

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DJ DONALDSON, AUTHOR OF "ASSASSINATION AT BAYOU SAUVAGE"

 AUGUST 29, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thanks for doing this interview, Don, and congratulations on the publication of your latest in the Andy Broussard mystery series, *Assassination at Bayou Sauvage*. How has this series developed over the years?

DD: The first book, *Cajun Nights*, was a very strange story, partially because the editor at St. Martins, who ultimately bought it, asked me to write a "creepier" ending than what I initially provided. The result was a blend of stark science brought hard up against elements of the paranormal. This combination, which was apparently viewed as fresh and different, caused a reviewer in *Booklist* to say, "We close this remarkable, intoxicating book like a first-time visitor leaves New Orleans: giddy, a bit disoriented and much less confident in our own assumptions about life."

Now that's a pretty good review. But, being from a science background, I felt self-conscious about relying so much on paranormal possibilities to fuel the story. So, in the next book, while there was still a bit of a paranormal feel to the tale, the resolution of the mystery was entirely anchored in reality.

In the third book and all those thereafter, the stories are firmly based on real forensic science with only a *hint* of the paranormal appearing in the form of Grandma Oustellette, the big Cajun woman who owns the restaurant where my main character, Chief Medical Examiner, Andy Broussard, eats at least one meal a day. Grandma O has "premonitions" that always come true. If she tells Broussard something is about to happen, he listens, even though he doesn't understand how this works.

AM: What is your science background?

DD: I have a PhD in anatomy from the Tulane Medical School in New Orleans. After graduate school, I become an anatomy instructor and eventually, full professor of anatomy at the U. of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis. For over 40 years there, I taught Microscopic Anatomy to freshman medical and dental students, and conducted an active research program in wound healing.

AM: There's a lot of talk about competition between science and the humanities these days. And yet you've managed to bridge the divide.

DD: Maybe all that means is that the "divide" is more apparent than real. Or you're giving me more credit than I deserve. I'm simply telling stories that arise out of my science background. I haven't left my formal training and experience behind by becoming a novelist. I'm just making use of it in a somewhat non-traditional way. But thanks for the



DJ Donaldson

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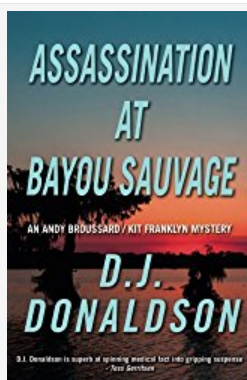
AM: Let's turn back to the novel. The catalyst for the twists and turns of plot is the murder of Andy's uncle, Joe. I want to avoid spoilers in this interview, so let me put the question this way: how do you craft the narrative surprises? Do you map out Andy's story beforehand, or do you just write and hope the storyline develops as you go?

DD: In each of my books there's a central idea I want to write about. Usually, it's some interesting medical issue that I've spent a lot of time researching. The one at the heart of this story required me to construct an extensive family tree for my main character, Andy Broussard, including the sex, name, and age of about 50 people. This work falls into the category of preproduction. I believe it's also important in each story to make sure my two main characters change in some way as a result of what happens to them. I typically have a good idea of what these little character arcs will entail before I start writing.

From this point, I'd compare my process to a family taking a car trip from Steubenville, Ohio, to the Grand Canyon. These folks obviously know all about their starting point and have a fairly good idea what their destination will look like. Along the way they plan to stop at the biggest Lego-brick dinosaur on earth. Additionally, they want to see the planet's largest sweater collection woven from belly-button lint. Beyond that, they'll keep their eyes open along the way for signs advertising other attractions of interest. Might even be willing to go a few miles out of the way for a really compelling sight.

Sitting at the keyboard, ready to begin this book, I could see the opening scene clearly and knew exactly what was going on behind the scene. That knowledge carried me through the first six chapters. Like the family from Steubenville, I knew a couple of other stops I wanted to make on my way to the big finale, but unlike that family, I didn't know how to get there.

Once I have a story rolling, it's mostly a matter of figuring out the next logical step, always keeping in mind that I need some misdirection as I go, a few surprises, a little humor, and whatever character arcs I've decided on. If you're thinking to yourself that this approach relies on a good bit of luck to succeed, I'd agree. But somehow, it always works out.



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AM: You could also say that about Andy's sleuthing, right? A little bit of luck here and there, and it always works out.

DD: I'm sorry, but I can't accept the suggestion that a scattering of lucky events explains how Broussard is able to have such a great influence on the resolution of his cases. That notion is contrary to everything he stands for. Broussard is an emotionally flawed intellectual that through his great knowledge and perceptive abilities can see things at murder scenes others can't. He's also able to assemble apparently disparate facts into a meaningful pattern that ultimately leads to the culprit. Luck? I think not.

AM: Okay, so luck isn't a part of it. But what do you think makes Andy so knowledgeable and perceptive? Is that just the way he is, or did he learn and earn his skills?

DD: His high IQ is genetic. His parents were reasonably intelligent people, but gave no outward indication they could produce something like him. That's the beauty of genetics: the recombination of hidden traits can sometimes produce wondrous surprises. That's not to say his abilities can be traced to a single golden gene. They reflect a myriad of combinations that, though highly unlikely to occur in one individual, give him various skills that together make him an extremely rare bird. And as you suggest in the latter part of your question, some of these skills made him a more intense student than most. But as I've mentioned earlier, that DNA shuffle left him holding a very poor hand when it comes to outward expressions of affection.

AM: You sometimes talk about Andy as if he's a real person.

DD: I like to think that even now as I'm typing this, he and the rest of the gang are going about their lives in New Orleans and that I merely report on their adventures from time to time as I learn what they've been doing. It helps me make them real to my readers. Maybe I need a CT scan.

AM: Do you and Andy get along? Do you ever find him pulling one way while you want him to go another?

DD: I never have any problems with him. But I sometimes don't agree with Andy's death-

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investigator sidekick, Kit Franklyn, and her alligator farmer boyfriend, Teddy LaBiche, as they try to advance their relationship. The best course would be for Teddy to continue living a few hours from New Orleans in the little town near his alligator farm. I keep telling Kit that if he moves to New Orleans and they start living together, he's just going to be underfoot and interfere with her work. If he stays where he is, he can still be available whenever she needs him. But you know Kit... headstrong, impulsive...I don't know what else to say to her.

AM: After this interview I have no doubt we'll be seeing more of Andy in the future.

DD: Grandma Oustellette, the big Cajun woman who runs Andy's favorite restaurant, once told him, "Life don't always care about when *you* wanna do things." Keeping that in mind, I will say that after so many years with Andy, it would be hard to say goodbye.

AM: Well, it's hard for me to say goodbye to you after this interview, but I'm afraid I must. Please give Andy my regards.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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