

Interesting People

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Debra Conner  
Scholar, Poet, Actress

Interesting People

## Performances

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- Margaret Mitchell
- Zelda Fitzgerald
- Emily Dickinson
- Rebecca Harding Davis
- Margaret Blennerhassett

## Interesting People

# Education/Publications

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- Bachelor's Degree: English
  - University of Virginia
- Master's of Fine Arts: Creative Writing
  - Warren Wilson College, North Carolina
- "...poets are not known for the size of their paychecks"
- 22 years as a teacher and poet
- Publications
  - *West Virginia Encyclopedia*
    - *50 Years of West Virginia Poetry*

## Debra on Writing

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- Daydreams; escape
- An otherwise vacant submerged submarine
- “...being on the margins of life, seeing the world with a view toward making sense of it...”
- “How much dysfunctionality is just enough to make you a writer?”
- Why not history?
- The pain: coming down
- Remaining focused, brick wall
- Overcoming the absence of failure?

## Interesting People

## Achievements

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- 1977: Fellowship: National Endowment for the Arts
  - Letter “... suggestions for educational programs...”
  - No prior acting experience
- Humanities Councils: Maryland, Ohio, Arkansas, West Virginia
- Appearances
  - Baltimore Museum of Art, Mt. Holyoke College, *Delta Queen*
- Writer-in-residence: Ohio Arts Council
- Workshops and residences: creative writing
- Poetry
  - Martha Richford Roberts Prize
  - University of Virginia

## Interesting People

# Debra's Beginnings

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- Ancestors/siblings
- Childhood: fears/concerns
  - Interests, dreams
- Glenn, spouse: photography
  - Animals: cats and dogs
- No prior acting experience
- Inspirations/tipping point
  - Willa Cather: first person presentation
    - Betty Jean Steinshouer
  - Drawn to literary women
    - Complexity in-depth
- Debra: deconstruction
- Adult
  - Fears, concerns
  - Passions

## Interesting People

# Nature of the Performances

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- Types: history lite
  - Professional interpreters
  - Chautauqua performers
  - Reenactors
- Bonding/audience
- First person/third person
- Competition
  - Video games, television, amusement parks
- The mission
  - “...entertainment is a requirement in our society”
  - “...teachers have to be David Letterman in the classroom or else the students are snoring”

## Interesting People

### Margaret Mitchell: 1900-1948: 48

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- One of the first female columnists
- *Gone with the Wind*: Scarlett O'Hara
  - Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh
  - Secession, Civil War, reconstruction, three marriages, motherhood
  - Published/movie: 1935: 30 million
    - Second to the Bible
  - Highest grossing movie ever
  - 10 Academy Awards; Pulitzer: 1937
- First spouse: Red Upshaw: bootlegger
  - Rhett Butler
- Is Margaret Mitchell part of Debra?
- A book is like a child, but with many parents



## Interesting People

### Zelda Fitzgerald: 1900-1948: 48

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- First flapper/jazz age/roaring 20's
- "...without a thought for anyone else...no moral principles"
  - Kitchen tables, guests, bath
- Married to F. Scott Fitzgerald
  - Tumultuous courtship
  - The profit of the roaring 20's
  - Became a confirmed alcoholic
- *The Great Gatsby*
  - Wealthy, glamorous, talented
- Love of dancing: drive away the devils
- Constant fighting
- Mental illness
  - Schizophrenia
- Fire, Highland Hospital, Asheville, NC

## Interesting People

### Emily Dickinson: 1830-1886: 56

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- Poems: total more than 1,800
  - Lifetime: 12
  - 40 volumes: death: 1,789
- Unconventional broken rhyming meter and use of dashes and random capitalization as well as her creative use of metaphor and overall innovative style
- Eccentric genius/recluse
- Mount Holyoke Female Seminary
- Poetry reflects her loneliness and the speakers of her poems generally live in a state of want
  - Suggest the possibility of happiness
- Admired Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning/John Keats
- Most creative people?

## Interesting People

### Rebecca Harding Davis: 1831-1910: 79

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- American author and journalist
  - Realism in American literature
  - *Life in the Iron Mills*: 1861
- Objective: sought to effect social change for blacks, women, Native Americans, immigrants
  - Soul starvation/living death
- Wheeling, Virginia (later West Virginia)
  - Washington Female Seminary/ valedictorian

## Interesting People

# The Inception of Debra's Social Conscience

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- Rebecca Harding Davis
- The Woman's Role
  - Inevitable destiny
    - Marriage
    - Bad girls, sex pre-marriage
    - Housework/babysitting
      - Barely able to speak above whisper
        - » Mother

## Interesting People

### Margaret Blennerhassett: 1771-1842: 71

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- Ohio Valley: 1797
  - Harman/mansion/Ohio River
  - Margaret/niece/laws of England and Ireland/religiously unlawful union
- Refinements of English society
- Aaron Burr, former Vice President/Thomas Jefferson; penitentiary
  - Conspiracy trial
- *Exhile from Eden*
  - Rags to riches story
  - 18<sup>th</sup> century frontier life
  - Love of entertaining
  - 50,000 visitors per year visit the island

## Interesting People

## Closing

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- What drives you?
- Your definition of success?
- Your future goals?
- Any change in your philosophies?
- What makes your career path interesting/exciting/meaningful?