

# Athas breeds no illusions

by Warren Rochelle  
Staff Writer

Chapel Hill seems to breed the literati and les artistes. Some come here, some go to school here, others are born here and others grow up here. Daphne Athas is one of the latter—she grew up in Chapel Hill and has stayed, writing and teaching, with occasional travels to Greece or Russia or Iran.

Daphne Athas is a gentlespoken woman, her clothes are warm, comfortable colors. She often uses her hands to under-score her words.

She has no illusions about the teaching

aspiring writer? Very simply.

"I think I would just tell them to write. I would say doing is most of it. Dedication is what counts but I don't mean dedicated on the outside. Either you're dedicated or you're not."

Many writers, especially Southerners, see themselves as part of a literary tradition, a genre. Daphne Athas does not. She wears no labels such as Southern woman writer.

"I don't see myself as part of a literary tradition," Daphne said. "I think there are certain advantages of feeling of being in one. I wouldn't mind being attached to one, but I've never been attached and never presumed

boy, Bostwick. The novel shows a dichotomy, Daphne said, which is still present in Chapel Hill.

"Carrboro (Haw in *Entering Ephesus*) was and is looked down on. Kids who didn't have university connections; there was definitely a large schism. When I was here, it wasn't so big and there weren't as many people who didn't have an idea of real life as there are now."

Now, though, Daphne is well into another novel, one she has spent a lot of time on, "but it's because I haven't had time to work, a cramfilled year, last year. But it's around the corner and is going into the homestretch."

This novel has a much larger scope than *Entering Ephesus*. "It has international overtones, but no international spies," Daphne said laughing, "I'm interested in the psyche of the people, the business of cause and effect. One of the problems in this particular work is what the universe is. Do you conjure your own universe or is it something over which you have no control."

Daphne is against national provincialism and this is also part of the novel. "We can't be national much longer. I like to be local and international and all of it is to be purely an individual's psyche."

In her own life, Daphne has lived up to being local and international. She spent part of the last year and a half teaching American literature on a Fulbright grant at Teheran University and traveling in Russia.

"I had quite a few adventures," she said. "I went swimming at 14° below. I went to Tolstoi's home in Moscow." Russia, to her, was very different from America. She described the country as very silent, "you're stepping back about fifty years. There's so much to be gained by that."

Daphne travelled in a tour group, meeting a varied lot of people. "There was one man who was looking for trouble. That is what he related to, trouble."

"He was a painting contractor," Daphne said, leaning back in her chair to begin the

*'I need to make a living. I like teaching — it's a job that I know actually fits into writing well.'*

profession though she does enjoy it. "I need to make a living. I like teaching—it's a job that I know actually fits into writing well." That is part of the crux of teaching to Daphne Athas, its meshing with writing. "It's about writing, it's about literature. It's something where you are working on forms, which is what you do when you write." Then, there is the rest of the crux, the people she teaches—"when you write, it's not in opposition to, it's dealing with people—"

She does not try to teach someone how to write, rather she helps students grow in the craft of writing. "Teaching creative writing begets a lot of problems," Daphne said, her glasses touching her lips. "It can be done in a million different ways and every teacher, if they're any good, is absolutely different from another teacher, with some overlapping."

How would Daphne encourage an

to be." A different genre for each book is her self-expressed literary tradition.

