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National Book Award Finalist Named 2022 Grisham Writer-in-Residence

Staff Report

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National Book Award Finalist Named 2022 Grisham Writer-in-Residence

Deesha Philyaw is helping develop 'The Secret Lives of Church Ladies' for HBO Max

AUGUST 18, 2021 BY STAFF REPORT



Deesha Philyaw will work on her next project while teaching a graduate fiction workshop and an undergraduate workshop as the university's 2022-23 John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence. Photo courtesy Vanessa German

OXFORD, Miss. – Acclaimed fiction writer Deesha Philyaw has been named the 2022-23 **John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence** at the **University of Mississippi**.

Philyaw is the prize-winning author of the short story collection "The Secret Lives of Church Ladies" (West Virginia University Press, 2020), which won the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the 2021 Story Prize and the 2020 LA Times Book Prize: The Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. It also was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction.

With most of the collection's nine stories set in the South, "The Secret Lives of Church Ladies," is described on Philyaw's website as featuring "four generations of characters grappling with who they want to be in the world, caught as they are between the church's double standards and their own needs and passions."

"I'm a native of Jacksonville, Florida, and I have a deep nostalgia for the South, so I set my stories there," said Philyaw, who resides in Pittsburgh.

A graduate of Yale University, Philyaw has written for The New York Times, The Washington Post and other national publications.

The author is about to embark on a new project, writing and executive producing an adaptation of "The Secret Lives of Church Ladies," which was optioned by HBO Max. She is working with actress Tessa Thompson, who chose the book as one of two debut projects for her new production company.

"I didn't want to just option the book and walk away," Philyaw said. "I wanted to be part of the process. Adapting my book for television gives me a chance to develop a new writing muscle."

"Deesha is amazing! We're so excited she's coming," said Beth Ann Fennelly, UM professor of English and Mississippi poet laureate from 2016 to 2021.

"I was lucky enough to be doing a Zoom event with Deesha in which we were both readers. In the green room before the event, I was asking her about where she was living, and she happened to mention that while she'd been in Pennsylvania for some time, but she felt ready to move and thought she might try a new city. I emailed my colleagues in the MFA department that night!

"I knew it was an opportunity to have one of our nation's best writers come live and teach with us for a year."

As a writer-in-residence, Philyaw will be working on her next project, either a novel or another volume of short stories. At Ole Miss, she'll teach a one-semester graduate fiction workshop in fall 2022 and an undergraduate workshop during the spring 2023 semester.

She is in the midst of a global Zoom book tour that has introduced her to readers across the United States as well as in Greece, France, Tanzania and Trinidad.

"I really enjoy connecting with readers about the book," she said. "Every conversation is fresh."

She's looking forward to her time in Oxford and a return to the South.

"We are beyond thrilled to have Deesha joining us," said Caroline Wigginton, associate professor and chair of the **Department of English**. "Her writing is fascinating, funny, moving and important. All of us –

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OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children's play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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students, faculty, community members – can learn from her and appreciate her work.”

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