SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

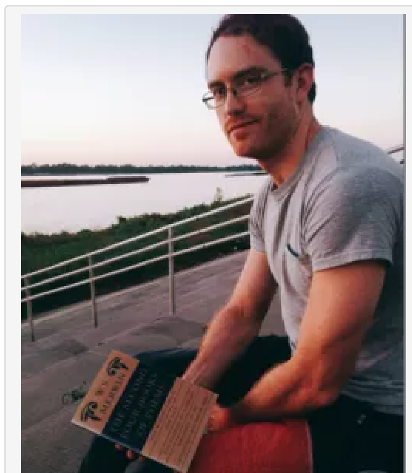
ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS AMOS JASPER WRIGHT IV, AUTHOR OF “NOBODY KNOWS HOW IT GOT THIS GOOD”

NOVEMBER 20, 2018 BY ALLEN MENDENHALL LEAVE A COMMENT

AM: Thanks for the interview, Amos. Your book *Nobody Knows How It Got This Good* was just released by Livingston Press of the University of West Alabama, a publisher I'm growing increasingly fond of month by month. The book consists of short stories. Do you agree with Edgar Allan Poe that “a short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it”?

Poe was more knowledgeable about the mechanics, design and structuring of short stories than I am, so I would probably be wise to defer to his gothic judgment. Though the short story has developed beyond the unitary mood – Donald Barthelme and Samuel Beckett, for example – and I am generally skeptical of these exhortatory imperialistic universals, there is some truth to Poe's theorem. Poe's dictum is applicable to a certain traditional model of the short story – John Cheever, perhaps, even though his stories presage a subtle awareness of later developments – but there are stories that might even be described as moodless, multiply moody, or having multiple personality disorder. The stories in this collection, however, while influenced by the moodless or the multiplication of moods, are partially unified by a single mood even when the narrators digress and depart from that mood, but they are also in dialogue and clandestine exchanges with the larger system of the collection as a whole, so that a dialectical moody gestalt obtains at multiple levels, or at least that is how I schematize it. The reader may have a different reading. My question for Poe would be, “Towards what is the story building? Is there some necessary teleology embedded in the story?” If there is, the necessity of its design often only appears in retrospect.

AM: Do you have a favorite story in this collection?



Amos Jasper Wright

It is difficult to choose a single story, but “Deepwater Horizon” or “The Jaguars of Southtown,” the collection's opening story, are in the vanguard for me. A close runner-up might be “Long Hot Summer of 2018,” the collection's finale, narrated by a lynching survivor, because it is written in a voice and perspective that depart dramatically from the preceding fifteen stories. Some stories stand on their own better than others, and “Deepwater Horizon” and “The Jaguars of Southtown” both went through fairly substantial revisions between their first drafts and publication – the ending of Jaguars was changed to the extent that the tone and “message” of the dénouement were dramatically different.

AM: Most of these stories are written in the first-person. Two part question: do you prefer writing in the first person, and how reliable are your narrators? Regarding the second part, I'm wondering whether we can trust what they say to us.

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Correct – only one story is written in third-person. Although I've done a lot of unpublished writing in third-person, first-person narration seems to come more naturally to me, and each point of view has its advantages – certain effects can be achieved with third-person narration that are impossible in first-person. As for reliability, dissertations and monographs have been written on the subject. The problem of narrative reliability might be experiencing a resurgence in our present political and social media environments with its fake news and the tireless fact-checking of elected officials who are both unreliable and untrustworthy, whereas I think the narrators are trustworthy, whatever their reliability might be, if that's not too tedious or specious a distinction. The narrators are reliable insofar as their narratives are environed by confirmed historical events such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Civil Rights Movement, etc. No one in these stories is questioning the historicity of these events, unlike our revisionist regime today. I'm not doing historiography, but the reliability of those events is, as far as I am concerned, beyond dispute, even if their interpretation is political and tendentious; reliable insofar as the world to which they refer is a more or less commonly shared world. Unreliable narrators, by contrastive logical extension, because binaries aid us in definition, also presuppose reliable narrators whose existence may or may not be reliable. Have narrators ever been reliable? Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John reliable? Was the Kerner Commission Report reliable? Is *Tristram Shandy* reliable? Is the Theory of General Relativity reliable? Is this interview reliable? All of us bump up against our epistemic boundaries and come into conflict with our aporia – I suppose we might aspire to augment those boundaries to make them as global and ecumenical as is feasible, to achieve some level of self-awareness of the boundaries and territory of reliability. Beyond the epistemology of first-person narratives, the reliability question is here specifically rendered in the racialization of perception: white and black narrators alternate in explaining their version or vision of Alabama, at the center of which is the state's fraught race history; in some cases white narrators are relating the dialogue of black characters, and vice versa, so there is some divergence in the experience and narration of the same general cultural phenomena. This narrative delta, or divergence is the measurement of how commonly shared that world is. A narrative distance from the pivotal, traumatic events at the core of the stories which is a function of race and class. These narrators aren't unreliable in the sense that Nabokov's narrators were – playing cute tricks or literary chess matches with the reader. The narrator of "Tilting at Windmills" is, in my estimation, the most classically unreliable in the collection – he suffers a syndrome called "wind sickness" which has totally distorted his cognition. I trust him the least. Reliability is further complicated by the extra-textual author, even though as an author I am dead, thanks to Roland Barthes, and this is an interview with a dead author. Here I am contradicting myself, saying the narrators are both reliable and unreliable, because I am an unreliable dead narrator.