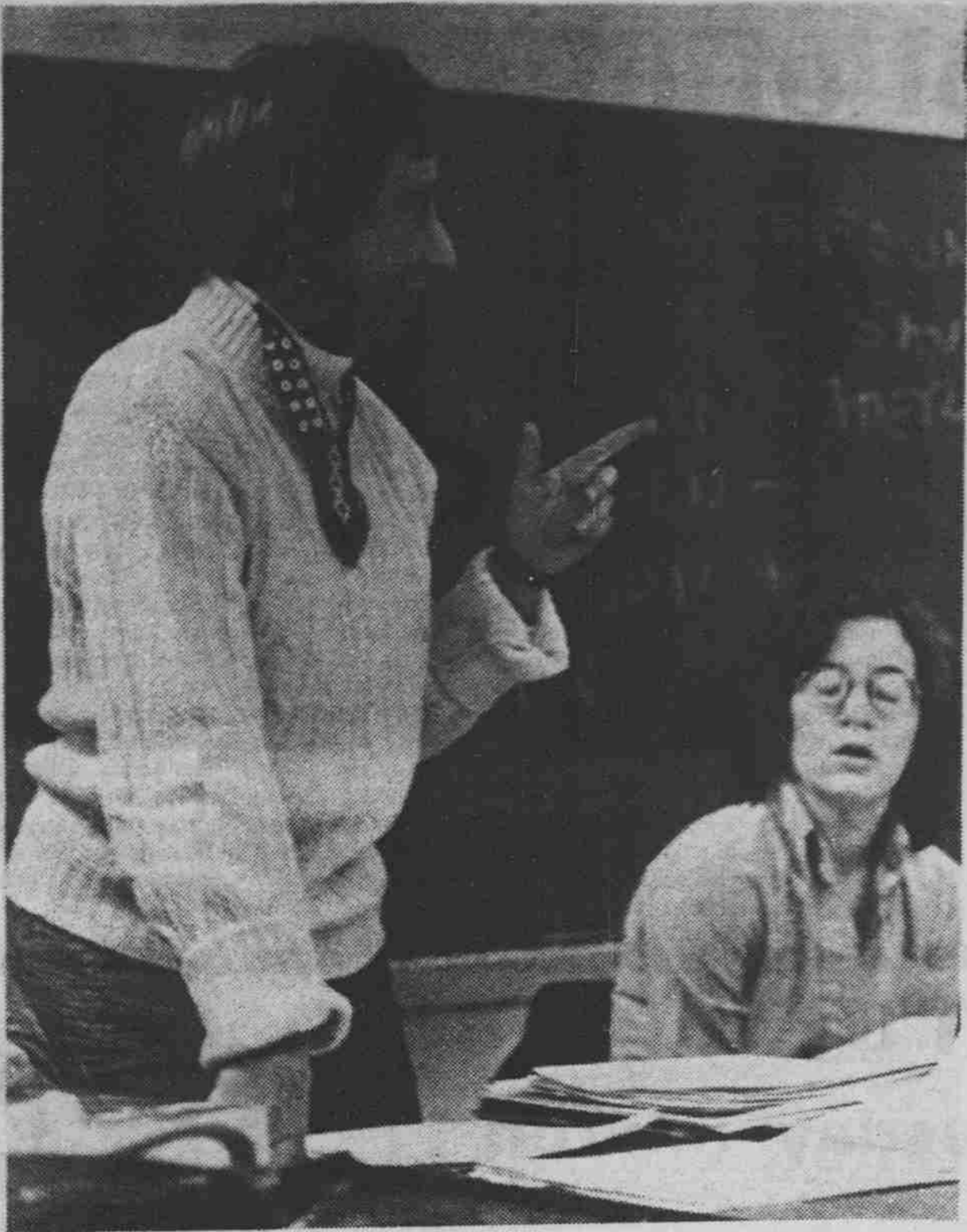
This non-attachment echoes from Daphne's childhood, growing up in Chapel Hill. She went to high school, "the old high school that burned."

"In high school, I didn't belong to any recognizable group and I had wished I had. It makes things easier."

Daphne wrote of this Chapel Hill in what some have said is an autobiographical novel, *Entering Ephesus*.

Chapel Hill now is a little different from the Chapel Hill in *Entering Ephesus*, but you can still enter Chapel Hill on Ephesus Church Road, passing Ephesus Church.

