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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DEBORAH MANTELLA, AUTHOR OF "MY SWEET VIDALIA"

MARCH 8, 2016 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Deborah Mantella

AM: You're a transplant to the South. Yet the rich quality of your language is distinctly, authentically Southern. There's something Natasha Trethewey about it. You must be a reader of Southern literature.

DM: First of all, Allen, I am still trying to wrap my writemind around your Natasha Trethewey reference. I am truly honored. I've always been a reader with eclectic taste, and to that end, I am constantly fine-tuning my own listening and monitoring skills. As any avid reader of literary fiction would likely attest, appropriately balanced, there is nothing quite like *Southern* to lend a lyricism, to enhance flavor. Place lends a special seasoning and in many instances is as important to story as character.

AM: Do you get nervous or anxious about getting your characters' dialect and colloquialisms just right?

DM: I do my best to set my world and then to let my characters take over. Their words are their words. As mentioned, serious listening is an important capability for any writer, second only to serious reading. When a reader opens a book a sacred bond is there for the making. I agonize over all details, dialect and colloquialisms included. It's part of the job. If I am going to ask you to follow me into this other universe, this cosmos I've created, it is my duty to get that world right.

AM: This is your first novel. At what point did you decide it needed to be written? What I mean is, when did you realize you had the makings of a book?

DM: At the outset, I wanted to see, hear, and feel, the basic ideals of courage and righteousness, the best of the human spirit, jammed right up alongside the worst of humanity's shortcomings, frailties, and deceptions. In keeping with what happens in real life, I needed to allow time for Vidalia's own most intimate inner workings to catch up with what she'd gathered, by force, during her rough and tumble due diligence period.

I knew it was time once my narrator, the character of spirit-child Cieli Mae, was fully formed. With her



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impractical yet pragmatic presence, her otherworldly yet down-to-earth sensibilities, and her always nonsensical approach to what it means to be human, I couldn't wait to release her out into Vidalia's world.

AM: Where do you write?

DM: That's easy. Wherever I am when an idea strikes me—regardless of its condition. I may remember a concept, a notion, an insight, later on, but never in the same way. Once I've safely surrendered that concept, notion, or insight to a more concrete form, I can always improve upon it later.

AM: You've taught before. Did you teach writing?

DM: Writing is my personal default mode. As such, I find myself unable to exclude its intrinsic benefits, its finer points, the appreciation of language, of a sentence well-crafted, from the instruction of any subject, to any level of student. My father was my writing instructor. By profession he was an electrical engineer, but he should've been an English teacher. Or a writer.

AM: Do you believe writing is a craft that can be taught, or is it a natural gift—or something in between?

DM: I believe the *desire* to write is a gift. And that the *creativity* needed to assign order to a jumble of thoughts and words into a state of cohesiveness is also a gift. The capacity to turn that desire, that jumble, that coherency, to channel that creativity into a state of clarity is a craft whose mastery is both laborious and time-intensive.

AM: Could you talk about the importance of womanhood in *My Sweet Vidalia*? I'm referring to the concept, the trope, the metaphorical import.

DM: Womanhood rules the county of Willin, sets its parameters. Womanhood reigns supreme, whether or not its inhabitants yet know it, and even as any victory seems unlikely. The relationship between Vidalia and her spirit daughter and the addition of motherhood to the womanhood mix only ups the ante.

Despite gender-specific traits and situations, attributable at least in part to time and place, I prefer to consider my characters in terms of their own particular idiosyncrasies. And while there are several distinctly female heroes in this story — from the misguided to the hell-raising, from a feisty former suffragette to the honorable bearer of unfathomable burdens and to one soft-hearted enabler — who support one another when support is most needed, each is ultimately rescued, delivered from harm, by the vast potential of her own spirit.

AM: Thank you very much for the interview.

DM: Thank *you*, Allen.

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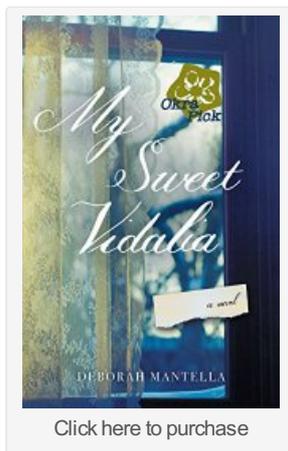
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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and educator. His book *Literature and Liberty* (Rowman & Littlefield / Lexington Books) was released in 2014. He blogs at *The Literary Lawyer*. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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