

RED TRUCK REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF AMERICAN SOUTHERN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Allen Mendenhall, J.D.



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Conversation: Editing Southern Literary Review, Lawyering, Writing, Prison Education, and Living Southern

ASW: Thank you, Allen, for taking time out of your schedule to visit with *The Truck* about your work. You wear many hats—you are an attorney, writer, adjunct law school professor, and you have taught literature in a penitentiary. You are also Managing Editor of *Southern Literary Review*. Would you begin by providing us with an overview of *Southern Literary Review*?

Thanks, Amy. I'm thankful for the opportunity and happy to be a part of *Red Truck Review*. *Southern Literary Review* was founded in 2004 by a writer and teacher named Jamie Cox Robertson. The publication was, I think, a hobby for her. The earliest content that appeared in *Southern Literary Review* has gone missing, and the online version, which Jamie created, dates back to 2009. All interviews, essays, and reviews since that time are now archived on our website. New York Times bestselling author Julie Cantrell took over as editor-in-chief shortly after *Southern Literary Review* went online. She asked Adele Annesi to join her as managing editor in 2010. Concerned by how much time it took to run a publication like *Southern Literary Review*, both ladies resigned in 2011 to dedicate more time to their writing. That's when Philip K. Jason and I became the editors.

Southern Literary Review focuses on book reviews and author interviews, but we also run the occasional essay. It's possible that we'll expand in the future, and one day we'll probably run fiction and poetry, but we're not there yet. Right now, we're just focused on the latest books and authors that will interest our loyal base of readers. We've featured reviews and interviews by Kerry Madden, John Shelton Reed, Casey Clabough, Ace Atkins, Julia Nunnally Duncan, Karen White, Clyde Edgerton, James Nolan, Moira Crone, Charles J. Shields, Daniel Wallace, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, Paulette Jiles, Steve Yarbrough, Irene Latham, James Lee Burke, John Brandon, Kevin Brockmeier, Mark Richard, Octavia Spencer, Robin Oliveira, and David Bradley, among others.

ASW: *Southern Literary Review* is particularly dedicated to promoting awareness of indie Southern writers; why is this?

I wish I could take credit, but this aspect of *Southern Literary Review* predates my time as editor. One reason—and not a very good one—is that indie publishers tend to mail us their books more often than the big publishing

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companies do. But I like to think that indie publishers, many of them at least, have an eye for the creative and innovative and are willing to take risks on authors. The truth is that the previous editors were committed to indie Southern writers and publishers, and when Phil and I took over, we thought that commitment was good and worth sustaining—so that’s what we’ve done.

ASW: Let’s switch gears and talk about Allen-as-Poet. Your poems are quite stunningly imagistic and resonate fully. Would you chat about your writing process when drafting poems? Do you revise frequently? How often do you write poetry?

This is a painful question for me. As an undergraduate, I wanted nothing more than to be a poet. Then I went to graduate school and law school and didn’t have the time for the slow reading and the disciplined planning necessary to be a good poet. Every now and then I’ll read something that inspires me, and I’ll instantly crank out a poem, but the last time this happened was probably in 2011. I wrote only three or four poems last year, and all of them around Christmas, when work slowed down. I haven’t looked at those poems since I wrote them, so I couldn’t tell you if they’re good enough to see the light of day, but I’ll revisit them at some point to find out. I will say that because I don’t write poems very often, the poems I do write don’t require much revision. Still, I’d much rather write a lot and revise a lot than write a little and revise a little.

ASW: Who are some of the influences on your poetry?

As a teenager, I was fond of the British Romantics, especially Wordsworth. During college, though, I developed a love for modern American poetry. T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams—they more than the others have continued to influence me as a person and as a writer. I really don’t know who I would be without Robert Frost.

ASW: I’m very curious about your take on prison education. Would you share with us what novel or novels you taught and give us a “day in the life” of teaching a college course in a prison? Would you teach in a prison again?

The easy questions first: yes, I would teach in prison again, although I’m prohibited from doing so at the moment. You couldn’t have Supreme Court staff attorneys interacting with prisoners who might be petitioning the Supreme Court for a writ of certiorari. I taught works by Oscar Wilde, J.M. Coetzee, Samuel Beckett, Shakespeare, J.D. Salinger, Sartre, Tom Stoppard, Jonathan Swift, David Sedaris, Alexander Pope, and probably some others—I can’t remember them all.

The tough question is about my take on prison education. My experiences left me ambivalent and confused, and I’ve never been able to work through the tensions pulling me in different directions. Of course I do believe prisoners should be entitled to education, especially if the purpose of prison is to rehabilitate prisoners. What bothers me is the effect I had, which was probably minimal. Some students took my class as an escape from the everyday, others to steal pens and books to exchange as commodities on the prison market, and still others to actually learn something.

My prison students—most of them at least—would read every assignment I gave them and were prepared to discuss the assignments during class. I couldn't say the same for the university students I taught. One thing I've noticed from slave narratives is how much the authors prized their literacy, which was hard to come by and often acquired illegally to the extent that whites in those times and places were not allowed to teach slaves to read. I used to remind my college students that they shouldn't take reading for granted, and I'd point to slave narratives and say, "look how much this person appreciated the opportunity to read." Many students still wouldn't care. They took reading for granted.

With the prisoners it was different: they had quite a bit of time to read, and that's what they did, but I'm not sure they would be reading novels tomorrow if they got out of prison tonight. They were diligent as students, and I wish my college students had read all their assignments and done all their work the way the prisoners did, but then again, the college students I taught hardly seemed capable of doing anything that would land them in prison. As I talk about this, I'm thinking that maybe it's just easier to [defer to my essay about teaching in prison](#). That essay expresses more than I can express in an interview.

