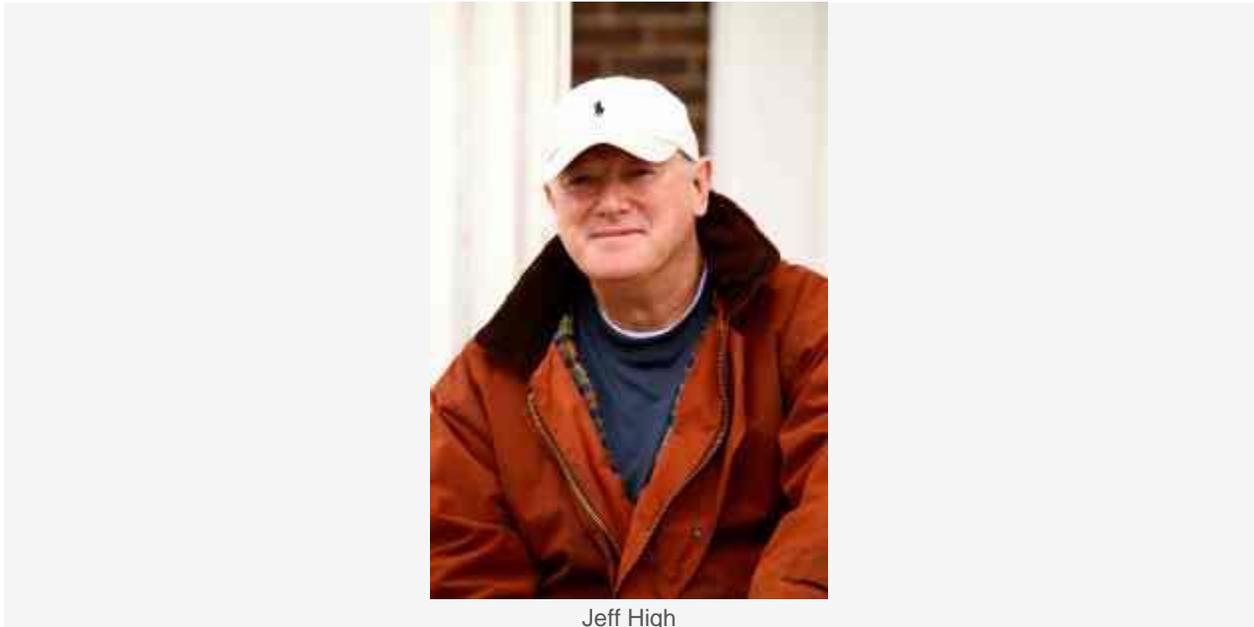


SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JEFF HIGH, AUTHOR OF “MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH”

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Jeff High

AM: Thank you for doing this interview, Jeff, and let me just say that I enjoyed your novel, which represents the best of literary fiction—Southern style. I’d like to jump right into the interview the way you jumped right into the opening scene of the book, the scene with the Code Blue and the seemingly supernatural revival of Hoot, a big fella who goes into a cardiac arrest. Why did you begin with this scene? My guess is, your decision had something to do with the title of the book that’s drawn from Hamlet’s line: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Might there have been more things in Watervalley than your medically trained protagonist could have dreamt of in his Vanderbilt schooling?

JH: Your question points a central theme in the book. While clearly *More Things in Heaven and Earth* can be enjoyed on the surface as light-hearted fiction, there are some definitive thematic and theological elements working in the substrata. Some reviews have endeavored to pigeonhole the work as “feel good” fiction. Certainly, it has that quality. But I am delighted that *Southern Literary Review* has insightfully noticed the powerful themes that are subtly and regularly earmarked in the language. As an example, in the opening pages, Luke Bradford, as the narrator, makes the statement, “So in the back of your head is this scared whisper nagging at you, reminding you that you will make the difference between some guy staying alive and an awkward conversation with the family about how ‘it was just his time.’”

The words “reminding you that you will make the difference” understate Luke’s assumption that he is the center of the universe...it is he who brings order to the world. At least, so he thinks, at the first of the novel. However, Hoot’s miraculous turnaround had nothing to do with Luke, and he, Luke, knows it. He acknowledges this when he states, “But this is Watervalley, and things like a Code Blue happen differently. They don’t follow the normal order.”

This sets in motion the underlying conflict that Luke wrestles with the entire story. The resolution of this occurs in the final chapter where he states, “At that moment I fully realized the importance of my life here. There was a larger agenda at work in the town that transcended my small plans and gave my life here a significance it would not otherwise have.” For Luke, this is the “more things in heaven and earth” revelation. The language in the novel continuously speaks to the themes of “order versus disorder” and “darkness versus light.”

As an example, Connie Thompson and John Harris are emblematic of the influences of light and darkness on Luke’s journey. This is not so subtly revealed as John gives Luke an apple on their first encounter. As well, Connie appears judgmental at first. But eventually the story reveals that she is actually an endless wellspring of love and strength. In the end, John’s self made world is crumbling, and he longs to be close to the distant lights of Watervalley. Conversely, Connie is the enduring force, the permeating glue that holds Luke’s world and the world of Watervalley together. If the reader is mindful of these thematic drivers and how they echo the internal conflict of Luke’s journey, they provide for an enriched reading experience.

