

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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[ABOUT](#)
[SUBMISSIONS](#)
[BOOKSTORE](#)
[CONTENTS](#)
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AUGUST 14, 2015

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)
[READ OF THE MONTH](#)
[AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#)
[CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS](#)
[MISCELLANEOUS](#)
[NEWS & EVENTS](#)

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Lindsay Parnell, Author of Dogwood

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS LINDSAY PARNELL, AUTHOR OF DOGWOOD

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AM: Thanks for taking the time to talk to *Southern Literary Review* about your novel, *Dogwood*. This is a remarkable and poignant book, literary fiction at its finest. You toy with stream-of-consciousness and alternating narration in the book. Why?

LP: The articulation of Harper's journey and the journey itself are irreversibly fused together. Harper's story is one of becoming, one that is bruised with digressions, but it still is rooted in the evolution of female identity and voice. Structure and content married early on in my drafting; her narrative very much showed and spoke for itself so I feel incredibly lucky. Looking back I don't think there was any other way for her story to be told. I think to present Harper's story in a more linear way, both in time frame and perspective, would be a manipulation and disservice to her act of storytelling. Harper's voice and corresponding narrative structure were birthed at the intersection of two of my favorite declarations: "...it takes a story to make a story," Flannery O'Connor, and "...one can confess and lie forever," Anne Sexton.



Lindsay Parnell

I think *Dogwood* is largely defined by Harper's often-chaotic recreation and rebuilding of ricocheting memories. Stream-of-consciousness and alternating narration both serve Harper's telling by allowing her act of telling to mirror the content of her telling. She initiates a highly considered resurrection of stories and voices chosen for her to speak in the now, and to Job. By anchoring her telling in the reconstructed memories, the reader is prompted to immediately challenge Harper's truth and authenticity as a storyteller. She struggles to articulate her history and her reality, but by her own admission, she speaks a selective truth at best. She declares herself a liar repeatedly, calling into question the "legitimacy" of her recalled incidents. Yet as a storyteller, she is plagued with lapses of self-loathing. She doesn't want to be saved. A general sense of bedlam infects her memories and in recreating these experiences, which are predominately embedded in violence, anger and confusion, the accuracy of such tellings is threatened. In turn, Harper often employs language as a defensive assault, particularly in manic episodes where narration slips from distant third to first and are unpunctuated and unbreaking and interrogating the boundaries of her speech. She's dismantling the experience itself. I hoped to bring Harper's acts of written and spoken confession to closely mirror the



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experience of reading the book itself, one which is often wrought with disorder and perpetual movement.

Employing stream-of-consciousness as Harper's mode of narrative also fosters the use of dialect. For me speech and voice are the cornerstones of text which I'm most drawn to and excited by. Throughout revisions the dialect has remained untouched. I didn't want anything in the text to be sanitized. I wanted the way these characters spoke and the things of which they spoke of to embody both lyrical cadence and a sense of decay. Harper's story necessitates language and speech that is cyclical and repetitive but able to refute, lie and contradict itself. Language itself alongside the rhythm and pacing of Caro and Harper and Collier's voices needed to imitate their collective physicality as well. Speech and the female body are interconnected in Harper's story; I believe the sprawling nature of stream-of-consciousness supports such a union.

AM: Your writing has been compared to that of Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. What do you think of this comparison?

LP: I think it's exponentially generous. I desperately chase them both. The components of literature that excite, stimulate and challenge me are all anchored in their canons. For me there are no others who speak the gospel of craft and story and voice as they do, *Wisblood* and *Light in August* particularly. I believe they write with an unmatched depth and potency of language while defying all narrative limitations. They're courageous. They write with purpose and conviction, they are titans not only of Southern artists but of American Literature.

I think O'Connor's *A Prayer Journal* has recently become one of my favorite texts on writing. It's as stirring and redemptive as her fiction. Just pages and pages of profound meditations on her process, faith as related to her artistic endeavor and frustrations, and uncertainty about her ability to write. I found this particular aspect astounding – that she would possess such doubt. I look to her and Faulkner constantly, to be inspired, to learn, to covet, to devour and to escape.

I very much hope that my fiction honors those whose work is imprinted upon me.

AM: Is it fair to say that the most important relationships in *Dogwood* are between women?

LP: Absolutely – the book's concentrated focus is cast onto the stories, voices and silence of women. Caro and Harper and Collier are bound together and at times seem to exist for each other. They share an intensely complicated history and Harper's unforeseen departure fractures their unifying relationship as a whole. They believe individually that their existence and voice are contingent on the presence and strength of the others. I think they all possess the empty notion that everything will fall into place upon the return of Harper, that somehow her presence as the crux of this trio will save them. I find that there is a great complexity to the overarching relationship of the three. They are as violent as they are deeply affectionate towards one another. Violence and what they believe to be outward expressions of love are tightly intertwined, I don't think they are able clearly distinguish between the two. I believe that Harper assumes responsibility for the welfare of Collier and Caro both and, in turn, they both rely on her fully for protection and love. Yet, following her homecoming, Harper must discard the notion of trying to "save" their trifecta because she cannot save herself, an idea that she often transfers onto Caro, and she must accept this as one of her greatest failures. Because of this failure, Harper is haunted by the voices of her childhood and adolescence, voices that finally move her to action, to script a history, a warning which will save other girls.

