



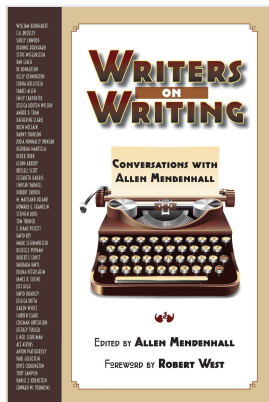
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A review of *Writers on Writing: Conversations with Allen Mendenhall*

May 15, 2019



Reviewed by Claire Hamner Maturro

Writers on Writing:

Conversations with Allen Mendenhall

Edited by Allen Mendenhall

Red Dirt Press

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Writers on Writing: Conversations with Allen Mendenhall is a thoughtful, insightful, and intelligent book. In other words, it is much like its creator, Allen Mendenhall, who is an author, editor, avid reader, law school associate dean, lawyer, and, as illustrated in this book, an ace interviewer. *Writers on Writing* is filled with interviews of modern authors, some famous and some not-so-famous. The eclectic collection of interviews in the book are not formulaic Q & A's, but something deeper, more revealing, often quite personal, and

endlessly fascinating. And that's what makes the book such a source of discovery and delight. As Professor Robert West, author, reviewer and poet, says in his foreword, "Here are interviews centering on recent novels, short story collections, poetry volumes, historical studies, and literary studies." As West observes, there is "a delightful egalitarianism here." Indeed, part of the great appeal of this collection is, as West notes, the broad-minded universality and welcoming of diversity in the collection.

In *Writers on Writing*, Mendenhall assembles many of the interviews he has conducted with writers over many years. Many of the interviews originally appeared in *Southern Literary Review*, a journal of modern Southern literature that is equally as egalitarian and broad-minded as this collection of interviews—albeit all with a Southern connection. Mendenhall has served as the editor of SLR since 2011.

Each included author has something important to say and Mendenhall has a talent for finding just the right way to allow the authors to express themselves. Mendenhall has a knack at getting to what is significant, and revealing truths both about the writers and about their books. Nor do the interviews shy away from topical issues or cultural conflicts. Right off the bat, in Mendenhall's interview with E. H. Buckley, there are stark political comments. Yet the book is not political per se, but as West notes it is broad-minded in its scope.

Given its links to *Southern Literary Review*, the collection contains many interviews with authors who focus in their books on things that continue to fascinate Southerners—or to haunt them with the weight of their history. For example, Robert J. Ernst talks about how his fascination with the Civil War led to his novel, *The Inside War*, about an Appalachian mountain family during that war.

Deepening the Civil War references, Mendenhall's interview with Coleman Hutchison raises a difficult, timely question. Hutchison is the author of *Apples and Ashes*, a book that comprehensively analyzes Confederate literature and literary culture. Mendenhall asks why Hutchison felt it necessary to state that he personally found "almost nothing that is admirable in the politics and culture of the Civil War South." To this, Hutchison replies:

I thought long and hard about whether to include such a disclaimer. In the end, I decided that clarity and transparency were important, in no small part because I think my colleagues' fears about the politics of writing about the Confederacy are well-founded. Alas, many people assume that a book written about the Confederacy is probably (perhaps secretly?) sympathetic to the Confederacy. I included the disclaimer in the opening pages

of Apples and Ashes in order to force my readers to acknowledge, as you say, the separation between my views and the views of my subjects. But it was also a way to address forthrightly and quickly the politics of writing about the Confederacy before moving on to the real work at hand.

Continuing the Southern connection, in Mendenhall's interview with Collen D. Scott, he asks about her first novel, *Everybody Needs a Bridge*. Mendenhall references the book as a "bildungsroman involving friendship, race, and the burden of history." Scott, in an answer to questions about race, states:

Without understanding the dynamics of race and the impact of racism on the central characters, the reader would lose important context. But I also wanted to illustrate how through ordinary conversations and interactions we inadvertently sustain those racist attitudes. And how those small actions can be just as effective as overt and violent acts.

