

Classes, Classics, and Community

Dr. Burns speaks on teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago and her research in the Classics field

Andromeda. Orion. Perseus. Pegasus.

Dr. Krishni Burns, a professor at the University of Illinois's Chicago campus, grew up in Columbus, Ohio with her father weaving these constellation myths into the tapestry of her childhood. When asked what fostered her interest in Latin and classical studies, it was those tales of her adolescence that she pointed to. In high school, Latin seemed the most obvious route of choice for her language of study, and Dr. Burns never looked back.

However, getting a Classics degree hadn't originally been the plan for Dr. Burns. "I was going to focus on anthropology," she said, "but I kept taking Latin classes and then realized late in my junior year that I had already completed a Classics major."

And, as she remarked, she just went with it.

Dr. Burns focused on ancient history for her master's degree, and obtained her Ph.D in classical studies with a specialty in Roman history in 2015. When asked what it was that made her want to pursue a Ph.D, Dr. Burns responded quite simply, "Spite."

Having had dyslexia, Dr. Burns shared that she was one of the special education kids for most of her school life. With a determined (and one could say spiteful) look in her eye, she said, "I wanted to prove to everybody who had ever thought I couldn't amount to anything that I could."

And so, in 2015, she began drafting her dissertation and book *The Magna Mater Romana: A Sociocultural Study of the Cult of the Magna Mater in Republican Rome*. Dr. Burns explained that monographs, while perhaps no longer as heavily emphasized in other disciplines, are still the staple of the Classics world.

So what, exactly, does it take to write a book a decade in the making?

Like most things, community.

Dr. Burns credits her success in obtaining her doctorate to her dissertation group Sparkle Motion. (“Terrifying movie,” she paused to say, “I don’t know why we named our dissertation group that.”), “I would not have finished my Ph.D if I weren’t meeting with them every week,” she said.

Fridays are now her dedicated writing days—the time she sets aside to meet up with her writing partner so that they may hold each other accountable for completing their personal projects. The rest of her working week is spent teaching at UIC as senior lecturer of Latin and Classics.

Monday through Thursday, with days starting bright and early at seven in the morning, Dr. Burns joins the early morning crew at UIC by parsing through emails in her office at University Hall. There are few more dedicated to their students than Dr. Burns, who spends her time after morning lectures working with several students completing independent studies and finishes her day by leading classes in the evening.

Though she may be proud of her book, Dr. Burns said that what she was proudest of, over and over again, were her students. “The *in loco parentis* thing is real,” she said with a laugh, referencing a Latin phrase that translates as ‘in place of a parent.’ “Every time any of you get something difficult right, anytime any of you accomplishes something, gets accepted to a conference, walks at graduation—I get super excited.”

This isn’t to say that Dr. Burns has tossed research off to the side of the road, however. When it comes to classical studies, one of the current largest trends is what she referred to as “reception studies,” which is about how the classics affect modern day media and literature—particularly that of children’s media. And she just happens to be considered one of the leading experts in this new field of study.

Dr. Burns was invited to Warsaw several times to work with a European Research Council focused on reception studies, and is often sought out after conferences for questions or requests to write about her work and knowledge on the classics in animation and media. For her, finding references to the classics in the media was a personal pastime, having noted so many of these hidden tid-bits so long ago.

“I remember all of these really obscure classical references and jokes encoded throughout all kinds of children's culture and media that most people forget about and never really understand,” she said, “But I do.”

Besides reception studies, Dr. Burns noted having a personal investment in the decolonization and diversification of classical studies.

The de-Eurocentrifcation of the classics was one of the key issues she discussed within this field of study. She mentioned that there was a big push in order to “really study Rome as a multicultural, multi-ethnic empire,” one that included its African and North African heritage as well.

While she may not be adding much in the ethnicity department, as a woman with a neurological disorder, Dr. Burns notes that she was helping to diversify the study of the classics in terms of gender and divergence.

As a woman in academia, Dr. Burns talked about how female scholars and faculty are often asked to “stir the soup.”

“Male faculty members will be responsible for things like being program director, but female faculty will end up doing the majority of the advising for students and picking up the extra classes and serving on extra committees—things that don't come with course releases or pay bumps,” she said. “I do a lot of unpaid, unrecognized tasks.”

When asked what was needed in order to delve into the world of classical studies, Dr. Burns offered two pieces of advice: 1) to focus on languages (especially Ancient Greek), and 2) to make sure it's what you really want. Dr. Burns remarked that while it was possible to finish in six, for most people getting a doctorate in the classics would take at least eight years. “Do it because it's really what you want to do,” she said, “Not because you're not sure what else to do.”

Burns believes that the humanities, and the study of Latin in particular, are especially important because *community* is important. She pointed out that even though Latin isn't a spoken language, it was difficult for people to learn Latin in isolation during COVID: “It's something that we have to do as part of a community.”

When asked if she would do it all over again should she have the chance to start over, Dr. Burns stated instantly, confidently, and with an assured finality, “Absolutely. 100%. I have zero regrets.”