On a side note, the Hoot Wilson episode is based on a true story from my medical experience. Hospital staff coded this guy in his ICU room for a half hour, all to no avail. He was flat-line dead. Afterwards, his family was allowed in the room and his daughter squeezed his foot and told him not to go yet. That man is alive today. It still gives me chills when I think about it.

AM: That gives me chills as well, and the good kind. I’m curious about your decision to include a prelude and postlude that, it seems, are from the perspective of some omniscient, third-person narrator. The rest of the book, of course, is from the perspective of Luke Bradford, a young doctor who has given up big dreams to move to Watervalley to pay off \$200,000 in student debt. When and why did you decide to include the prelude and postlude?

JH: The prelude and postlude were part of the original concept of the book. The intention of the prelude was to trace the journey of something as insignificant as a single drop of water. Thus, the prelude poses the simple question: Is this world random or is there a larger order that animates the universe?

Clearly, the drop of water is allegorical for the journey of Luke Bradford. This is particularly notable in the phrases “it is cleansed from the impurities of the world behind” and “but time and pressure pull it downward toward the valley.” Luke’s trials are part of his cleansing, his sanctification, if you will. And the effect of “time and pressure” underscores the larger plan into which his life is inevitably drawn.

The postlude brings the drop of water metaphor full circle. Luke is now at peace with his place in the world and understands his role in the larger tapestry of life in Watervalley. At journey's end, he finds himself moved and consoled. Appropriately, the final sentence in the book shows him in a supplicant posture, looking up to the heavens with an upturned palm. He is holding a snowflake, a unique creation that is emblematic of Luke's unique life, his unique pilgrimage. Warmed by his touch, it now turns into a drop of water.

AM: That is a beautiful image. Let's forget, for just a minute, what the no-longer-new New Critics said almost a century ago. How much of your background—Southern, medical, educational—made its way into the novel in some form or another? Is there a little bit of Jeff High inside Luke Bradford?

JH: Being a son of the South and an RN definitely informed the story, but the novel is truly not autobiographical. My family has always placed great value on education. My mother was Valedictorian of her high school class, my father had a Ph.D. in genetics, my three brothers include a physician, a tax-lawyer, and a veterinarian, and I have degrees in English and nursing. Altogether, we have more degrees than Fahrenheit.

I probably do share some of the introvert tendencies of Luke Bradford, but the real confession is that John Horatio Harris is most likely a close alter ego. (My initials are JHH.) I tend to be an optimist. However, I also have those days where I can be rather cynical, and the voice of John Harris seems to pour out naturally.

AM: Elsewhere you have said that Connie Thompson is your favorite character in the book. Would you say more about that?

JH: The beautiful thing about Connie Thompson is that the reader is completely convinced that she is the real thing. Even if you have absolutely no use for Christianity and organized church, you still love her. You love her because she lives out her convictions of service and humility without ever being anybody's fool. And also, she just gets to say the best lines.

AM: *More Things in Heaven and Earth* is the first in a series. Do you see Watervalley, the so-called "dropping-off point of God and all creation," as your own little Yoknapatawpha? What might we expect for the future of this town?

JH: Watervalley provides a unique microcosm from which I have a long, long list of stories to tell. I highly suspect there will be several more books about Luke Bradford, but there is also a great opportunity down the road to tell fascinating back-stories, especially about the lives of John Harris and Connie Thompson. In the pages ahead, there will be a new owner of the Society Hill Bed and Breakfast who comes to town with her teenager. She will make an appearance in my next book, *Each Shining Hour*, and I suspect there will be some stories to tell about her experiences. I intend to write about Watervalley for many, many years.

AM: I'm sure that comes as good news to readers of this first installment. Okay, one last question. All authors struggle to see their manuscript through to print. There's the process of writing and revising, of seeking out the opinions of friends and colleagues, of finding an agent and editor, and so on. I'll put a broad question to you: What was it all like? How did you cope? What might you recommend to readers who are at that stage?

JH: I am convinced that my arrival as a published author was ecclesiastical, involving what appeared to be chance, but actually happening in the fullness of time. For over three decades I quietly wrote stories, read voraciously, and daydreamed about being published. But I never sought publication until I had written *More Things in Heaven and Earth*. This was the first work in which I seriously pursued an agent and publisher. I was fortunate. Attaining a contract happened within a few months.

It was a good piece of writing, but it was made infinitely better by my editor, Ellen Edwards at Penguin. Look, I'm a Southern boy. And I never would have guessed that a tough and talented Connecticut Yankee, my editor, would be the key to bringing my tales of small town Southern life to print. But thankfully, she saw a spark of possibility in the early manuscript and has been invaluable in the refinement of the story.

My advice to anyone seeking publication is threefold. Write about what you know; write about what you believe; and then rewrite it. I am an incurable revisionist. I constantly edit, redo, and rewrite, looking for that perfect word, that perfect sentence. I casually wrote for three decades before I thought I had something worthy of casting my bread upon the water.

Once you have done this, it is wise to network. Although it can be painful, you have to put yourself out there and tell your story. I realize that this advice comes as no big revelation. But then again, as I mentioned earlier, much about writing is ecclesiastical; there's nothing new under the sun. But there are always new stories to tell about the enduring truths of the human experience.

AM: Amen to that. Thank you again, Jeff, for taking the time. *Southern Literary Review* looks forward to more work from you.

JH: And thank you, so very much, for this opportunity.

Click [here](#) to read Donna Meredith's review of *More Things in Heaven and Earth*.

Click [here](#) to purchase this book:

