

Jane Chance – Medievalist

Most Published Professor in Rice University Humanities

Grit

At eight I long for a horse
with a velvet nose and bright eyes.
My father gives me a box camera.
A portable stable. Joy!
In Tien-mou I trade my dad's Luckys for an hour
astride a Mongolian pony fast and lean as a thought.
I race him past rice paddies and the farmer and
his water buffalo slowly furrowing the mud with a
wooden plow. Hello!
My father has more Lucky Strikes in his sock drawer:
strike, the flare of the match to light the cigarette
and burn the smoke my father loves.
If you don't let the boys win, they won't like you.
True pony
I grab your mane and grip the pommel tight,
my legs astraddle the world, and urge you on,
leaving behind the furniture of gender.

What guiding star of persistent questions was behind her intellectual and creative pursuits?

Dr. Jane Chance possesses the ability to persevere, forged by the discipline of a father who grew up with a Depression era Quaker mother, Lt. Col. Donald W. Chance, who ascended the ranks in the military to end up in the high echelons of the Department of Defense. She lost her mother to cancer before her seventh birthday and was often alone, finding writing as both a refuge and eventually a portal to launch a career that took her from the Middle Ages to Hollywood.

"I started writing at 8 and crafted stories, often about animals," says Chance. "Throughout my childhood, I kept writing. It was my pleasure and my solace. I played with paper dolls and made up stories about them." "My dad was very strict, and my brother and I were like little soldiers. But I was, on the other hand, so fortunate to have a father who supported me and my aspirations in every way. At dinner, I



Chandler Davidson with Jane Chance

would listen to his stories about work and as a result received many helpful tips about management. The family was our anchor because we moved every year or two.

"I'm a pretty good problem solver and have been called "one of the great organizers of the world," by a fellow medievalist, she says. "If you move every year, you have to be organized." But she also has fond memories of riding Mongolian ponies on the dirt roads along the Rice paddies of Tien Mou, an enclave for the military families in Taiwan.

She spent two years each in the Philippines and Taiwan and three years in Germany at Kaiserslautern and Heidelberg American High Schools before matriculating at Purdue University, where she earned her B.A. with Highest Distinction and Honors in English. Next, she took top honors at the University of Illinois with an A. M. in English and a Ph.D. in English (Medieval English Literature) in 1971. According to the committee who hired her here, Chance was the top choice to join the English Department at Rice in 1973, after teaching at the University of Saskatchewan for two years.

"I've always played by the rules," says the feisty Chance. Yet her determination resulted in her consistently breaking through boundaries, as she

became the most published professor in all of the Humanities at Rice University (25 books, more than a hundred articles and reviews, and Series Editor of three medieval book series, one of which brings into the classroom translations of works by medieval women). (There are 46 books in her three series.) Her research interests range from the reception of classical myth in the Middle Ages; women's writing and gender difference in the Middle Ages to the New Medievalism (Tolkien, film studies), cognitive theory, and Old and Middle English literature. Chance has appeared in two films, as herself in *Ringers: Lord of the Fans* (Sony Pictures) in 2005, directed by Carlene Cordova and also as herself in National Geographic: "Beyond the Movie, The Lord of the Rings," in 2002 directed by Lisa Kors.

Her honors have included NEH and Guggenheim Fellowships, a Bellagio Residency, and membership in Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Chance won a 1994 Best Book Prize from the South Central Modern Language Association for the first volume of her three-volume series on Medieval Mythography. She also won the 2008 Book Prize for *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women* (Palgrave, 2007). Her essay, "Classical Myth and Gender in the Letters of `Abelard' and `Heloise': Gloss, Glossed, Glossator," in *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman* was awarded the Best Essay Prize from the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship in 2005. One of her Tolkien books was translated into Japanese.

In 1998, she received the IMPACT Award for Outstanding Rice Faculty Woman, for the Empowerment of Women, from the Rice University Women's Research Center. She was also invited to deliver the 2016 Medieval Academy of America Plenary Lecture at the annual international conference on Medieval Studies at the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, an event that attracts 3,000 medievalists. She is proudest of having been graced with an Honorary Doctorate in Letters (D.Litt.) from Purdue University – W. Lafayette in 2013 "in recognition of her outstanding literary scholarship and visionary leadership in the field of medieval studies." Three "In Honor of Jane Chance" symposia have been held, including the symposium sponsored by the Medieval Foremothers Society and organized by Helene Scheck, University of Albany and in addition, the "Tolkien and Alterity session" organized by Chris Vaccaro and Tolkien at Kalamazoo (which

Jane also founded) at the International Conference on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University in May, 2013. A new collection of articles dedicated to Chance--edited by Yvette Kisor and Chris Vaccaro, titled *Tolkien and Alterity*--just appeared this year in the same New Middle Series published by Palgrave-



An image of two perspectives on society: Medievalist Jane Chance and Founding Director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Stephen Klineberg, who will continue as director despite retiring from the School of Social Sciences.

