could probably be interested in just about anything if it were presented the right way, but I can't say I'm deeply invested in knowing more about baseball or football.

You've said that this series came out of your wondering, “If there really are witches and vampires, what do they do for a living?” Are there any other little musings in the back of your mind that you might chase down in fiction?

DH: All kinds of things. They pop up all the time, usually when I'm driving or gardening or doing dishes — something that makes it impossible for me to write them down. So there are always clumps of dirt and soap spots on the floor as I dash around looking for pens or paper. In the car, I just have to try to hold on to the idea until I make it safely back home!

Last one — we ask everyone: Favorite thing about shopping in an indie bookstore?

DH: Besides the miles of bookshelves to browse, I think it would have to be all the great things at the cash register that I didn't know I HAD to have—like stickers, or pencils, or keychains, or...

Link to this interview located here: <http://parnassusmusing.net/2015/05/21/deborah-harkness-nashville-book-of-life/>