

# Harkness' witches, vampires take on life for readers

*Rege Bebe at tribelive.com - published 28 May 2015*

Deborah Harkness' first two books, both nonfiction, were designed to spur discussion and thought.

The Philadelphia native, who will appear May 31 at Shadyside Academy's Hillman Center at a fundraiser for Penguin Bookshop in Sewickley, found a different reaction when her first novel, "A Discovery of Witches," became a best-seller.

"As an academic, I'm used to trying to influence people's heads, not their hearts," says Harkness, who teaches at the University of Southern California. "It's a very nice change."

"A Discovery of Witches" not only became a bestseller, but also begat the "All Souls Trilogy." The paperback version of the final novel, "The Book of Life" (Penguin, \$17) has just been released. The main characters are academics, just like Harkness. But in addition to being a historian, Diana Bishop is a witch, and Matthew Claremont's scientific pursuits are vested in his vampire lineage.

Harkness admits she was surprised when "The Book of Life" was accepted for publication, let alone when it became a best-seller. When she started to meet readers, it suddenly hit her what she'd accomplished: The characters had taken on a life beyond the pages of the novels.

"I've had very quiet, composed, elegant older women take me by the arm and say, 'I better not die before you finish this series. I'm not going to my grave before I know what happens to my friends,'" Harkness says, laughing. "It's one thing for the characters to be real to me. When they became real to my readers, it was quite extraordinary."

That they became real at all is a credit to Harkness' creativity and her ability to make a witch and a vampire seem to be ordinary people with common concerns. But Harkness insists that she's not casting them in a new light.

Instead, she's restoring the characters, especially Diana Brooks\*, to their traditional standing.

“In the period I studied, the 16th century, people really did believe that their next-door neighbors could be witches,” Harkness says. “For a very, very long time, almost everyone, including educated people and religious figures, believed there were witches all around them. I was deliberately trying to pull that forward into the present.”

Researching witchcraft came naturally to Harkness, who has worked as a historian since 1982. Casting Brooks\* and Claremont as believable characters proved to be trickier. She knew they would lose credibility if they broke through physical barriers instead of merely stretching reality.

“I wanted to avoid anything that struck me as an adult as being far-fetched,” she says, “or that would make me doubt that magic could really be around them all the time. So, it had to have a certain gravitas and dignity to it, and it also had to obey certain rules. I don't think if you were a witch you would use that power on things that you could just as quickly do with your hands.”

With characters so real — at least, to her readers — it seems only fair to ask Harkness about whether she believes in witchcraft. She's noncommittal, but doesn't discount the possibility that witchcraft exists in some form.

“Einstein said that what we perceive as humans beings as reality is one facet of a crystal,” Harkness says, “and that all the other facets are waiting there to be discovered. We just don't have eyes to see them. I never disagree with someone as smart as Einstein if I can help it.”

Article link: <http://triblive.com/aande/books/8318339-74/harkness-characters-became#axzz3bUhVoWe7>

\* *We're pretty sure the author meant "Bishop" ~ The Daemons*