Springer.

Her retirement over the past seven years has taught her a lot. "This would be my advice to retirees – you have to have a plan," says Chance. "I knew I wanted to write and I had two book contracts to fulfill (both now published, in 2015 and 2016) and then added a third, on Cognitive Alterities/Neuromedievalism, a journal issue coedited with my neuroscientist son, Antony Passaro, while he was working on his doctoral dissertation, and published as an issue of a new theoretical journal titled *postmedieval* (also published by Palgrave-Macmillan). For this research, I was awarded a year as a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Medical Humanities at UTMB-Galveston. It took me a semester just to collect articles in cognitive theory and philosophy." Although Jane is retired, she is active on social media with an enviable following, many of them connected to the field of medieval studies.

A love of travel also has been key: she has been heli-hiking and cycling in the Canadian Bugaboos,

off to conferences in Romania and Italy, and a traveler to Jerusalem and Egypt, the Galapagos and Antarctica (her favorite), and Africa. A newly honed skill, photography, was her purpose in her travels to Agra, Rome, and Budapest and resulted in some award-winning photographs. A curious mirror image of the Taj on the landing of her stairwell causes most visitors to double-take and ask how she was able to capture this? (It is deliberately upside-down.) Another photograph, printed on Japanese rice paper and encased in an elegant frame, invites her visitors to experience one of her amazing adventures. Upstairs, photographs of Galveston where she lived for nine years before moving back to Houston, frame beautifully appointed rooms, all resplendent with rich antiques. A peek inside her closet reveals an ingenious retirement tribute presented to her by her children, a framed Rice photo of her in her first year at Rice, composed of hundreds of tiny black and white photos of her.

She hopes now just to continue writing and publishing poems, after having completed a first book, *Only Begetter* (2014), eight poems in a medievalist poetry anthology, *New Crops from Old Fields: Eight Medievalist Poets*, 2015, and a second book just accepted, *The Middle Ages*. She has almost completed what she calls an unofficial low-residency traveling MFA. This has involved signing up for one-week poetry workshops with poet luminaries such as Nick Flynn, Dorianne Laux, Marge Piercy, Greg



Jane Chance reads her poem Enchanted Rock at launch of 2018 Texas Poetry Calendar, a collection of 128 poems as diverse and unique as the state itself, at Blue Willow Bookshop.

Pardlo, Kevin Young and then some recent University of Houston Ph.D.'s who have published their own first books. "It is fun being a freshman again," Chance says.

Her poem, "Enchanted Rock," was published in the Texas Poetry Calendar for 2017 and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize:

Enchanted Rock

This lazy mountain
 Long and pink as a lady's thighs
 A lady lying on her side, listening
 for her lover.
 Trees blanket her long afternoon.
 Sleep and dream, woman
 Whose desire time mounted
 In granite.
 You mistress
 Without sin.
 Atop you a muscled wind brandishes
 Cloudy fists
 To beat you around,
 Stoned sister
 Too tough to notice,
 And anyone who tries to move you.
 Mean the wind you never mind
 And mute the man who climbs you.

In addition to writing poetry, she also adores visiting her sons, their wives and the youngest of her grandchildren, Arianna Elena, now three and a half, and speaks Italian, Spanish, some Japanese and English. Her daughter, son-in-law, and their four children (two in college), are scattered across the United States in Ohio, Missouri, Oklahoma and California. On her children and grandchildren: "I hope the world survives for them," says Chance. "I believe in offering my children opportunities of various sorts and letting them be responsible for steering their own lives. Education is key, which is why they all have advanced degrees. Ben, my oldest grandchild, published his second article as a junior, at University of Tulsa, his first authored publication. "Is it any accident that the children all have advanced degrees, teach and do research and publish - even her attorney daughter - and all love to travel?" asks the woman who never stops questioning. On parental influence: "Don't criticize, if you can possibly help it," she says. "Encourage and love them."