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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DANNY JOHNSON, AUTHOR OF "THE LAST ROAD HOME"

NOVEMBER 30, 2016 BY [EDITORS](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

APM: Congratulations on your debut novel, *The Last Road Home*. What's this book about?

DJ: The book is about discovery. Two kids, Junebug who is a white orphaned farm boy, and Fancy who is the daughter of black sharecroppers, meet and form a bond at the age of eight. They spend their growing-up years discovering the soul beneath their skin is very much the same. The relationship reveals Fancy's vision of a future void of hope and happiness simply because she is black, an image common among African Americans, and something Junebug never before considered. What they were as children changes when they come of age, a change which they discover has overwhelming odds.

My objective was not to preach viewpoints, but, in the form of a delightful story, my hope is readers will have their own "aha" moments and come to conclusions about their own vision of life, while at the same time understanding it may not be one shared by other folks. The beauty of life is in our differences, not our similarities, and if Americans can "discover" and appreciate that simple concept, it will be a big step forward in the reconciliation of our country.

APM: Did you find it difficult to write about race relations in the 1960s South? Did you worry that this time and place had been thoroughly explored already, or were you convinced you could bring a fresh perspective?

DJ: I wasn't sure I could bring a completely fresh perspective, but I was sure I could bring a fresh story. I don't believe it possible to overstate what conditions a large segment of our population were forced to endure for so many years; therefore, we as writers have an obligation to be the voice of what we see. Someone pointed out recently that so many new books involving race were either out or coming out, and my response was: "that's great, how are we ever going to solve these issues if we can't talk about them." I have long held strong feelings about the racial disparity in America, and have spent years thinking about how the white population could in good conscience subjugate the black one, then poke out our chest to the rest of the world and declare ourselves "the land of the free."

My Grandmother was the wife of a farmer, and spent her life digging in the dirt beside my Grandfather in order to survive. What was different about my grandmother was she was born in 1903, graduated from high school and then taught school for a few years, this in a period when the normal rural community education was limited to anywhere from two years to six. I point this out only to say my grandmother had a different viewpoint on things about which she seldom spoke, one being I never heard her use the "N" word to refer to black folks. I asked her about it, because it was as common as "pass the biscuits" in my family. She told me it was a word poor white folks needed as a safety net; that it let them believe there would always be somebody less than them; that a white man could be a sot, beat his wife, etc., but as long as he could say "at least I ain't a N" he still had worth. When I began to write the story, her words kept coming back to me. I had two wonderful characters who ended up in a place I knew about and people I understood. What began as a story of friendship expanded, and allowed me to address the issues and values of that period and how I saw them change inch by inch.

Our racial disparity began in the south, and I really believe it will be the south that brings us out of it.



Danny Johnson



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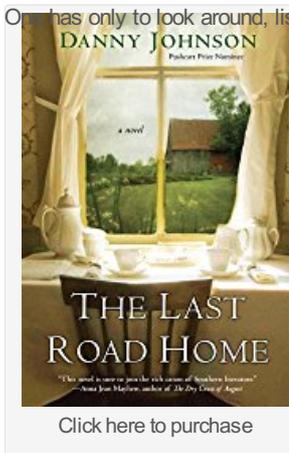
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One has only to look around, listen, and read what's coming from southern writers to have hope that a tremendous change is coming.



APM: Did you have certain literary precursors in mind when you conceived of this narrative?

DJ: Not to be blasphemous, but Huckleberry Finn. On its surface, Huckleberry Finn is a story about a boy and a slave floating down the river, but underneath, the book is an exploration of racism in that period. I have always admired Mark Twain's courage in exposing in 1885 the same thing we find ourselves still addressing 135 years later. I did not write my novel with Huck Finn in mind, but it is a similar concept since my book uses a white boy and African American girl on a comparable, albeit unplanned, journey of personal discovery, while making a statement about the conditions of racism

in the period.

APM: Every novelist has a story about how his first novel came into existence. What's yours?

DJ: There was a point a few years ago when I had nothing going. I had started and discarded a couple of novels because I could not find the voice I wanted. So, I began to sit at my computer in the morning and just start typing the first words that came to mind and then tried to make little stories from them, hoping something would click. After a couple of weeks, the two main characters in the novel showed up. I had no idea what to do with them at first, but once I paired the two in a time period I knew and in a place I knew, the story began to reveal itself. Over the next three years, I became an observer of the relationship and actions between the characters and let them tell the story, and simply wrote what I saw. My goal was for all the characters to reveal what was at stake for each of them, from the unnerving oppression to which some were subjected to the horrors of a war that tore our country apart. At the same time, I desperately wanted to keep alive Junebug and Fancy's love for each other.

APM: What's your background?

DJ: I grew up in a low-income city housing project, and my grandparents owned a farm in the county. I spent each summer with my grandparents, so I knew what that environment looked like, tasted like, and sounded like. I also came to understand the conflict between the love white folks had for African Americans as individuals versus their hate for the race.

I went into the military in 1965 and Vietnam in 1968. The book is dedicated to my African American Warrior Brother, Dot Dorsey, who was killed on February 5, 1969, when his plane flew into a mountain in Laos. I discovered so many levels of my ignorance from our friendship. I am a Distinguished Flying Cross recipient.

APM: And when did you first start writing?

DJ: I wrote my first story at the age of 62.

APM: Do fiction and nonfiction overlap in any way in *The Last Road Home*?

DJ: The individuals in the story are complete fiction; however, the attitudes and circumstances, both in growing up on a farm and in the war, are mostly based on memories. I think in literary fiction, there is always a foundation of truth, an obligation to teach what the reader may not be familiar with, and to present new ideas for them to consider.

APM: You've been busy promoting your book at bookstores and libraries. Has the publicity been fun?

DJ: I have always loved meeting folks and making new friends, chatting with them both about my book and their backgrounds, trying to understand what they may or may not have liked about the novel; and I must say the book has been very well received. The only real talent I've ever had is an intuitive understanding of people and that's been a blessing. I seem to have an overload of empathy for almost any circumstances, since many times I've experienced them myself (e.g., my wife is a cancer survivor, I had a kid on drugs, I've been to war, etc.). That's a long way around answering the question, but yes, I've had a glorious time with the folks who come to the readings; the travel, however, is hard on an old man. I just don't know how Stephen King does it.

I recently had an opportunity to be a part of the Inaugural Carolinas WordFest in Charlotte, North Carolina, a wonderful expansive literary experience for folks from kids to adults in a variety of genres. I was on a panel with four other amazing writers like L. Lamar Wilson, who is a brilliant man and addresses so many aspects of American culture, as well as Jim Grimsley and Mary Alice Monroe, who has about every literary award presented and has written so many books it's crazy. She's still so young

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—I don't get it. The panel exposed the audience to a variety of viewpoints about what literature is doing and can do to address the racial and cultural divide in America, and it was wonderful to be included with folks of such high caliber.

APM: Thanks for this interview, Danny. I wish you much success.



Allen Mendenhall

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