The trio of Caro and Harper and Collier are the driving force of the novel but I think it was critical to include the peripheral presence of women who would challenge and shape them into being. It was very important for me to feature relationships between women who have been largely omitted from literature. They aren't debutantes or socialites. They are deeply flawed but they are women of strength and resilience. They are loyal to a fault but they are cursed, and so they curse. They assault and are assaulted. They are bruised but never broken. I wanted the varying relationships between these female characters to highlight the complexity of their identities.

I also wanted to explore the idea of inheritance through Harper, which is why it was imperative to me to present her relationship with Luce through a lens of desertion and neglect. There is a hero worship which Caro and Harper and Collier employ in regards to Luce, specifically during their childhood as they stand witness to Luce's performative femaleness. But in Harper's adulthood, Luce is a ghost of

[Author Profiles & Interviews](#) (95)

[Book Reviews](#) (245)

[Conferences and Festivals](#) (36)

[Contributors' Bios](#) (62)

[Essays](#) (7)

[General](#) (7)

[Grants and Contests](#) (16)

[News & Events](#) (74)

[Read of the Month](#) (78)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

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[Select Month](#)

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[Contributor](#) [Donna](#)

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[Interview](#) [Julie Cantrell](#) [Karen White](#)

[Louisiana](#) [Mississippi](#) [Neil White](#)

[New Orleans](#) [nonfiction](#) [North](#)

[Carolina](#) [novel](#) [Oxford](#) [Patricia](#)

[O'Sullivan](#) [Philip K. Jason](#) [Poetry](#)

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[Stories](#) [SLR](#) [South Carolina](#)

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[Review](#) [Southern Literature](#)

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pain, violence and longing. Caro and Harper and Collier are their Mothers' daughters, their greatest blessing and greatest curse.

AM: Who is Harper Haley?

LP: I believe that Harper defines herself by the events in which she has experienced, endured and ignited, but she remains uncertain to her place in the world in the absence of her Mother. She's quick to call herself a prisoner, a liar, a sinner, an addict, but greatly delayed in employing an "I" in voice and in action. She's been orphaned, incarcerated, isolated and abandoned and these states are only intensified following her release from prison. Upon returning home Harper exists in a state of arrested development. She's stagnant in her "now" becoming, physically, emotionally and otherwise, and becomes enveloped in the blind loyalty to the emotional binds of her childhood, a love birth from shared history with Caro and Collier.

I never wanted to reduce Harper to a clearly definable character but the South breeds sin, storytellers and contradiction. She's deeply damaged and she's damned. She's as resilient as she is confused. She's buoyant and she's tenacious but she often succumbs to temptation. She's boundless but also still imprisoned. She is everything her Mother is and is not. Harper not only creates the mythology of her Mother but further solidifies it in her active participation of reverence and worship.

Harper is largely silence and, ultimately, well delayed in claiming a voice asserting an "I." As a woman she has been denied a voice, so I wanted to execute duplicity in narrative – the intentional act of claiming her own history and voice in written letters, and the emotionally distant tellings and recreations of her past. But even in speech she still adheres to a silencing, she chooses to write Job a letter in place of relaying her words on the telephone or in person. However, she's scribing a history of the women who haunt her; she's writing them into a tradition that predominantly rejects them. They speak to and through her. Harper cannot exist without the voices of Caro and Collier, Luce and Tillie, Sister Paul. Harper haunted me as much as she was haunted by the women who raised her.

One of the definitive reasons Harper even exists is because someone told me her story and voice were important. That Harper should breathe and speak the truth of her reality. Studying feminist narrative with Heidi James was beyond an education. I feel like she taught me to read as an adult. She gifted me Lynne Tillman and Kathy Acker and Angela Carter and Lydia Lunch. Heidi's own fiction is beyond instrumental in my own creative practice, and it would be a gross understatement to say that she greatly inspires my work.

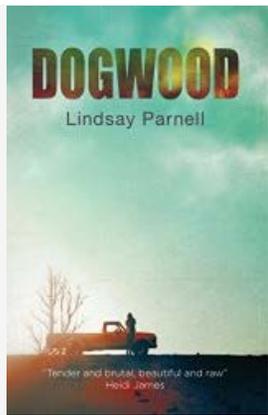
AM: So you own 13 editions of *The Bell Jar* and you're happy to share a birthday with Meryl Streep. What's that about?

LP: *The Bell Jar* is one of my favorites and shortly after my first reading I wanted to own Esther Greenwood in all her published forms, so I began collecting various editions. I'm desperate for one of the few Victoria Lucas copies, as most are. I've collected a handful of *Ariel* and a couple of *Johnny Panic* but Esther and Doreen lead always.

