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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DIANE C. MCPHAIL, AUTHOR OF "THE ABOLITIONIST'S DAUGHTER"

📅 DECEMBER 11, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Diane, thanks for the interview. It was so great seeing you at the Mississippi Book Festival this summer. I've had the opportunity to read *The Abolitionist's Daughter* during recent flights. It's an excellent novel. Why don't we start by having you tell our readers a little bit about it—background, characters, whatever you'd like to share.

DM: Thank you, Allen. I thoroughly enjoyed the Book Festival. It was wonderfully done. I'm so glad you enjoyed the book.

The seed of the story is an actual historical incident of some infamy that occurred in November of 1861, ten months into Mississippi's secession. I grew up hearing this story, referred to as the Greensboro Feud, though the violence only lasted a few days. The conflict involved a clash between families in which two siblings of one married two siblings of the other. By the end of the skirmish, a town mob had formed, broken into the jail, and multiple men on each side were dead, the women left to bury them. It was not until I was in middle adulthood, seeking information about my mother, who died when I was nine weeks old, that I discovered this story to be about her family. People had regaled me with the story, but no one had told me how it connected to me.

AM: Discuss the historical elements of the book, in particular the figure of Judge Matthews. You must have done a lot of historical research before writing the book, right?

DM: Yes, Allen, twelve years to be exact. I was still collecting new research right up until the manuscript was submitted. The murder of the judge, ostensibly over a land dispute with his daughter-in-law, erupted then into far-reaching violence. Over time the tale had become stereotypically simplified, as oral histories tend to do. Once I realized that the judge was my great-great grandfather, my research led me to a trove of information about him, specifically that he had been a slave-owning anti-slavery Mississippi Abolitionist. It's hard to imagine those words in one descriptive phrase, yet here this man was.

That man, Judge Matthews in the book, had inherited slaves at a time when manumission—the freeing of slaves—had been made a crime as part of the conflict-compromise process leading up to the Civil War. As a judge, he believed he could find the loopholes and legal weaknesses that would allow him to free his slaves, setting a precedent for others who might be freed. As one of the last appointed judges in the state, he came up against the threat of losing his judgeship entirely. If he had persisted, he would have been unseated and the slaves would still not be free. Nothing would have been accomplished, so he resorted to devising what good he believed possible, such as education and marriage, both illegal, but that he could accomplish in secret.

My research led to family records in the archives at Mississippi State University Library. There were no journals, but a few letters and a number of careful inventories of the plantation, which was quite large.



Diane C. McPhail

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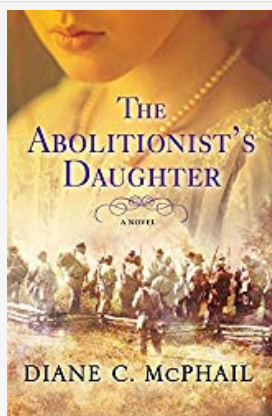
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These included: slave names, organized in married couples, families, with birthdates, all highly unusual for the time; an inventory of cows with names ranging from Empress to Grump and Dumble, not only unusual, but conveying the wit of this man; and an inventory of supplies taken by Union troops, which led me to a fascinating history of Grierson's Raid down the state as a distraction of Confederate troops from Union efforts along the Mississippi to take Vicksburg by the river.

AM: Wow, fascinating stuff. What's also fascinating is that you're a minister. You hold a doctorate in ministry. You also earned your M.F.A. In what order did you achieve these? What motivated you to study in both areas?

DM: Well, Allen, you have touched on the reality that I never quite knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. I majored in French and lived in France as an exchange student. My M.F.A. is actually in Painting and I was director of a gallery in Atlanta for many years. I then earned a second Masters in Clinical Art Therapy and worked in outpatient mental health, perhaps the most rewarding work of my life. After we moved from Atlanta to the mountains of North Carolina, I decided to follow a life-long interest in Theology and pursued my doctorate in ministry.

