

# PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

## *The Secret to Successful Research:* Dr. Woertendyke sits down with CrossTalk to reveal her professional research project

by Athena Marousis  
Photo by Stephen Cupschalk

Dr. Gretchen Woertendyke is an associate professor in the English department of USC, as well as the author of *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre*. She is currently working on her second book, which she describes as a project focused on secrecy as different flashpoints, particularly in moments of heightened circulation, in American history. For Dr. Woertendyke, a secret is more than just something that is kept hidden. Rather, "secrecy is this sort of set of protocols and processes and behaviors and networks more than it is about the secret itself." Her project focuses on four branches of secrecy in American history: secret societies such as the Freemasons or the KKK, scandal fiction in the early nineteenth century, slave narratives, and our contemporary culture of secrecy. Her research has led her to discover intriguing parallels between the ways in which current and older societies handle matters of public interest. She explains that in the early nineteenth century, newspapers and media outlets took on a writing style of commodifying secrets. They would report on a crime that was

publically known to have been a true event, but they would do so in a manner that reframed the story into a secret narrative. And while this was not necessarily a new technique, it effectively increased popularity and intrigue.

This window into previous reporting styles stands to reveal something about our modern attitude of public versus private life. With social media ever present in our contemporary culture of secrecy, Dr. Woertendyke describes the current climate quite nicely: it is a "confused arena" where public and private are overlapping, and there is this tension of how people are representing themselves. There is this appearance of heightened exhibitionism, but the reality of whether or not something is actually revealed is questionable.

Dr. Woertendyke explained that she was not initially familiar with secret histories, and that she came upon them while conducting research for her first book. The text that sparked her interest in secrecy was Leonara Sansay's *Secret History; or, the Horrors of Santo Domingo*.

"I became fascinated by it, and the more

fascinated I became I thought, 'oh, I have to include this in my project' ... the more research I did on secret histories, the more I realized it was just too big ... but I knew I wanted to return to it."

Such is the nature of research, particularly in the humanities. Undergraduates, graduates, and scholars alike begin pursuing one topic, only to be swept up by a new one entirely. This lack of rigidity is the very thing that gives the humanities its appeal. "It was cool and it was

“The bigger the project, the more open you have to be to letting the research guide you.

unexpected" Dr. Woertendyke explained. "You have to be willing to follow the strands."

Her advice for undergraduate students looking to get involved in humanities research: find a faculty member you work well with. Humanities research can take different forms, from students working on their first novels, to engaging in critical analysis essay writing on a particular topic or time period. She also noted that Magellan scholarships are available to students with faculty members sponsoring their project. This type of research is frequently characterized by substantial interaction between professor and student, or fellow colleagues. The process is hardly ever formulaic. It involves reading, rereading, writing, and rewriting, and many times, simply talking it through.

As far as the differences go between

seasoned humanities scholars and student researchers, Dr. Woertendyke says, "we know our own idiosyncrasies better." She explains that everyone's process is different. Regardless of how the words end up on paper, the process in general is a long one that requires commitment. The goal of such a commitment is ultimately publication.

"So much of what we do is thinking and reading and sitting with ideas before they're even visible to anyone else, which is a frustrating part of the job and the process because we're always up against the perception that we don't do enough as it is, which is to say that people don't really understand ... just the kind of labor that goes into intellectual work." For Dr. Woertendyke, it's about more than just the literature. It's about, "using what I do and what I know that I can do well, and making it have some impact beyond my own scholarship ... I'm very interested in having that kind of conversation, not one that's just based in the nineteenth century, but one that's current."