ASW: Let's talk about the book you have written. What is it about and why did you write it?

The book is called [Literature and Liberty](#). I wrote it to counteract what I consider to be a big problem in literary studies.

I've been in an English department for fourteen years now, and I've read a wide range of literary theory and criticism. I've been disappointed by the lack of any literary theory embracing political and economic views that I believe are most helpful to society. Not all literary theory is economic, but the theories that are economic are mostly Marxist or quasi-Marxist, and the literary theory that isn't purely economic often reaches certain conclusions or makes certain political proposals that reflect a misunderstanding of economics. My book seeks to remedy this. It's a collection of libertarian or free-market essays about literature. My subjects range from Emerson and Shakespeare to Geoffrey of Monmouth and Mark Twain.

I'm a proponent of the free market because I believe that a society in which individuals are free to enter into voluntary associations and transactions absent the control of corporations, lobbyists, and politicians enables prosperity, grows the middle class, and produces more material goods for more people, including and especially the poor. I'm also strongly opposed to the warfare state and military intervention abroad and tend to see unjustified power, corruption, cronyism, and incompetence in government where others see the possibility for reform or welfare.

From a more theoretical standpoint, I don't think many people who favor government intervention and central planning really understand the logical implications of their position. The human mind is limited and fallible and its knowledge partial and selective. No person can possess an integrated knowledge of particular people in different areas with different values and priorities. If even a small group of people could, then they would be able design some master plan that would fix all our problems. But because no one has total knowledge, no one should be able to impose an ideological scheme on everyone else. There's no one-size-fits-all plan for human organization.

The free-market theories that attract me are premised on the notion that humans have limited knowledge. The study of free-market economics doesn't teach you how much you know—it teaches you how much you do not know and cannot know about the preferences of other people. Those who favor a free market believe that individuals in their own social contexts understand what is best for them, what goods they want or need, what goods they don't want or need, and how much they are willing to spend to get what they want or need. The average person doesn't make everyday decisions based on some abstract template about the economy. Most people say, "Hey, the price of butter went up, so I have to adjust accordingly." These minor adjustments, in the aggregate, give us dispersed knowledge through pricing mechanisms that allow people to coordinate their activities for their mutual benefit.

The stereotype is that free-market types are all rugged individualists who don't care about others, but the reverse is true, at least in my experience, because the people I associate with believe the free market facilitates cooperation and community whereas economic interventionism is about using force or the threat of force to coerce segments of society into total conformance.

ASW: What are some writing projects that are currently in development that *Red Truck* readers can look forward to from you?

I'm always working on some smaller project: an essay or article. But I do have a couple of larger projects I'm working on.

First, I'm editing a book that collects some previously unpublished or mostly unknown essays by John William Corrington, who was a poet, lawyer, novelist, and screenwriter. He's probably best known for writing the screenplay for *Omega Man* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, but his earlier works are extraordinary.

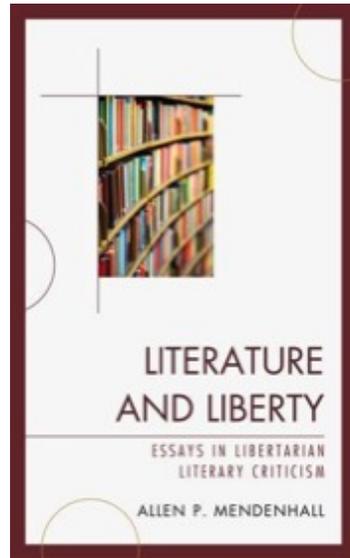
The second is my doctoral dissertation, which is close to being finished, and which I hope to convert into a book. It's about the dissenting opinions of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. I make several arguments in the book, and I won't attempt to explain them all here, but I will say that I place a lot of emphasis on Holmes's relationship to Emerson.

ASW: In conclusion, what drives your dedication to American Southern Literature?

I'm a man of the South. I was born here, raised here, and I hope to raise my children here. The South is what I know. It follows that I'd like literature by Southerners and about the South. There's a deeply spiritual element to the South, and to identify with the South is to identify with something spiritual. I'm convinced that the more you learn about the South—its history, its people, its complexity, its traditions—the more you learn about the human condition in general. That's a tall claim, I know, but I'm willing to stand by it.

ASW: Thank you, Allen, for visiting with *The Truck*. It is our hope here at *The Truck* that everyone checks out your new book, poems, and peruses *Southern Literary Review*.

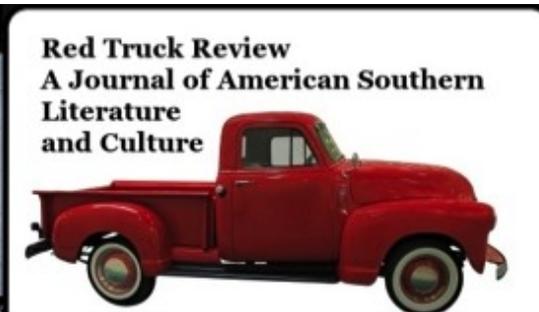
Thanks, Amy. I appreciate this and look forward to reading and rereading and rereading *The Truck*.



Allen Mendenhall is a writer, managing editor of [Southern Literary Review](#), staff attorney to Chief Justice Roy S. Moore of the Supreme Court of Alabama, adjunct professor at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law, and doctoral candidate in English at Auburn University. He is the author of [Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism](#) (Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington Books). He blogs at [The Literary Lawyer](#).



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