However, despite what these examples might imply, *Writers on Writing* is not focused exclusively on The South and the burden of its peculiar history. As promised in West's introduction, there's a bit of something for everyone in the collection. Legal thriller fans, for example, should be intrigued by trial lawyer Hubert Crouch's interview as he reveals how his own experiences helped him create Jace Forman, the protagonist of Crouch's first novel, *Cried for No One*, who reappears in *The Word*. Best-seller William Bernhardt, author of dozens of legal thrillers with his Ben Kincaid series, is also featured. Bernhardt, a lawyer, admits that though his legal experiences helped him write the courtroom scenes, he had to "learn from scratch" with such subjects as forensics and police procedure.

Forensics isn't all some of the authors had to learn from scratch. Deborah Mantella, a transplant to the South, discusses how despite her non-Southern roots, she nonetheless arrived at a distinctly, authentically Southern quality in her writing. In writing *My Sweet Vidalia*, Mantella confesses she was "constantly fine-tuning my own listening and monitoring skills. ...I agonize over all details, dialect and colloquialisms included. It's part of the job."

Mendenhall, who has a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University as well as several other degrees, shows his intellectual, well-read side in commenting on the "something Natasha Trethewey" in Mantella's writing. Trethewey is a Gulfport, Mississippi poet, and the resulting exchange between Mantella and Mendenhall is just one of many examples of the literary surprises lurking in this wonderful book.

Mendenhall is also able to often relate directly and personally with the authors he interviews. For example, his Q & A with Amber D. Tran, author of *Moon River*, begins with their shared connections at the West Virginia University both attended. Similarly, with Dan Leach, Mendenhall connects over a shared publisher—the University of North Georgia Press.

With his strong academic background, Mendenhall delves into some deep literary material along with genre fiction. In his interview with Paul A. Cantor, for instance, Mendenhall and Cantor discuss Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy, which analyzes three plays, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. This interview was originally for a libertarian audience, and addresses economics and political science, as well as literature.

Balancing that interview with Cantor, Mendenhall follows with an interview of Tom Turner, author of a crime thriller called *Palm Beach Nasty*. Turner explains his choice of setting as: "[Palm Beach has] got everything. Glamour, glitz, pretensions, phonies, scammers, wannabees, never-will-be's and some to the greatest, down-to-earth, nicest people you'll ever meet. It is an incredible mine of material."

Speaking of an "incredible mine of materials," Mendenhall has crafted a fascinating collection of insightful interviews with writers, and this is a book writers and readers alike can dive into and reap rewards. It's educational, it's entertaining, and its broad scope is sure to offer something on point for every reader's specific interest.

About the reviewer: Claire Hamner Maturro is an honors graduate of The University of Alabama Law School, where she became the first female partner in a prestigious Sarasota, Florida law firm. After a decade of lawyering, Claire taught at Florida State University College of Law and spent one long, cold winter as a visiting legal writing professor at the University of Oregon. Her books are: *Skinny-Dipping* (2004) (a BookSense pick, Romantic Times' Best First Mystery, and nominated for a Barry Award); *Wildcat Wine* (2005) (nominated for a Georgia Writer of the Year Award); *Bone Valley* (2006) and *Sweetheart Deal* (2007) (winner of Romantic Times' Toby Bromberg Award for Most Humorous Mystery), all published by William Morrow, and *Trouble in Tallahassee* (2018 KaliOka Press). Coming in Spring of 2019: *Privilege* (Moonshine Cove), a steamy legal thriller noir set on the Gulf coast of Florida. She recently finished polishing *Wayward Girls*—a manuscript she co-wrote with Dr. Penny Koepsel—and awaits the happy news when her agent, the great, fun, funny, and radically energetic Liza Fleissig, places it with the right publisher. Follow her at <http://www.clairematurro.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/authorclairematurro>

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