

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DAN LEACH, AUTHOR OF "FLOODS AND FIRES"

SEPTEMBER 7, 2017 BY ALLEN MENDENHALL [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Congratulations on the publication of your collection of stories, *Floods and Fires*. We share a publisher—the University of North Georgia Press—as well as a connection to Greenville, South Carolina, where I went to school at Furman. You graduated from Clemson in 2008. Were you writing stories then?

DL: Thanks, Allen. Congratulations to you, as well. I look forward to reading *The Southern Philosopher*.

With respect to your question, "stories" would be too generous a term for what I was writing back in 2008. In love with literature and intent on joining the conversation, I was definitely attempting to write them. I'd play with phrasing or produce little vignettes or sketches. I'd sometimes tinker with poetry. But I hadn't hung around long enough. I hadn't read enough good books.

It wasn't until 2012 that I wrote "The Day Getting Dark," which was the first thing I'd done that I was proud of, that I'd set beside Barry Hannah or Ron Rash and not feel bad about.

AM: Sam Baker wrote a piece in *The Telegraph* about three years ago in which he claimed that the short story, as a genre, is "having a moment." Do you think that's true?

DL: As someone who writes little else, I certainly hope that Sam's right. I've heard it observed that the best screenwriters are leaving film and making a mass exodus into television. I think you could make the same argument for fiction, couldn't you? Many of the writers I'd consider the best of our time—George Saunders, Junot Diaz, and Richard Ford, to name a few—are devoting as much or more energy to their short stories as they are their novels. Combine that with our culture's ever-dwindling attention span and I think it's possible that a long overdue "moment" has arrived for the short story. And then there's Alice Munro, a pure short story writer, winning the Nobel Prize. So—who knows?—maybe Sam's got it.

AM: Funny you mention screenwriters. I noticed that Tom Hanks—yes, *that* Tom Hanks—has just written a collection of short stories.

DL: Tom Hanks making the move into short fiction? Without having read his stuff, I'm imagining something slightly better than James Franco but nowhere near as good as Miranda July. That's interesting, though.

Anyone who works in film must have at least decent instincts for story, dialogue, and pacing, right? What will be interesting to see is the quality of the prose, especially on the sentence level. Because that kind of command, as you know, comes only after so many countless hours wrestling with the language. Who knows, though? Maybe all these years Tom's been honing his craft. What is your expectation? More or less optimistic than if Cormac McCarthy suddenly announced he was starring in a film?

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AM: I don't have an expectation, really, but I suspect Hanks had some help with the writing. One thing I like about *your* collection—to get back to the subject—is its varying narrative styles. For example, the opening story is told in the third person while the confessional first-person narrator in the second story probably seems more sophisticated to the reader than he does to the characters that populate his fictional world.

DL: Good eye. Shortly after the collection was accepted by UPNG, I reached out to several mentors regarding how to order the stories. I got some fine advice from George Singleton and Dale Ray Phillips, both of whom have been very generous with me. But it was Bret Lott who recommended avoiding the temptation to “frontload,” that is putting your strongest work first and following it in descending order of quality. Instead Bret advised ordering the stories based on narrators. He said to be aware of the balance between 1st and 3rd person voice, but also of the narrators' ages and voices. I listened, so it pleases me a great deal when a sharp reader such as yourself picks up on it.

AM: Singleton and Phillips and Lott—you've had some excellent mentors, each with a Carolina connection.

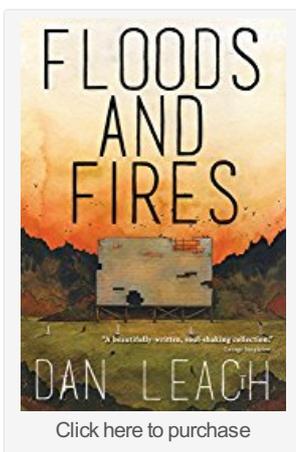
DL: There's a great story about how all that came about. I mentioned earlier that it wasn't until 2012 that I wrote my first “true” story. Well, I wrote it shortly after my first daughter had been born. Though healthy, she was a fussy kid and had her days and nights flipped around. Luckily, she was born in summer, which meant that I was on break from teaching.

