

JayMac

Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication Alumni Association



GAYLORD ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

“You need to be able to discipline yourself, to know your craft and why writing principles work, and to work alone with solitude on your shoulder.”

DEBORAH CHESTER

John Crain Presidential Professor, Professional Writing
University of Oklahoma
Norman, OK

For most of her life, Deborah Chester has been writing. She wrote her first story at 9 years old, kicking off what's been a lifetime of learning and honing the writer's craft. To date, Chester has authored over 40 novels in a variety of genres plus three nonfiction books. We talked to the Gaylord College professor about her career, time as an OU student and the professional writing program.

What is your favorite memory from your time in the professional writing program at OU?

My favorite memory from my undergraduate days is the spring afternoon I walked into Professor Robert L. Duncan's office for a Tutorial session in my last semester as a senior, and he told me he'd been talking to his literary agent in New York about me and she wanted to see part of my manuscript. I sent her pages, and shortly thereafter she accepted me as a client. Six months later, she sold that class project, and my dream

How has the professional writing program changed over the years?

The biggest change in PW has probably been in our graduate courses. We have evolved from offering a Master of Arts with a professional writing emphasis to a separate Masters in Professional Writing degree. The program—on both undergraduate and graduate levels—has also expanded from two teachers to a faculty of four. This has allowed us to offer more electives—such as Writing Science Fiction & Fantasy, for example—in addition to our required curriculum. Massive, revolutionary changes in the publishing industry in the past few years have also changed how we guide students in marketing their work.

What advice do you give to students aspiring to a writing career?

My advice boils down to you have to read, read, read commercial fiction so that you keep your story sense honed and you know

career as a novelist was launched.

Did a particular faculty member inspire you to want to become a professor yourself?

Jack Bickham inspired me to become a professor. His teaching of technique was very clear, and although he was intimidating because he didn't pull his punches with feedback, I felt he taught me so much and I wanted to help carry the Professional Writing torch forward.

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genre tropes and what's current. You have to love writing even more than you adore reading. You have to absolutely master the writing craft so that solid technique can carry you through the rocky days when you don't feel inspired but still have to keep going. Understanding your craft and why writing principles work will protect you from being a one-hit wonder or having your career die by your third book because when you know what you're doing you can adapt always to shifting market demands. You have to be a professional capable of delivering what editors ask for, and you have to meet your deadlines. You need to be able to discipline yourself, to know your craft and why writing principles work, and to work alone with solitude on your shoulder.

What do you do for fun outside of work?

Outside of work, I have fun by buying and selling antiques and vintage goods, and I enjoy spending time with my two Scottish Terriers.



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