I had been writing poetry since I was in college, and later, flash fiction. In Atlanta I received a commission to create a thirteen-figure sculpture garden as the center of Lenox Park, incorporating image, poetry, and theology on a theme of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden as the psychological journey we all must make out of innocence and into a reluctant, but necessary, "knowing" of life as it is. *The Abolitionist's Daughter* is a culmination, for me, of all of these elements of my history. Along the way, I have studied with a number of great writers, including Madeleine L'Engle, Jane Smiley, Louis Bayard, Lisa Page, and Jacquelyn Mitchard, among others.



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AM: Should readers look for religious or spiritual themes in *The Abolitionist's Daughter*?

DM: Absolutely. They abound. The haste to judgement is one. I think of my exploration of full humanity of character as a spiritual endeavor. The best of us have some dark corners and the worst of us have some bright spots. A prime theme is the question of conflict between morality and legality. We tend, superficially, to equate them, but they are often in conflict. At the heart of spiritual issues for me personally is the ongoing question of how to do the right and moral thing when that is made impossible by legal or cultural standards, things such as: legalized injustice; racial issues; educational and economic discrepancies; family separation; slavery "by another name"; and a plethora of other issues, all of which stem, at core, from a failure of authentic religion and true spirituality.

AM: Is Emily in any way representative of women in general, her personal struggles and achievements mirroring those of women throughout society?

DM: That is a fascinating question and one I have not encountered before. You challenge me here, Allen. I would begin by saying "not intentionally." However, the Civil War, with its extreme casualties all over the country, led to a significant increase in responsibility for women, which in turn, contributed to Suffragism and ultimately the emergence of Feminism. Emily, in her growth through grief and responsibility, does embody that journey I mentioned earlier into a necessary, if reluctant, "knowing," of life as reality. Her journey brings her to the full maturity, which if we are fortunate, however difficult it may be, is a worthy endeavor.

AM: What's the best piece of writing advice you ever received?

DM: Only one? Read.

AM: What's the worst piece of writing advice you ever received?

DM: A fellow student at Yale Writers pegged my novel as "another white savior" story, in spite of the historical realities of slavery and the Civil War. The suggested corrective? Make Ginny, the educated slave, the one I consider to be my strongest character, the epitome of wisdom, a "take no prisoners" Black woman, to be a bi-racial offspring of the judge.

AM: You recently got mixed up in some protests in Chile. What happened?

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DM: My husband and I, along with two other friends, made a much anticipated tour of Patagonia. I almost hesitate to mention a powerful intuition I had, perhaps weeks before the trip, not to go to Santiago. Just before the trip, riots and demonstrations broke out, with 23 deaths and hundreds of injuries. All of our inquiries and updates from both the travel agency and the hotel assured us nothing was happening in the area where we would be. A bad fall in the airport that put me in a wheelchair to the flight—entirely my own fault. We arrived in Santiago, still with full assurances of our safety and “all calm.” However, we arrived in front of our hotel to find peaceful demonstrations on the side street. The other three in my party entered the hotel. I heard explosions and saw the crowd turn, stampeding toward me. My throat and nose filled with tear gas.

Most everything was closed, so our guide was simply taking us from one closed museum or park to another. The Cathedral was open and utterly beautiful, but when we came out, my phone suddenly delivered three different fraud alerts. Reaching for credit cards, I discovered my bag had been slashed in the Cathedral and everything stolen. So the rest of my time in Santiago centered on the U.S. Embassy, where only minimum staff remained. But they got me a temporary passport, in spite of most photography places being closed. Now I am spending the aftermath in mounds of red tape trying to prove I still exist as myself!

If I wrote this all in a plot, it would be rejected as unbelievable—too melodramatic and predictable! Think I'll stick to historical fiction.

AM: You live in Highlands now. Are you from North Carolina? Do you consider yourself a Southerner? Have you always been interested in the Civil War?

DM: I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, grew up in the Mississippi Delta, graduated Ole Miss. I am about as Southern as one gets to be. I moved to North Carolina from Atlanta about twenty-five years ago. I live in an old grist mill with all the stones, gears, and machinery still in place and have never felt more at home.

And no, the history of the Civil War came into my interest at the right time in my life, like so many other things. I still am not quite sure what I want to be when I grow up!

AM: Me either, Diane. And I hope I never grow up. Thank you for the interview.

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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*

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