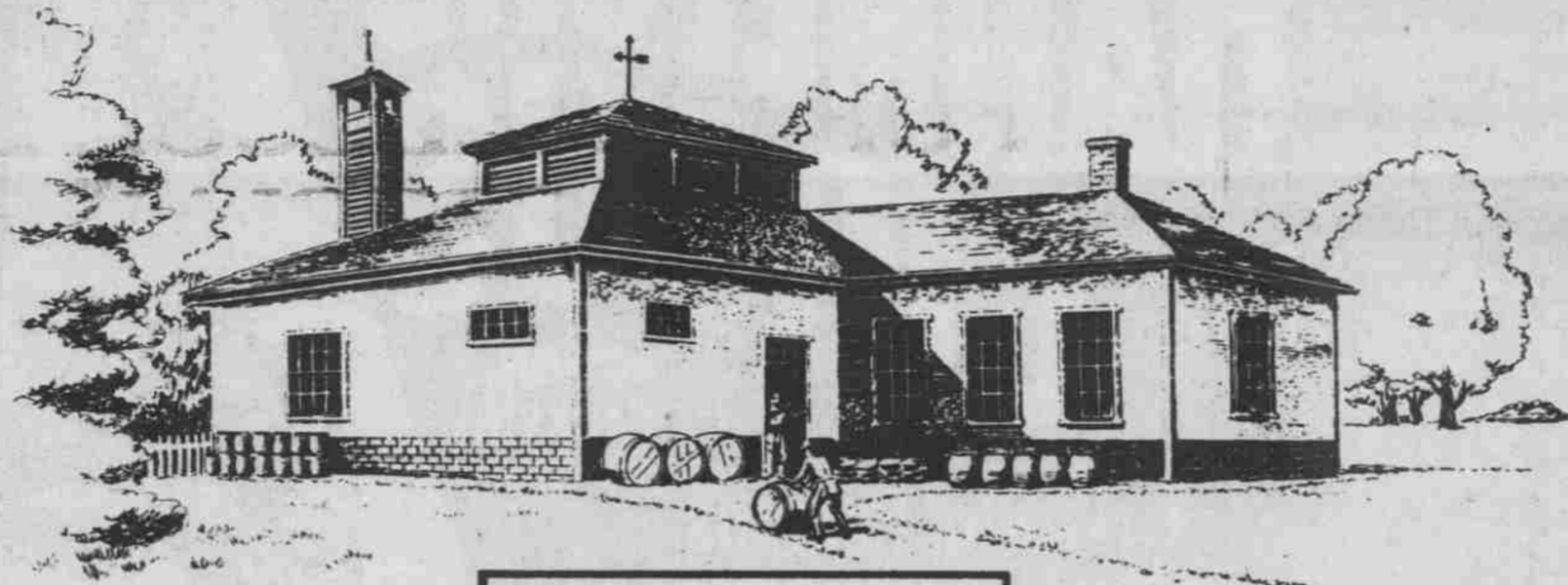
*Entering Ephesus* is the story of the Bishop family, P.Q., Mrs. Bishop, Urie, Loco Poco, Irene and their growth in the town, the people they meet, Zebu, the Haw-marked



Staff photo by Martha Stevens.

"Either you're dedicated or you're not," Daphne Athas advises a writing class. An aspiring author ponders her future in light of these words.

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story. "Kansas City, Missouri, who was a slob. Looked like Paul Newman but a slob. He had a wife who was West Virginia mining up from nothing. Pretty, but a bitch."

She went on to tell the man's exploits in Russia, describing him in even more precise terms. "He was down with niggers, damn people on welfare, very much Middle America helps selsy Horatio Alger. He was spoiling for adventure and trouble." The man got it, arrested in Kiev after a drunken brawl with a taxi driver over a girl.

Daphne's other travels, Greece, India, have given her a different perspective on people and America.

"In Calcutta," she said, "you see people like swarms, like maggots."

This is a reality of people and their existence that is not present in America. "You come to America, and you don't get that at all. You come to America and there are no people at all. You never see people on the streets. They're in the house, watching TV. A silent country that has empty streets. You think: where are the people, where is the life?"

Everything pretty much said, Daphne then leaned over and seeing that the tape recorder was off, added: "You need some good quotable stuff. I hope I've given you some."

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