

Introduction to Debra Dean. 0:46 sec. Photo & Design: Raymond Elman. Music: Soul and Mind by E's Jammy Jams.

## A Conversation with Author Debra Dean

By Elman + Marchante

Debra Dean is the bestselling author of four critically acclaimed books that have been published in twenty-one languages. Her debut, *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice novel, a #1 Booksense Pick, a Booklist Top Ten Novel, and an American Library Association Notable Book of the Year. It was long listed for the IMPAC International Dublin Literary Award. *Confessions of a Falling Woman*, a collection of short fiction, won the Paterson Fiction Prize and a Florida Book Award.

Her most recent book is *Hidden Tapestry: Jan Yoors, His Two Wives, And The War That Made Them One* (Northwestern University Press). It tells the amazing true story about the unforgettable life of Flemish American artist Jan Yoors — childhood vagabond whose parents allowed to run off with Gypsies for months at a time, WWII resistance fighter, and polyamorous New York bohemian. At the peak of his fame in the 1970s, Yoors' photographs and magnificent tapestries inspired a dedicated following in his adopted Manhattan.

Yoors' work brought him international acclaim, and in 1959 Art in America nominated him as one of the new talents in the U.S. Considered one of the most important textile artists of the twentieth century, his tapestries were exhibited in prominent museums, galleries, and public buildings and were sold to major public collections. Yoors' work is still featured in solo exhibitions worldwide.

Debra Dean was born and raised in Seattle, Washington. The daughter of a builder and homemaker and artist, she was a bookworm but never imagined becoming a writer. "Growing up, I read Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder, Jane Austen, and the Brontës. Until I left college, I rarely read anyone who hadn't been dead for at least fifty years, so I had no model for writing books as something that people still did. I think subconsciously I figured you needed three names or at the very least a British accent."

At Whitman College, she double-majored in English and drama. "If you can imagine anyone being this naïve, I figured if the acting thing didn't work out, I'd have the English major to fall back on." After college, she moved to New York and spent two years at the Neighborhood Playhouse, a professional actors' training program. She worked in the New York and regional theater for nearly a decade, and met her future husband when they were cast as brother and sister in A. R. Gurney's play *The Dining Room*. "If I'd had a more successful career as an actor, I'd probably still be doing it, because I loved acting. I understudied in a couple of long-running plays, so I was able to keep my union health insurance, but the business is pretty dreadful. When I started thinking about getting out, I had no idea what else I might do. What I eventually came up with was writing, which in many ways was a comically ill-advised choice, given that the pitfalls of writing as a career are nearly identical to those in acting. One key difference, though, is that you don't have to be hired before you can write. Another big advantage is that you don't need to get facelifts or even be presentable; most days, I can wear my ratty old jeans and T-shirts and not bother with the hair and makeup."

In 1990, she moved back to the northwest and got her MFA at the University of Oregon. She started teaching writing and publishing her short stories in literary journals. *The Madonnas of Leningrad* was begun as a short story, and when she realized that the short form wouldn't contain the story, she put it back in the drawer for a few years. "In retrospect, I'm very grateful for my circuitous journey, that I wasn't some wunderkind. I like to think I have more compassion now and a perspective that I didn't have when I was younger."

Dean and her husband, Clifford Paul Fetters, live in Miami, where she teaches in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Florida International University. She is active on the national lecture circuit and has spoken at book festivals; at colleges and universities; at literary societies, civic and business organizations; and at art museums and public libraries across the country.

The videos below are organized by topic and run between 30 seconds and 8 minutes. Click on any video. You must be connected to the Internet to view the videos.

### SELF-CONFIDENCE: 1:49 min.



*What's your earliest memory of thinking that you could write well?*



### VALUES LEARNING PROCESS: 0:32 sec.

*Describe your education growing up in Seattle.*



### SERENDIPITY: 2:55 min.

*Seattle is paradise when the sun is shining, but can be bleak and dreary otherwise. How did living in Seattle impact your writing? And what was the impact of moving to Miami?*



### INSIGHT & INSPIRATION: 2:24 min.

*What did you learn in school that still informs you today?*



### SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES: 0:35 sec.

*When an author has a hit like your "The Madonnas of Leningrad," does that automatically open up doors for teaching positions?*



### UNDERSTANDS THE BUSINESS OF ART: 2:16 min.

*What do you know now that you wish you knew when you were first starting your career?*



### SERENDIPITY: 1:02 min.

*When did you realize that you might have a career in writing?*



### COMMUNITY VALUES: 2:18 min.

*Were you part of a literary community in Seattle, and are you part of a literary community in Miami after living here for 10 years?*



### EXPOSURE TO BROAD INFLUENCES: 1:17 min.

*Who are your role models and influencers?*



### CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY: 0:57 min.

*In terms of writing compact prose, where would you place your writing on a spectrum between Alec Wilkinson and Norman Mailer?*



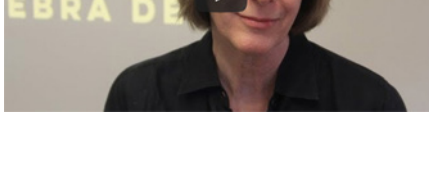
### SERENDIPITY: 5:27 min.

*Where did the idea for "Hidden Tapestry" come from?*



### CRITICAL THINKING: 2:39 min.

*What was your internal debate over whether "Hidden Tapestry" should be written as fiction or non-fiction?*



### OVERCOMES CHALLENGES TO SUCCEED: 2:04 min.

*Are your hundreds of hours of interviews recorded as audio or are they hand-written notes?*



### PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS: 1:55 min.

*I recorded many interviews and sent them out to a service for transcription, but they charged about \$500 per interview. Did you ever use a transcription service?*



### EMPATHY: 1:28 min.

*Did Marianne and Annabert keep making tapestries after Jan died?*

**INSIGHT & INSPIRATION:**

**1:43 min.**



*Did Annabert and Marianne have one child each?*

**CRITICAL THINKING: 0:50 sec.**



*In my family, two brothers married two sisters in the 1890s, so it may not have seemed so unusual for Jan Yoors to be living with two "sisters," one of whom was his wife.*

**CRITICAL THINKING: 2:00 min.**



*Yoors sold his work for around \$15,000 in the 1950s, which was a lot of money in that era. Was he able to maintain that level of sales?*

**UNDERSTANDS THE BUSINESS OF ART: 0:35 sec.**



*I remember when rug manufacturers started making rugs with designs by famous artists like Picasso.*

**PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS:**

**2:59 min.**



*Were you able to find any living artists that knew Jan Yoors in Greenwich Village?*

**INSIGHT & INSPIRATION:**

**1:33 min.**



*Do you think you would have been friends with Jan Yoors?*

**SELF-CONFIDENCE: 5:02 min.**



*For me, the most unbelievable part of Jan Yoors' story is that his parents allowed him to run off with Gypsies for months at a time when he was a teenager.*

**FOLLOWS A ROUTINE:**

**1:57 min.**



*Do you have a routine when you are working on a book?*

**SERENDIPITY: 1:45 min.**



*What has been the role of serendipity in your career?*

**CRITICAL THINKING: 0:29 sec.**



*Are you indifferent whether your next project is fiction or non-fiction?*

**EMPATHY: 1:37 min.**



*Are there lessons in Jan Yoors' story for contemporary times?*