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[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[SUBMISSIONS](#)
[BOOKSTORE](#)
[CONTENTS](#)
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JANUARY 23, 2020

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)
[READ OF THE MONTH](#)
[AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#)
[CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS](#)
[MISCELLANEOUS](#)
[NEWS & EVENTS](#)

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Charles D. Thompson, Author of "Going Over Home"

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS CHARLES D. THOMPSON, AUTHOR OF "GOING OVER HOME"

 JANUARY 23, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT \(EDIT\)](#)



Charles D. Thompson

AM: Grateful for this interview, Charles. Your latest book is *Going Over Home*, published by Chelsea Green Publishing. It comes with the endorsement of none other than Willie Nelson! Until I opened it and started reading, I didn't realize it was a memoir. I had been expecting—what exactly? Something academic? A polemic? Your tenacity is evident in the first chapter, when you refuse to accept a decision by the Farmers Home Administration to deny your loan application to start up a farm. This was back in 1983 (the year I was born). Does that tenacity serve you as a writer as well as an activist and educator?

CDT: I'm grateful for your reading, Allen. Receiving Willie's backing was a tremendous honor. I was also deeply moved to receive an endorsement from the

Rev. Dr. William Barber, along with others I deeply admire. To have Willie Nelson's blurb juxtaposed with Rev. Barber's is perhaps a literary first. Yet, as my readers learn, my quest combines the aims of Willie's Farm Aid with Rev. Barber's Poor People's Campaign. Mine is a search for rural justice for women and men of all backgrounds, including African Americans, Latinx people, and Native peoples with whom I have worked. Too often when Americans think of our family farms – as seen on food packaging, for example – we think of white farm families headed by men.

I have lived a life steeped in agriculture and justice work. I was drawn to write in my own voice and to tell the story of American agriculture from my first-person perspective because this is my story too. By 1983, I had lived over twenty-five years believing, actually from my very first memory, that I should be a farmer. I was born early enough to have numerous farm relatives. Yet, I was also born late enough in the American farm story to be forced to watch the demise of all of the farms in my extended family. Over time, I grew to understand that something structural is wrong with our farming system. My tenacity – thank you for your word – grew out of a combination of my own personal desire to farm and my deep sense of justice born of grief.

I believe that every person who stands for something or who works to right a wrong must have some kind of personal tie to the cause. I also believe that both activism and teaching must come from one's heart, and there is no better way to one's heart than through direct experience. Agricultural justice work is the work of my heart, not an academic exercise. This work happens also to tie into my academic vocation. I'm thankful to say that institutions where I've studied and worked have supported me in being exactly the person I am.

AM: When did you decide to write this memoir?

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[Author Profiles & Interviews](#) (170)

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[Contributors' Bios](#) (104)

[Essays](#) (22)

[Excerpt](#) (1)

[General](#) (8)

[Grants and Contests](#) (17)

[News & Events](#) (83)

[Read of the Month](#) (130)

CDT: I've joked that I started working on this memoir when I was three years old with my first memory of an attack by my great-grandmother's old rooster on her farm! I started writing in earnest about rural justice in Appalachia while in college and then later about farming while I served as a VISTA volunteer, publishing a few pieces along the way. I must have known that someday I might write about my personal farm experiences because I saved all of my documents from my Farmer's Home Administration case in 1983, including transcripts of my appeal hearings and so on. Unlike some of my other projects, this book already seemed fairly well organized in my head before it ever made it to the page. Stories I had been saving spilled out when I started writing the manuscript a few years ago. Luckily both of my parents are still living and could help with dates and details I was hazy on.

AM: I particularly enjoyed reading about your childhood, your grandparents and their farm, farm work with your grandfather, his advice to you to become a vet, the family histories of local residents—all set against the backdrop of an industrializing South. Your parents returned to your grandparents' farm to work while you were in college. Not everyone shares early associations with farms and thus may not share your fondness for them. I recall that line from Justice Holmes: "What we most love and revere generally is determined by early associations. I love granite rocks and barberry bushes, no doubt because with them were my earliest joys that reach back through the past eternity of my life." Was writing this book a way to reach those who had different earlier associations than yours, who maybe need, in your view, to understand, on a personal level, the importance of the old ways, the home farm, the rural family? Might this book be a profound way of showing rather than preaching the importance of the causes that motivate you?