AM: I'm now thinking of the term "ghost writer" in a different way, you being dead and all. Tell me, how did you end up in New Orleans? You started in Birmingham and then moved around a bit.

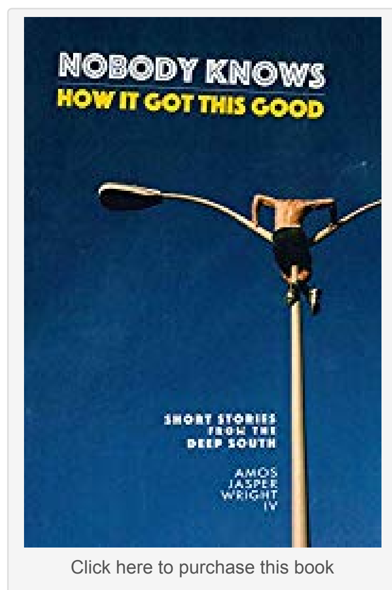
I moved north after college and lived there for five years, though non-consecutively, in Boston, Cambridge, Somerville and Medford at various times, usually in pursuit of affordable housing. Boston was as different from the Deep South as one could find without leaving the continental United States, which for some reason never occurred to me as a realistic option. Though at the time I could not leave Alabama fast enough, living in Boston turned me into a Southerner, the entangled contrasts honed and sharpened my identity and – I know this is as trite as it gets, but we all learn old lessons for ourselves – to see my birthplace with the clarity only distance can provide. As an Alabaman I was sometimes regarded with exoticism by New Englanders, and was asked a lot of strange questions about the South by otherwise educated, intelligent people that made me realize the North and South are practically different countries, never mind the triangulated relationship of the West. I've had a fraught relationship between North and South, but eventually, for reasons too numerous to recount here, I decided to leave Boston and moved – of all places – to Lafayette, Louisiana in the dark spicy heart of Cajun country, and later to Baton Rouge, slowly working my way closer and closer to that siren song of a city, New Orleans, which was ultimately where I wanted to be. New Orleans was a kind of compromise with everything I loved about Boston while still being in the South, the region that inspired my writing in a way Boston never did: New Orleans has the complexity, historicity, dense building pattern, walkability, architectural heritage, maritime culture, legacy transit system, literary history, and scale of a city like Boston without the exorbitant cost of living and other vexations of a major city in the Northeast, not that New Orleans is without vexations. New Orleans also has a wrinkled polyvalence and textured tragic disposition that is mostly absent in Boston. I flirted with other cities like Seattle, and attempted several times to land jobs in Atlanta that never panned out.

AM: Do I sense a bit of Walker Percy in your writing? Are you familiar with the work of John William Corrington?

Although Percy is from Birmingham and lived in Covington just north of New Orleans, I'm not intimately familiar with his work. I read *The Moviegoer* years ago, and have a few of his books lingering unread; I don't recall being enamored, though there might be more affinities between us than I'm aware of. I've mostly stopped reading "canonical" Southern literature. I'm familiar with John William Corrington in name only, but if you think I should read his work I will check him out.

AM: Sorry, I'm writing about Percy and rereading *The Moviegoer*, so I'm seeing Percy everywhere. You've got a degree in creative writing. I've asked this question of other writers, and I always get different responses: how effective are creative writing programs? And if they're effective, what are they effective at?

