

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS AMY SUSAN WILSON, PUBLISHER OF RED DIRT PRESS

 OCTOBER 17, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Amy Susan Wilson

AM: Amy, thanks for doing this interview about Red Dirt Press. Congratulations, too, for reaching the six year mark. You focus on publishing poetry and prose that examines the complexities and diversities of the New South. You also have a focus on social justice issues that are global in nature yet connect to the New South. That is quite a combination. I am curious: what is the mission and formula for success at Red Dirt Press?

ASW: New South roots are embedded in the traditional geography of North America, and cultural attributes of the South are of course embedded in history. The New South culture is particular to the region, but certainly contains elements that span the globe. For example, we are working with an author in Louisiana who wrote a memoir that examines both her Thai and New Orleans roots as a child and how this influences her identity as

an adult. We are also publishing a short story collection by Yasser El-Sayed, *The Alexandria You Are Losing*, which explores those same cross-cultural tensions as they play out both in the U.S. and the Middle East. As for the success of Red Dirt Press, we position our books and market carefully and precisely. At Red Dirt Press, we also embrace the poet Sharon Olds' saying, "Poetry should be sold at supermarket check out stands." We market books to reach readers, everywhere, so we make our books accessible in many varied markets and venues.

AM: You also are founder and editor-in-chief of *Red Dirt Forum: A Journal of Contemporary Literature*. How did you come to start the journal and where do you see it going in the future?

ASW: *Red Dirt Forum* grew out of a conversation with some friends in Santa Fe, New Mexico one spring evening in 2011. We were discussing red dirt music, which led to a discussion of red dirt literature. I had always had it percolating in the back of my mind, since my MFA days in the mid-1980s, that I would like to start a biannual publication. However, I felt I never had the time. Well, it occurred to me I will never "have time" to edit a journal, but I would just have to make the time. So I organized my life so I could found and edit *Red Dirt Forum*, which seeks New South literature primarily, but not exclusively.

Our most recent issue of *Forum* contains work by Fred Chappell, Julia Nunnally Duncan, Joseph Bathanti, Lara Bernhardt, and of course, an interview with you, Allen, regarding your book, *Writers on Writing: Conversations with Allen Mendenhall*, foreword by Robert West. *Forum* features poetry and prose, and we sometimes reprint works that we query, such as Heath Dollar's story, "The Flag Salesman" which first appeared in *Cowboy Jamboree*, edited by Adam Van Winkle. We feature an author interview, emerging or established, in each issue.

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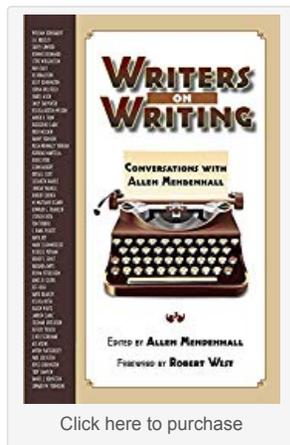
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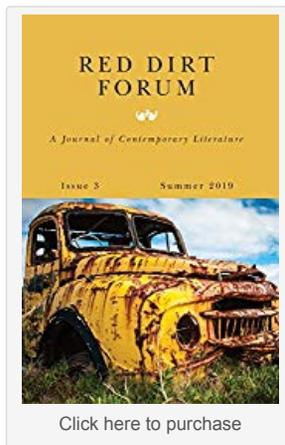
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And, how can you have a journal with “Red Dirt” in the title without featuring a band or musician from this genre? So in issue three, we interview *Midnight Rounds*, a San Francisco Bay Area band that is mostly comprised of Stanford University health care practitioners and medical school professors, who have quite a following in the area. Along with other genres, they play much Southern rock. Our editorial crew at *Forum* delights in finding Southern culture alive and well far outside of our geographical



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boundaries.

Red Dirt Forum issues are sold on Amazon, Barnes and Noble and in independent bookstores across the country. Our next issue is the “Music Issue” and details can be found at our website, www.reddirtpress.net. This issue will release in late Spring 2020.

AM: You mentioned earlier that you are publishing a collection of short stories by an American-Arab physician and author, Yasser El-Sayed, the title of which is *The Alexandria You Are Losing*. The collection has received some strong reviews from prominent authors. But given your interest and focus on the New South, I'm curious for more details about how this collection fits with that landscape, and why you chose it for publication among the numerous manuscripts you come across.

ASW: Well, first of all the writing is riveting and powerful, so it stands on its own in that way. But what attracted me to Yasser's writing, and in the end why I felt it was perfect for Red Dirt Press, was the way his stories transcend arbitrary boundaries. His characters include Americans from Oklahoma living in the Middle East, newly immigrated Arabs adjusting to life in the United States, or people with dual identities searching for a sense of place and home. That engagement with identity and with loss and with place fit perfectly in what is happening in the New South, how it is being transformed and changed in wonderful and exciting and at times unpredictable and turbulent ways. The themes in these stories, while broad and universal, are very much inclusive of our region.



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AM: You are also an author. You've published poetry and prose in dozens of magazines, and your story collection, *Fetish and Other Stories*, was December 2015 Book of the Month here at *Southern Literary Review*. Your own work focuses primarily on rural, Oklahoma women who are full of regional color and often find themselves in unimaginable circumstances, either true or imagined. Although I read the book awhile back, I recall the bank teller who finds herself living with a special needs ghost, Billy Craig. Another story about an alcoholic grandmother who is carted off to the nursing home after a violent bender. Your stories are poignant, raw, and others quite hilarious. Any new works to look forward to in the near future from you?

ASW: I have a novel forthcoming, *girl, out there*, about a young soul aging out of the foster care system in rural Oklahoma, and some

stories that I carry around in my head and want to write. I keep a yellow legal pad in my car and carry it with me everywhere. I scribble down ideas to develop when I have some downtime. I rise often times (thank you, insomnia!) at the ungodly hour of 4:00 a.m. to write before work.

AM: I also see that Red Dirt Press is sponsoring a first book competition. Will this become an annual event?

ASW: We would love to host a book competition annually, but we plan on every five years. Our reading period is October 15, 2019 through February 15, 2020 for our first annual competition. We don't charge a reading fee or submission fee to enter. The first place winner receives a book publication and marketing support of the book from us. Two runner-ups will be selected. We support both established and emerging authors, and part of our mission as a press is to take emerging works to the public. A competition is a great way to assist a deserving new author. Details are found at our website.

AM: You've got much to be proud of. I look forward to more and more great authors to peruse in the pages of Red Dirt Press books and also in the pages of *Forum*.

ASW: Thanks, Allen. It is always good to visit with you.

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About Allen Mendenhall

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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