PhD Student Finds Success with First Novel  
by Stacey Stevens

TaraShea Nesbit, 3rd year PhD student in English, is the author of The Wives of Los Alamos, a novel about the making of the atomic bomb from the perspective of the nuclear scientists’ wives, who were unaware of what their husbands were building. Nesbit developed the novel during her first two years as a PhD student at DU.

“To write it I traveled several times to Los Alamos, New Mexico,” said Nesbit. “I sifted through archives at the Los Alamos Historical Society and listened to oral histories from the scientists’ wives. I read memoirs, physics books and history books about WWII.”


“Nesbit doesn’t pick as her narrator one fictional wife or hover over the town, Cheever-like, with an aloof omniscient eye,” he said. “The story is told by all of the women—not queued up as in an oral history, but together in unison as one haunting communal voice.”

Completing her masters of fine arts at Washington University in poetry gave Nesbit a skilled strength in prose writing.

“She understands how narrative works, how behavior is a link of odd, meaningful, and meaningless chains, but also writes very clean and lean prose,” said Brian Kiteley, DU English professor. “What stands out about TaraShea is the smart, effective, and imaginative research she did into the Manhattan project for her book, The Wives of Los Alamos. I am very impressed both by the details of her novel and by the humanity and empathy of her understanding of these women in that fascinating, terrifying, and world-changing project.”

Originally applying to the English department’s poetry program, Nesbit was accepted into the fiction program. Nesbit accepted the spot in the fiction program due its flexible categorization of prose.

“I took fiction workshops and grew less afraid of sentences,” said Nesbit. “Professors recommended novels that explored history in unusual, roving, rebellious ways. My peers are also doing different kinds of work, all of it living up to the DU writing program’s reputation for innovation, talent and presence.”

Nesbit chose the graduate program at the University of Denver for its small class size and the ability to work closely with faculty and students that would extend her thinking, both as a writer and a literary
critic. She also likes how the program places importance on tutorials, two credit-hour sessions that meet once a week, and that the classes are capped at three students.

“The English department works hard to create time for graduate students, and that’s what any writer needs the most of all,” said Nesbit. “We need time to read, time to think, and time to write. If I did not have the time and support, I would never have written this book or, it would have taken years longer.”

Nesbit is working on a new book project that takes place during the 17th century, about an eclectic mix of people aboard a ship that traveled from Holland, then to England, and onward to America. She also makes time to be involved in the local community—she has mentored young writers at the Ricks Center, a private school affiliated with the University of Denver, and has facilitated writing sessions at The Gathering Place, a daytime drop-in center for women, children, and transgender individuals who are experiencing homelessness and poverty.

“A woman comes in to The Gathering Place and wants to write a birthday poem for her granddaughter, another wants help working on a cover letter, and a third comes to write a memoir,” describes Nesbit. “These connections with others remind me of how much bigger the world is than just my little room, my little writing project, my little grad school experience, my little graduation.”

Nesbit encourages graduate students to be involved with others, to remember how much is out there and to be helpful as much as possible.

“Writing can be an isolating task—a thing done at a desk, alone with a computer, telling stories to no one but yourself,” said Nesbit. “It can be lonely work, as any research project can be, but participating in the community reminds me of what I love about my field.”