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A Magazine for Literature of the American South



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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS BREN MCCLAIN, AUTHOR OF "ONE GOOD MAMA BONE"

FEBRUARY 23, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thanks for the interview, Bren. Before we talk about your new book, *One Good Mama Bone*, I'd like to mention something we have in common: We both studied English at Furman University. Who were your professors there?

BM: Dr. Stanley Crowe was my adviser. Also Dr. Pate, Gil Allen and Ann Sharp. Loved them.

AM: I took courses with Dr. Crowe and Dr. Pate and Dr. Allen as well. And I loved them too. They each had a tremendous influence on me as a student of literature and as a person. I miss them and Greenville. It's a beautiful town. Did you grow up in South Carolina?

BM: Yes, I grew up in Anderson, in a farming community west of town, where there were no subdivisions, only acres and acres of pastureland and cotton and wheat and oats. A girl could run free.

AM: What's your fondest childhood memory?

BM: I was in the sixth grade and at my grandmother's home across the road. She had a collie dog that was having puppies in a cramped dog house with lots of straw. I wanted to watch the birth, but my grandmother, Nana, thought it would be too much for me. "Please," I said, and she went for it. I sat up against the wooden wall across from the mama dog and watched in silence as her eyes bulged, her legs held out stiff like broom handles. She was in pain. Yet she welcomed into the world all six puppies, each one coated in a milky white sack; each one she gently licked off and nestled to her teats with her nose. I felt her love for them and began to cry. My grandmother came to check on me, saw my tears and wanted me to leave, thinking I was upset. "No," I told her, "I think it's beautiful." She let me stay. I think that's my fondest childhood memory, because it was the first real time I bonded with an animal and got a glimpse of how special they are. And also because my Nana let me stay.

AM: How does your sense of place find expression in your writing?

BM: Actually, I think my writing finds its expression in my sense of place. I grew up on a 72-acre beef cattle farm, and that environment has informed everything I write. The unadorned life of farmers, our dependence on, even subservience to, the weather and nature and the land. Not taking anything for granted. The importance of the church in the community and family and neighbors.

AM: Tell us about *One Good Mama Bone*.

BM: It's the story of Sarah Creamer, a dirt-poor woman who doesn't think she has a "mama bone," but is thrust into that world to take care of her husband's illegitimate son, after he can't live with what he's



Bren McClain



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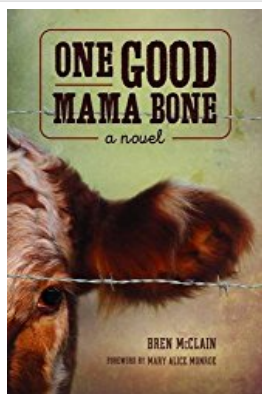
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done and drinks himself to death. How will she survive? What I think sets the book apart is the form Sarah's "help" arrives in, a mama cow that comes to live on her farm and teaches Sarah how to be a mother. It's set in the early 1950s in rural South Carolina.

AM: I read an interview in which you were asked why you wrote about cows. Your answer was that you didn't choose the cows, the cows chose you. Explain what you meant.

BM: I was visiting my father's farm in late 2008, only to be awakened in the night by sounds that drew me outside to a gathering of mama cows, huddled in the corner of a barbed wire fence. I would come to know that their babies had been weaned from them the afternoon before. These mamas were calling for them, deep guttural calls, which seeped into my bones and made me think of my failed

novel, an attempt to celebrate motherhood. But I had not pulled that off. There, in front of me, with these mama cows, lay the missing piece. I told them I couldn't bring their babies back, but I could tell their story. Guess who was in the center of that huddle? The cow I would name Mama Red! I made her a promise, bought her from my father and gave her forever sanctuary.

AM: You're on a big tour. What's that like?

BM: I begin tomorrow. But I'll go ahead now and tell you what it's like, because I know. It's like having weeks and weeks of celebration, as I get to connect with readers and booksellers. For me, connection, establishing relationships, is what it's all about. I embrace the days and nights ahead.

AM: Do you have a writing ritual?

BM: Yes. I'm a morning writer. I get up at 3:30, make a cup of coffee and go into my writing sanctuary beneath a stairwell and sit at my desk, which is a small organ from the 1800s that's been gutted. I write in the dark, save for the light from my laptop screen.

AM: How did you decide to play with different points of view in the novel?

BM: The story was bigger than any one person. Any attempt I made to isolate the narration to Sarah, my main character, fell woefully short. I wanted the reader to really get to know the other characters, their inner workings, what they loved, what they feared. It was a tall mountain to climb, let me say, but, oh so worth it. As I was rotating their points of view, I always asked myself – Where should the camera go now?

AM: Where can readers find your book?

BM: Everywhere books are sold. Independent bookstores, Barnes & Noble, Books a Million and Amazon, of course. I also made an audiobook version that's available on Audible and iTunes and other audiobook outlets.

AM: Thanks for the interview, Bren.

BM: My pleasure, Allen. My absolute pleasure.

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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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