CDT: A profound question! My early associations with farming are my bedrock and they support me still. But I have resisted the temptation to associate my message about farming with nostalgia. While I revered my grandparents' style of work and their knowledge that connected to their ancestors, I do not believe there were ever any "good old days" of farming to which we should return. I intend with this book to show how farming should connect to family, and no one got a bigger dose of family farms and the old ways than me. But I have also endeavored to show with my every turn through the South or Global South what I have learned about agricultural oppression and the painful human cost of raising food. I do intend for readers with no farming experience to learn about agriculture as it was lived, but also how we as a nation, all of us, should explore ways to construct a better agricultural future.

A primary audience for this book is also the large group of would-be farmers, the thousands of idealistic youths who seek means to start their own farms. I was once just like them, and now I'm returning to say that I know their row to hoe is going to be rough, largely because there is no agricultural credit available for people like them. We are spending billions on agricultural subsidies now. We need to change our priorities in spending to foster new ideas and new people in agriculture. Thus, my goal in discussing farm problems as structural and political is to focus forward and say, we all as citizens have a stake in the future of agriculture. As we look toward the future, we must think about ways to nurture people and land and climate, not exploit them. But, as you graciously suggest, by showing rather than preaching, I'm trying to say this with example and story, not by diatribe.

AM: Your reading of Wendell Berry explains some of this. Can you expound on it?

CDT: When I read Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* in 1979, I was working as a rural community garden organizer in the coalfields of his home state of Kentucky. I was so deeply moved by this work written by the progenitor of the new agrarian movement that I sought out his every book of prose and poetry for years to come. My wife and I used a quote from one of his poems on our wedding invitation. The word "unsettled" in the subtitle of my book is certainly a tribute to him.

But something else happened to me when I read Wendell Berry in the context of poverty in the coalfields where I was trying to help people grow food, and later when I worked in rural Georgia where sharecropping was still extant. What I realized was that there have been millions of rural Americans who, unlike my extended family, were forced to leave farms, or who never had the opportunity to "settle" on land in the first place. In other words, "unsettling" requires that people must first be settled. And, of course, the concept of removal when seen in the context of trails of tears and other indigenous removals takes on other meanings much deeper than the experiences of rural white people on American land.



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[Red Dirt Press](#) [Rhett DeVane](#) [Short Stories](#)

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[Literary Review](#) [Southern](#)

[Literature](#) [Tennessee](#) [Texas](#) [The Civil War](#)

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My book begins with scenes reminiscent of Berry as it takes place in an extended family of people tied closely to one place. From there, in part because I had to find answers to my own homelessness, I studied how in settling, white settlers from Europe unsettled others already here. I have also learned deep truths about many generations of rural people of color who worked land all their lives and never owned anything. And for the last twenty years I have focused on farmworkers who have lost land in Mexico and Central America to agricultural injustices. Many of these exiles are now working in our food system in the U.S. Our homeplaces are haunted by *layers* of loss, not just one layer of unsettling. So you might say that I have applied my initial reading of Berry to many other cultural settings and political realities.

AM: Your book carries the subtitle “A Search for Rural Justice in an Unsettled Land.” What is justice?

CDT: Whole books have been written about our human quest for human fairness, starting with the ancients, including those who explored how an “eye for an eye” might seem fair. Hopefully we know now that justice is not a zero-sum game. I have worked a lot on this concept of justice throughout my academic life. For one of the epigraphs of this book, I used Tom Joad’s speech to his mama in *Grapes of Wrath*. Through Joad, Steinbeck says justice is, “Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat... and when our folks eat the stuff they raise, an’ live in the houses they build...” With Steinbeck, I believe strongly that our food system should not exploit people in order to put food on our plates. My work of over fifty years has centered on this.

AM: Your doctorate is in religion and culture. How has that field influenced your agricultural activism and views of farming?

CDT: Speaking of justice, religions have long been at the heart of the human quest for how to treat one’s neighbor. They have certainly failed at this, and too often they have been part of the problem. But in my studies, I wanted to start at the heart of our most closely held beliefs in my quest to understand justice, place, indigeneity, and so on. For my dissertation research, I lived among the Highland Maya in Guatemala and studied their close ties to spaces as practiced through religion. I learned about their indigeneity as understood through centuries of colonialism, the exile of millions of Maya refugees, and their eventual return, which I later included in my writing and documentary filmmaking.

