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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS CHARLES DODD WHITE, AUTHOR OF "IN THE HOUSE OF WILDERNESS"

 FEBRUARY 21, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**AM:** Happy to have the opportunity, Charles, to interview you about your novel *In the House of Wilderness*, which was recently released by Swallow Press, an imprint of Ohio University Press. There's a moment in the novel when the character Rain writes "WHO I AM" in her composition book. She then lists some nouns she associates with herself. I thought I'd begin this interview by putting this question to you—who are you?

CDW: Thanks, Allen. I guess that's a question I'm always trying to address in my writing because it's something that others might be better able to answer than I can. I think I can start by saying I'm someone who believes serious writing matters, even if it is increasingly competing against different forms of entertainment. I'm particularly interested in telling the truth of the place I live, which is in the modern South of East Tennessee. I don't want to be a writer who chases fads, but who holds to the kind of stories that hold their ground, even if it might be at odds with what is popular or perhaps somewhat lacking depth. I think I write books for smart, feeling people who aren't looking for tidy plot lines. I guess you could say I'm somewhat of a true believer when it comes to the power of the written world.

**AM:** Do you think social media and the Internet have, on the whole, hampered our ability to read well and widely?

CDW: I don't think there's much doubt that they have radically changed reading approaches. The research I've seen points at a tendency to skim, which isn't good news for literary fiction, a type of writing that rewards the experience of difficulty. At the same time, I'm glad to see communities developing online that put readers in touch with one another. Something like Goodreads is an excellent example of that. I've had the chance to connect with other readers who have broadened my appreciation of things I might not have been exposed to otherwise. It also allows me to discuss my work with others who find my profile there. I don't agree with Jonathan Franzen that the only way to write seriously is to cut yourself off from social media. I believe whenever you commit yourself to that kind of hermetic behavior you're cutting yourself off from a large part of the world you're trying to write about.

**AM:** How did you come up with names for Rain, Wolf, and Winter—characters from *In the House of Wilderness*?

CDW: When the characters first appear in the book the tone of the writing is somewhat mythic. I thought that it only made sense that a character like Wolf, who defines himself in mythic terms, would apply names to themselves that would suit that worldview. The process of self-naming seems particularly significant to me considering these characters are interested in taking on a nature-based identity. Beyond that, there is a fairly straightforward allegorical quality to this decision. Through the



Charles Dodd White

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second half of the novel, the reliability of names begins to break down. So those names begin to diminish. In the case of Wolf, that name completely disappears.

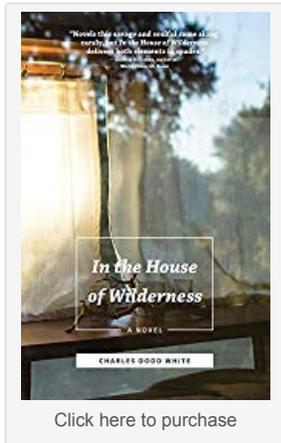
**AM: Tell us about Stratton: how he came to be, why you chose to make him a professor of music theory from Texas, his educational details—that sort of thing.**

CDW: Stratton is Wolf's counterpoint. He has lived long enough to understand that he doesn't have the answers and that believing you have the answers can cause you a lot of damn pain. He's a man that's defined by living in the aftershock of things that were beyond his control. Still, he's not simply someone who is able to give up. He sees the need to stay ethically involved in the world, despite the fact that much of the time he has felt pushed to the side. If Wolf is action, Stratton is thought. If Wolf is a brawler, Stratton is a patient counterpuncher.

**AM: Where do you prefer writing? At home? The office? Do you have a routine?**

CDW: I have been able to write at work some, but when I'm deeply into a book I find the time I have in the summer and winter break from teaching are invaluable. I am very slow at working and this routine seems to promote a deliberate approach. I like to get up, have a couple of cups of coffee, cuss at the blank screen for a little bit, then wander over to my bookcase and pull out a few books and hold them and read spots. I'll finally get back to the dining room table, tap out 250 words. I'll reward myself with a trip to the gym then a hot bath when I get back. I do another 250 words in the afternoon before my wife gets home from work. Even though I usually don't pass 500 words per day, I've spent the entire day thinking about what I'm working on, so the prose is usually tight and doesn't need a tremendous amount of revision.

**AM: To me, that is the ideal day—but only if you add a glass or two of wine to dinner. At that rate, how long did it take you to write *In the House of Wilderness*? And at the risk of demystifying the authorial experience, what steps did you take to find your publisher?**



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CDW: The book had some seeds that became a story, which was written over a couple of months. I let it sit a bit then returned to the project with the idea of expanding it into a full length book. Once I was rolling, the novel version took about ten months of steady work. After that I sent the manuscript to an agent who ended up signing me fairly quickly. The manuscript toured the New York houses, but while I received a lot of encouragement, no one seemed to have room on their current list. I knew Ohio University Press had an active list of Appalachian fiction because I'd read and admired several of their titles. I asked my agent to send the book there and the rest is history.

**AM: We've been receiving novels from Ohio University Press here at *Southern Literary Review* lately, and I like the tastes of whoever is in charge of acquisitions there. Some really great stuff is coming out of that office. You mentioned "Appalachian fiction." Is that how you'd classify your work?**

CDW: Yes, Ohio University has a great list. I'm thinking particularly of Robert Gipe and Jim Minick, but also a really well developed gathering of nonfiction books as well. I certainly write about what is generally regarded as the Appalachian South, so in that sense I think it's accurate to call my work that. However, I don't believe the book is regional in a restrictive sense. I'm trying to tell some of the big truths as I perceive them. If that means that I'm rendering a recognizable place, it simply means I'm interested in authenticity. I think the only thing a fiction writer can do at the end of the day is create a world that reflects the complications and hazards of the real one.

**AM: "The real one." That reminds me of Stratton's realization that his "professional life" had been "a counterfeit of invisibility." I like that phrase. We're ending, I suppose, with a philosophical question, but I wonder if you've any thoughts on whether we all have this realization—whether everyone discovers that parts of their lives are "a counterfeit of invisibility."**

CDW: I guess the only way I can answer that is to paraphrase Garcia Marquez's remark about living three lives—a public life, a private life, and a secret life. I think the secret life is the place of imagination and the real bedrock of what makes a fiction writer's intelligence interesting. The way we configure our identity is so much about what we desire the world to be in its most ideal state. Maybe it's as close as a writer can get to achieving a place to stand. Invisibility allows us to see more clearly, and the ability to see and then name those things is what makes art worthwhile.

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AM: This interview has been worthwhile. Thank you for doing it.

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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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