Anyway, she was asleep on my chest, I was reading Singleton's *The Half-Mammals of Dixie*, and, out of the ether, an idea for a story popped into my head. I opened up a Word document and started typing. Two hours later, I had finished “The Day Getting Dark.” I read it over and, with the exception of a few hiccups in the plot, I was relatively pleased. I wanted to do something with it, but, having virtually no knowledge of the publishing process (and being too proud to type something like that into a search engine), I did what, at the time, seemed natural. I looked up George Singleton's email address (actually tracked it down on the staff directory on Wofford College's web page) and sent the story to him. This all happened sometime between 3 and 4 in the morning.

I had no idea how audacious this was and have since blamed sleep-deprivation.

To make a long story short, George answered. He read the story and liked it enough to send it to his friend Denton Loving, who at the time ran *dratthorse* literary magazine. Publishing gave me a much needed sense of validation, and I wrote a few more stories. George read them all and gave me some incredible feedback. Then, he put me in touch with Dale Ray Phillips. Not only did Dale Ray run one of my stories in *The Madrid Review*, but he has been reading my stuff ever since and basically giving me an MFA through emails.

To me, those guys are the best in the world at what they do. It'd be like being mentored by Hemingway in the 1920's or Cheever in the 1960's.



AM: I confess to feeling jealous.

DL: Keith Morris over at Clemson recently set me up with a young and talented writer named Stephen Hundley. I've been mentoring him for several months and recently celebrated with him over his first publication—a dark and hilarious Civil War piece called “Replica” that ran in *Driftwood*. Though no Singleton or Lott, I'm trying my best to pay forward some of the kindness and support that has been so generously shown to me. Hundley, by the way, is going to be huge. You read it here first.

AM: Where are you these days? Are you writing full-time or are you like the rest of us mortals who have regular jobs?

DL: As far as the writing life goes, I'm as mortal as it gets. As we speak, I'm on the clock at a large insurance company where I work as a claims adjuster. As you might imagine, this interview has been the highlight of my day. What did Dickey say of his advertising job? Something like “I sold my soul to the Devil every day and wrote like hell every night to buy it back.” That's me.

In all seriousness, I think my writing life has been better than ever since leaving teaching. I graduated from Clemson with an education degree in 2008 and worked in the classroom until October 2016. Summers and breaks were great for getting work done, but otherwise teaching sapped me pretty badly. I remember reading an Updike interview in which he said, “Whatever brain cells are required to write are the first ones killed when you step in a classroom.” Strong words from a man who taught, if I'm not mistaken, a single summer course at Harvard.

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I mentioned Stephen Hundley earlier, the young man I've been mentoring. He recently asked me how and when the work gets done. I confessed to him and I'll confess now to you: "I don't know." I'm not a particularly regimented person, so it happens in short bursts and whatever windows open up between work and kids and wife and the general wildness of life. It honestly baffles me when, after several months, I realize that I've completed several stories. I just keep showing up and, somehow, the work gets done.

AM: I strongly dislike this question, but I'm asking it anyway because I want to know the answer: Do you have a favorite story in this collection?

DL: Actually, I do. "Not Home Yet." And I say that because of its "moments." Maybe more than anything else, when I tell a story, that's what I'm after. There's probably a better, more literary word for what I'm referring to, but I don't know it. By "moments," I mean those points in a story where some combination of crisp imagery and narrative action (possibly even of symbolic motion) bring the reader to the sense that powerful is underway and that they themselves are being moved by it.

To use several inestimable examples: Nick seeing Gatsby reaching for the green light; Harry Angstrom bolting through the woods at the end of *Rabbit, Run*; or the table scene from "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." That's my general measure for how good something is: what moments it leaves you with. In "Not Home Yet," there are some I'm really proud of—for instance, in the opening scene where the couple comes home and discovers the dead hen lying in the gravel; the neighbor's various intrusions from his dark porch; and that climax when the protagonist has the shotgun against Bruce's head. Those are what I enjoy writing because those are what I enjoy reading.

A close second? "My Time at the Bottom." It's too "voicely" and will probably not engage readers like some of the more plot-driven pieces like "Transportation" or "Floods and Fires." However, there's some phrasing in that one I absolutely love.

AM: You've got much to be proud of, and I highly recommend these stories to our readers.

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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*

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