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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DEREK FURR, AUTHOR OF "SEMITONES"

FEBRUARY 17, 2016 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Derek Furr

**AM:** Thanks for taking the time to answer a few questions about your new book, *Semitones*. I want to start by asking about the title. You provide an epigraph by John Dowland that works toward defining "semitones." Could you explain the significance of this title, which I'm guessing has to do with the unique musicality of your writing that is reflected, as well, by titles in the book: "Dawn Chorus," "Aubade" and "Aubade II," "Coda," "Kindertotenlieder," and "Evensong."

**DF:** Sound and music are important in all my work—sounds of the language and sentences, references to music. The idea for the title came to me when I was working on the prose pieces that are somewhat hard to define—lyric essay, prose poem, short poetic fiction? They are between recognizable keys, so to speak. Moving up or down a semitone, a melody also seems to be on its way somewhere, to be searching, unresolved.

**AM:** Why do you think there aren't more books like this one—books which combine poetry with the lyrical prose of short fiction.

**DF:** That is probably as much a matter of marketing as of art. Before I found Fomite, I had been told by more than one editor that my books needed to be all short fiction or all poetry. But that's not how I write, and it's too narrow a definition of "book." Historically, smaller presses have tended to welcome difference and push boundaries. Perhaps that's why some of the most important literary work of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries began in tiny print runs and small publishing houses.

**AM:** Spirituality seems important in *Semitones*. I'm thinking of "The Annunciation of Mary of Upstate New York," mentions of God and Jesus and Buddha and the Virgin Mary, a prose poem—if that is the right classification—about Easter. Are you a spiritual person? A religious person?

**DF:** I was raised Baptist, and while I've moved far away from that doctrinally, I am still searching, because I still have faith that there is something to be found. It's always been important to me to understand the history and philosophy of religions, especially of the faith traditions that shaped me, and because I'm basically a student, I read about these matters whenever I can make time. I should probably also say that the language of the KJV, gospel songs, and hymns runs through my mind alongside that of



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the writers whom I've admired.

I do try to be disciplined about putting my mind on higher things—otherwise, they'll remain out of sight and mind. I play piano for a small, ethnically diverse and economically challenged Methodist congregation in the Hudson Valley. These are good people, many of whom have made mistakes or been dealt a bad hand, but they're trying to overcome. We do that in community, giving of ourselves. I guess what I'm describing is a ministry of social justice, which is what any religion or spirituality should be.

**AM: Do you have a favorite poem or story or passage from the book?**

DF: Recently I've been reading "Bruise" at my book signings. I have a deep affection for those characters and their pain. Also the idea of a "chorus of semitones."

**AM: Am I right to detect the influence of modernist Americans like Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop, whose names appear in the book?**

DF: Two of my favorites. I've written about Bishop, and I was rereading Stevens while I worked on several pieces from the book.

**AM: How did you decide to include the sketches or illustrations by Andrés San Millán?**

DF: Andres is a friend—a generous spirit and talented performer and artist. Fomite encourages collaboration, and Andres was interested in trying to create drawings based on my work. At first, I was skeptical when he suggested drawing with the words themselves. But the results were so striking that I cannot now imagine the book without his drawings: the image for "Graveyard Encounters," for instance, or the way he depicted the threesome from "Become a Light."

**AM: "The certain risk of a simple sentence." This phrase stuck with me, perhaps because some of your sentences are so powerful without being complex or ostentatious. I'm reminded of Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*, which attributed to certain modernists the ability to achieve "superfluity"—Poirier's loaded term—through the sounds of ordinary language employed with sensational effect.**

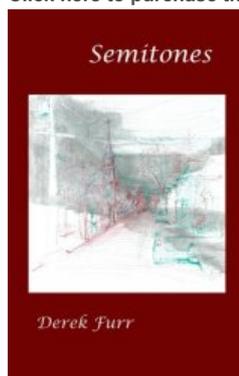
DF: There is a bit of irony in the phrase, because I was experimenting with long sentences in that piece and others of its kind. In essence, that's what I do: work with sentences. Maybe that's what all writers do at some level.

**AM: Death, ghosts—explain their place and significance in the book.**

DF: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. They're in books and music, as well as memories and bird song. And I've never met anyone who wasn't haunted. It's just a matter of being aware of what haunts you, facing it, trying to understand it, and if possible, giving it a voice in a key that others can recognize, or at least hear.

**AM: Thanks for the interview, Derek. I enjoyed it.**

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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](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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