In 1984, I met a Maya refugee when he came to our town in North Carolina and he changed my life. My family and I lived in his Guatemalan home for a year while I sought to learn about his town’s peoples’ most heartfelt beliefs in sacred places and what happens when they leave them. My closest confidants were Maya farmers. I returned to the U.S. profoundly moved by stories of how rural people must leave homes in order to save them. Upon my return, I began my work as a farmworker advocate, now knowing that many of our foods are on our tables because of tremendous losses and sacrifices by living people, some of whom I now know by name. Eating food puts everyone in touch with these realities. We eat human histories. We become them.

AM: I notice that you title each chapter after some process of farming—rooting, hauling, culling, propagating, germinating, reseeding, harvesting, reaping, and so on. I’ve mentioned only a few. Each step or stage is figurative, referring to periods of your life. That’s clever and provocative. Human life is rather like an agricultural cycle, isn’t it?

CDT: Thank you for noticing that, and also for pointing out how much we are tied to farming, even if we’ve never planted a seed. To state the obvious, we humans are all part of nature and live within and because of powerful natural cycles. The best agriculture takes that truth to heart and makes careful steps to work with nature, including nonhuman species, water, air, and soil. Whether we can see it or not, actions in one place or animal or human influence all the rest of us. The best culture of agriculture marries human experience, our planting and harvesting and so on, to the cycles of the planet. To farm is to harness oneself to the sun, rain, wind, humus, seeds, and other living beings, and to help steward these amazing forces into a means by which to live and to help others eat.

AM: Your first epigraph is a quote from *Walden*, and Thoreau appears throughout the book. Discuss his strong influence on you.

CDT: From my first reading in high school, *Walden* became a bible verbalizing my longings to have my own place and live close to the earth. Thoreau quotes were on index cards all over my bedroom walls. I followed Thoreau’s advice in getting back to the land. It wasn’t until later in graduate school and beyond that I began to appreciate Thoreau’s activism regarding slavery and the annexation of the Mexican territory of Texas. When I was arrested for my own opposition to rural injustices, I had this Thoreau quote from *Civil Disobedience* folded in my wallet: “If the machine of government...be of such a

nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law." My teenage reading of *Walden* had gotten me started on believing that I might still find a way to farm despite my family's setbacks. Forty years later, I found Thoreau waiting for me in my stand for justice for others.

AM: I should emphasize that this book isn't just about farming. It's about *people*. Farming allowed you, one might say empowered you, to connect with people of different races and backgrounds and economic means. It inspired you to learn Spanish. It strikes me that agriculture—which was central to the rise of human civilization millennia ago—has always caused people to cooperate, associate, flourish, and form loving bonds. Is the future of agriculture in danger of missing these benefits?

CDT: Yes, agriculture has allowed people to create our most profound connections to nature, sacrality, community, and to stories of who we are. It has also created our most difficult chapters of humanity at our worst. Think of the stories of Hebrews searching for the land of milk and honey (i.e. farming), and then realize that all of this is connected to stories of enslavement in Egypt. Human suffering and triumph are at the heart of the book of Exodus, as they are in the human story writ large. Agriculture is always at the heart of the human story throughout the ages. You might say that when we began to farm, we began to write ourselves onto the landscape and as this influence on our landscape grew, so did our stories, our religions, and our senses of place and of ourselves. But lest we wax too nostalgic, our farming history is also inextricably tied to slavery. Human suffering is still present in our food production.

As we further mechanize and endeavor to separate the means of food production from our direct experience or our personal knowledge, we deaden our collective human experience and awareness, making it seem as though our sustenance comes from climate-controlled stores from where we wheel baskets to our cars without thinking of the human and natural ways all this makes it to our tables.

In these ways, my book is about people and their stories of farming; our collective search for just ways of raising food. It is for all people, both those who grow and harvest our food and those who eat because of them. Ultimately, my book is a call to all of us to plant seeds of justice and hope. If we work together to make our voices heard, we can rewrite the next chapter of our story of agriculture and the life that grows from it.

AM: Thank you for taking the time for this interview—and for this thoughtful, insightful book.

CT: Thank you so much for your helpful insights into my work. I learned a lot from this interview!

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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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