Not to quibble over much, but I technically have a master's in English with a concentration in creative writing, which matters less to me than to human resources departments because it is considered a nonterminal degree by those who sanction such things, so I took more literature seminars than workshops. I think I enrolled in maybe four workshops the entire time I was there, and two of those four were poetry workshops, which I found more instructive than the prose workshops (this was at a time when I wrote more poetry). The poetry workshops were helpful for developing imagery, language at the level of the line, a grasp of metaphor, all the techniques of penning vivid and unique language. I attended memorable seminars on James Joyce, Charles Dickens, literary theory, the British Romantic poets, linguistics, etc. I've always been a bit of an autodidact, and an obstinate one at that, so I don't know how commensurate my experience was with the more mainstream creative writing programs that are workshop-heavy.



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If you attend a ranked program, with esteemed faculty, which the internet hivemind will tell you is imperative, MFA programs effectively supply you with a network and a pipeline to publishers, agents and other middlemen in the industry. Based on the careers of my peers, this network seems invaluable. Hopefully, you'll make lifelong writer friends, even though I don't personally know that many writers. Secondly, MFA programs provide a plethora of time, structured and unstructured, to immerse yourself in the mental space-time necessary for the production of creative literary works – an opportunity that does not repeat itself for most people, because the mundanities and insults of the workaday world get in the way; because I didn't attend a well-networked program, this windfall of time was the most critical to my development.

MFA programs are also effective at saddling students with crushing debt (granted, no one to my knowledge attends a program under duress) that haunts you for the rest of your life (I was lucky to avoid this) because the ratio between the debt and your earning potential is onerous. The end may justify the means of debt for some writers – that's a cost-benefit analysis that has to be self-evaluated on a case by case basis – or of no consequence for writers of independent means to drop fifty g's on tuition. Categorically, I would not go into debt for an MFA degree. In other words, if a writer has the means to get an MFA degree without compromising their financial future, then by all means do it, because if there is anything that will make it more taxing later in life to write it is debt and financial insecurity. Assistantships and scholarships defray some costs, but you also have to factor in soft costs and opportunity costs, such as time not spent paying into a retirement fund or developing more marketable skills for your post-MFA employment. There isn't an employer in America who cares that I can write a sonnet in perfect iambic pentameter or analyze the mythological structure of Joyce's *Ulysses*, or that I can diagram a sentence. The fact is that the world outside of the MFA does not care whether I write short stories or not. The barriers to entry for these programs also prompt equity issues of representation, demographic diversity, and homogeneity that have been better interrogated elsewhere in the blogosphere.

Although our particular phase of Philistine capitalism has been brilliant at bottlenecking and circumscribing to the point of strangulation any viable non-academic ways to survive for writers, to name just one group of many immiserated groups who have it much worse, too many aspiring writers seem to think nothing is possible outside of academia, unable to envision a writing life outside the ivory tower, the adjunct rat race, or the dispiriting hustle for the few tenure jobs left, it's like we have this Stockholm Syndrome about academia – or so it would seem from my vantage outside the walls of the ivory tower at least. I'm not going to say it is a facile task to manage a writing life outside of academia, but it can be

done, and my word count is probably more productive now than it would have had I continued to pursue an academic career. The Great Recession, which hit right before I got my master's, exacerbated all these preexisting trends. Most of the people I know who earned MFA degrees (or any degree in the humanities, for that matter) are not employed anywhere near a classroom, and those who are employed in universities are the exceptions and endured untold masochism and misery to get there, such as a hand-to-mouth itinerant lifestyle. I include acquaintances in the visual arts, because I dropped out of an MFA program in sculpture before pursuing writing more seriously. While not MFA's, I have friends (yes, I have friends!) who earned doctorates and needed counseling, therapy and medication in order to cross the finish line. Then there's the asymmetry of supply and demand: the MFA-Industrial Complex accepts more students than there are open jobs. But writers produced creative works before the MFA era and will continue to do so. Many of my favorite writers either did not have an MFA degree, or were not academic instructors, and I trust that motivated artists will find a way to get along without it. I know I sound overly cynical about the MFA, and there is much to be critiqued, but I also fully acknowledge that I would not be the writer I am today – maybe not a writer at all – without the two years provided by the refuge of a master's program. But I got my second master's degree in urban planning, and in retrospect I'm glad I opted out of the academic hustle.

AM: This has been an interesting conversation, Amos. Thank you.

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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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