



Shame the Devil: A Novel (Excelsior Editions)

Debra Brenegan

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The remarkable and true story of the nineteenth-century novelist, journalist, and feminist Fanny Fern.

“There may be married people who do not read the morning paper. Smith and I know them not ... It is not too much to say the newspapers are one of our strongest points of sympathy; that it is our meat and drink to praise and abuse them together; that we often in our imagination edit a model newspaper, which shall have for its motto, ‘Speak the truth, and shame the devil.’” — Fanny Fern

Shame the Devil tells the remarkable and true story of Fanny Fern (the pen name of Sara Payson Willis), one of the most successful, influential, and popular writers of the nineteenth century. A novelist, journalist, and feminist, Fern (1811–1872) outsold Harriet Beecher Stowe, won the respect of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and served as literary mentor to Walt Whitman. Scrabbling in the depths of poverty before her meteoric rise to fame and fortune, she was widowed, escaped an abusive second marriage, penned one of the country’s first prenuptial agreements, married a man eleven years her junior, and served as a nineteenth-century Oprah to her hundreds of thousands of fans. Her weekly editorials in the pages of the New York Ledger over a period of about twenty years chronicled the myriad controversies of her era and demonstrated her firm belief in the motto, “Speak the truth, and shame the devil.” Through the story of Fern and her contemporaries, including Walt Whitman, Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Shame the Devil brings the intellectual and social ferment of mid-nineteenth-century America to life.

Debra Brenegan is Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Women’s Studies at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Her work has been published in CALYX, The Cimarron Review, Southern Women’s Review, Phoebe, and other publications.

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