



## **Daphne Athas**

Daphne Athas remembers the cinder block house in Carrboro her family built– father, mother, three sisters and a brother carrying blocks and cementing them together by hand. They painted the house white and Daphne still sees it across the driveway. Her mother, from a well-to-do New England family, married a Greek immigrant, had four children, and lived a charmed life till the Depression wiped them out. They moved to Chapel Hill when Daphne was 15 because her father believed in education and the University was the town’s heartbeat. Having read her mother’s Dickens, listened to her father tell stories in a Greek accent of digging up small carved ceramic gods and goddesses from the earth as a kid, and been mesmerized when her mother played Brahms on the piano, Daphne became sensitive to language. Her father started a small business from the broken-down shack they rented near the railroad tracks on the edge of town. Southern accents emboldened her. If, when her father criticized her, she defended herself saying, “They say it’s okay to do it,” he replied: “Who is They?”

Such a cultural life was at odds at first. “I literally saw Chapel Hill from the other side of the tracks.” she said. She also saw it exploring on her bicycle. It was the 40s, the time for girls’ nicey nicey behavior, white gloves, and saddle shoes. On graduation from high school a lady gave her a book autographing it: “Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.” Daphne thought “Why should I have to be good and not be clever?” By hook or crook she swore she would finish University in 3 years and become a writer. Chapel Hill was small then and very democratic and

the Reading Room of Wilson Library was her hangout. After college she went to Harvard School of Education and spent a year typing in the Office of War Information, leaving for Europe in 1952 where she wrote every day and worked for the U.S. Air Force.

After returning to Chapel Hill in 1968, having published three novels, *Weather of the Heart* (1947), *The Fourth World* (1956), and *Entering Ephesus* (1971), she got a job teaching writing at UNC. When asked to teach a course in Stylistics, she decided to experiment. Grammar had been dropped from U.S. High Schools in the 60s, so she gave exercises in parts of speech, types of sentences, and fake language like the coded notes she and a boy friend wrote secretly behind the teacher's back in high school. Halfway through the experiment, she realized students should read their best writing aloud in a live show. It turned into a sensation. So she wrote a mischievous grammar called *Glossolalia* which morphed over the years, was taught, edited, and piloted by colleague, Marianne Gingham into the digital age. Renamed *Gram-O-Rama* and published in 2009, it has become a perpetual seller and yearly class spectacle which anybody can watch on *You Tube*.

When asked what direction Chapel Hill should go in the future Daphne responds: "It's anybody's guess to answer realistically when facts are worshipped but not understood, and money controls development. It's time to take Willie Loman's wife seriously in *Death of a Salesman*, when she says 'Attention Must Be Paid'. I add: To History, to Words' Meanings and to Ecology'."