Meryl Streep is easily one of my favorite humans. I believe she is an artist with one of the most accomplished and diverse canons across all creative mediums. Her depictions of female characters have largely shaped the voices and characters that I want to breathe life into: flawed and strong and convoluted and daring. The roles she occupies speak with conviction and passion and imagination, inhabiting heroine and villain alike, all the while conveying boundless compassion. Her roster of films is one that is built from the voices and stories of women. Also, Meryl Streep is just really fucking brilliant. I'm going to watch *Doubt* in like 15 minutes because I can't not.

AM: I agree with you about Meryl Streep. She's one of my favorites. You completed *Dogwood* in your twenties. You're still in your twenties. Not many novelists these days publish their first book before they reach 30. What was your childhood like? Were you a reader, a writer?

LP: I'm obscenely lucky to have been raised in a home where stories and the voices that tell them are not only valued but encouraged. I



[Click here to purchase Dogwood](#)

realized very recently that such a household can be a rarity. My parents have always emphasized the importance of words and storytelling. They're both passionate learners, so reading was something in our home that was a joyful and intimate act. It still is.

My mother and father are feminists who love words and are driven by faith. I couldn't have asked for more.

AM: There's something biblical about your novel, no?

LP: Absolutely. Many of the fictional texts I'm drawn to are very deeply rooted in Biblical narrative and language, whether it is within the continuance of tradition or an interrogation of ritual. Specifically, O'Connor, Faulkner, Dorothy Allison and Harry Crews. I've read *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Feast of Snakes* more times than I can count because of this.

I find Biblical narrative an integral component of the fiction, poetry, visual art and music created in the South, it's woven into the fabric of Southern storytelling. I'm quite fixated on narrative interpretations of temptation, sin and guilt. O'Connor said, "drama is birthed from original sin." I couldn't be more jealous of such an expression, or know an observance of narrative more true. I think, especially with women, overarching notions of sin and guilt can be instilled very early on, and subsequently, breed a shame of the body, mind and spirit which is a dangerous assault of identity.

I think that there exists a perverse discipleship of sorts existing between Caro and Harper and Collier. But even then, they are the abject so they are rejected. Sinners because they sin and sinners because their Mothers are. They are women who have fallen from grace but seek no redemption, they are proud and they are damned. I think the most explicit references to Biblical narrative and Christian tradition is Harper's assertion that she reads the Bible but it still remains a book of men written by men. By writing her experiences to Job, she is claiming a history, writing herself into the very silence imposed onto her; she is amplifying her chosen voice.

AM: What do you do now, besides write?

LP: I've had various "professional" stints over the past couple of years. Mediocre tutor and nanny, lazy bartender and waitress, average Editorial subordinate of medical textbooks and most recently, assistant at an Immigration Law firm. It was unexpected but is work that is shaping my current fiction and, hopefully, will continue to challenge and push me forward. The attorney I work for has become such a strong presence in my process and collaborating with her on a daily basis has allowed me to explicitly evaluate how and why I write and read the way I do. I never expected to find that type of reflection in work so far removed from fiction, ignorantly so. Working alongside her has illuminated narrative and language in a way that is redirecting my fiction and broadening my understanding of craft entirely. She has a stunning command of language and I hope very selfishly that it's contagious.

I also play a number of ukulele Amy Winehouse covers, so there's that as well. I do the Roots too, and very occasionally, Edith Piaf.

AM: I won't ask for your thoughts on the recent Amy Winehouse documentary. I take it you plan to write more novels?

LP: Shortly after *Dogwood* went to the printer I returned to short form both in reading and drafting. Angela Carter, Ann Beattie, JT Leroy and Carson McCullers, especially. Sprinting in this way I think was really beneficial in preparing for a new project. I've been drafting longhand notes for a novel for the past few years so I'm now desperate to find the courage to sit down and begin typing. As *Dogwood* is focused on a homecoming, I'm excited to pursue an exodus. This one follows the

runaway daughter of a miner, a Korean War veteran, and a Stella Adler School dropout. I can't shake off trifectas at the moment.

AM: Your book is set in the South. You were raised in Virginia. As I sit here the television is flashing with images of the Confederate flag and debates about its removal from public spaces. What does the South mean to you?

LP: I think the South is largely defined and simultaneously plagued by its contradictions, ones that tragically violate and silence members of its own population. It's an empire splintering with long set fractures, and is somehow simultaneously haunted by its past and present. I believe that to not only enable the existence of such divisions, but also to celebrate them, will not only perpetuate intolerant breaks, but also continue to silence, violently oppress and threaten lives.

Amidst turmoil, the South still thrives in tradition and in practice with storytellers and artists who are progressive, fearless, and exhilarating. Ones who challenge symbols of hatred and ones whose resilience, strength and survival prevail against adversity. *The Bluest Eye*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Fay* all interrogate as fiercely as they resurrect the voices of those silenced. Southern artists pulse with voices unspoken, breathing poetry into those who cannot speak themselves.

AM: Thank you for doing this interview. I hope we cross paths again in the future.

LP: Cheers, Allen!

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