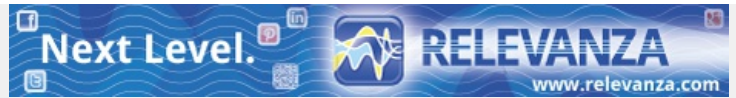


SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South



HOME	ABOUT	SUBMISSIONS	BOOKSTORE	CONTENTS	FREE SUBSCRIPTION	NOVEMBER 6, 2015
BOOK REVIEWS	READ OF THE MONTH	AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS	CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS	MISCELLANEOUS	NEWS & EVENTS	

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Elizabeth Harris, Author of "Mayhem"

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS ELIZABETH HARRIS, AUTHOR OF "MAYHEM"

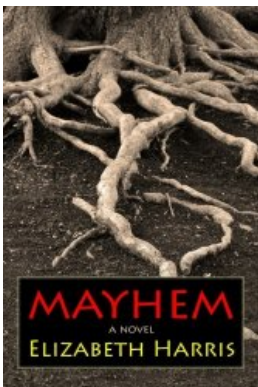
NOVEMBER 5, 2015 BY ALLEN MENDENHALL [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Elizabeth Harris

AM: I appreciate your taking the time to do this interview. Your writing has been called "literary fiction." Your prose is beautiful and complex, allusive and fluid. The first pages of *Mayhem* call attention to "a crime whose mention makes men cross their legs," locate readers in early 20th century Texas, and reference Herodotus and Thucydides. Your prose is sophisticated and musical, poetic and meandering. Do you feel that popular fiction today lacks the lyricism and complexity that characterize so-called literary fiction? Do you feel that literary fiction is a fair characterization of your work, or perhaps that all fiction should, in essence, be literary?

EH: Thank you for your kind remarks on this semi-crime novel about a Texas woman in the early 20th century. I love good writing. And I do see much published fiction I wish had been better written—sometimes my fingers twitch for a pencil to edit a book into the better work I can see hidden in it. But lyricism seems to me a stylistic choice apart from "good writing," and I certainly wouldn't want to see everybody writing the same style. For me, part of the delight in reading is the rich variety available. For instance, besides fiction called "literary" and some detective, historical, and young adult, I read history, biography, a little theology, and the occasional targeted self-help book. *Quiet*, about being an introvert, was important to me; also David Burns's *Feeling Good*, about depression.



I suppose the term "literary fiction" is useful to readers in finding the books they want, or reviewers and booksellers wouldn't use it. Depending on how we understand it, "literary fiction" could be a fair characterization of *Mayhem*, but we don't all understand the term in the same way. I was getting questions about it last night on Writer's Chat Room. To some readers it sounds snobbish or exclusionary. Although I've read agents' websites that call literary fiction "character driven," as opposed to "plot driven," which applies only to a slice of modern and contemporary fiction—as I've incidentally suggested in a short piece about Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* at elizabethharriswriter.com.

I've heard literary fiction more convincingly characterized as focusing attention on language—and now we're getting back towards *Mayhem*. But lyricism is only one way for language to be foregrounded, which is what happens when it attempts art. Think of fiction by Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway (who, granted, also has a lyrical side), Raymond Chandler, James Cain, J. D. Salinger (in *The Catcher in the*



TOP POSTS & PAGES

[November Read of the Month: "The Curse of Crow Hollow," by Billy Coffey](#)

[Allen Mendenhall Interviews Elizabeth Harris, Author of "Mayhem"](#)

[Free Subscription](#)

["Southern Women and Their Birds," Essay by John Nelson](#)

[SLR Welcomes New Contributor John Ryan Hrebik](#)

["The Forsaken," by Ace Atkins](#)

SEARCH THE SITE

Search this website ...

SEARCH

FREE SUBSCRIPTION

Email Address

Subscribe

[unsubscribe from list](#)

powered by [MailChimp!](#)

TOPICS

[Author Profiles & Interviews](#) (97)

[Book Reviews](#) (263)

[Conferences and Festivals](#) (36)

[Contributors' Bios](#) (68)

Rye), John Edgar Wideman, who all variously draw attention to language by means of colloquialism, rhythm, and tone.

Allen, I'm flattered and delighted that *Mayhem's* focus on language pleases you, as I hope it does other readers. I think "literary fiction" is a fair characterization of *Mayhem* if readers can strip away the connotations of "a dull book we had to read in high school." If not, I'd replace the term with "everything else," which a friend of mine proposes—so we would have a marketing category for *Mayhem*, which is partly a fictional woman's "her-story" and partly a historically-set crime novel. My ideal (everybody needs an ideal) would be to produce books that are brilliantly written and gripping, fascinating.

AM: What is the "mayhem" referred to in your title?

EH: The mayhems I was most aware of when working on the novel were the most dramatic two, the castration of Charlie McCoy and the metaphoric cutting off of Evelyn, this traditional and deeply-rooted Central Texas woman from her family and—apart from her involvement in the incident—from her history and prior social identity. But I chose the title because it seemed resonant beyond those.

I didn't think through how: I don't do lit. crit. on my own work except to solve problems. I've learned from reviewers to see that the gender ideas contributing to the novel's complex crime also represent a cutting of connection, as do the racial ones that condition Evelyn's delivery to her next life.

AM: How did you come to write about women in Central Texas during this time period, and how did your childhood in Texas shape this narrative?

EH: The time setting, roughly 1917-1954, was given by the decision to include certain backstories about vigilante justice and about the Civil War in Central Texas, and by the need to establish Evelyn's life as a geriatric nurse before World War Two. During and after that war, white women's employment opportunities outside small towns expanded so enormously that Evelyn would've needed complicating reasons, even at first, to stay and labor "for room and board and a few dollars a week" in this town where she is ostracized by almost everybody.

There's a lot from my Texas childhood in this novel. As you, Allen, might guess from having read it, the idea for it derived from my childhood encounters with the "live-in" geriatric nurses of some elderly relatives—some of whom could barely afford them—and from my interest, afterwards recalled periodically, in who these women were. There had always seemed to be a story about them nobody would tell me. So I wrote the novel, as the author-character claims, to imagine one of those stories—although some other things the author-character says about herself in the novel are entirely fictional.

And many other bits of childhood observation and family lore contributed to the novel's design. For instance, to show me how disastrously certain men, even with good intentions, could behave towards girls and women. To set up a river with a shared fishing camp on it such as some older members of my family used to host family reunions. To create one important character, the outspoken, bed-ridden Baptist Mrs. Theriot—although the main characters, except the author, are wholly fictional. To imagine the daily labor of landowning rural folk, which I saw every time I visited an aunt and uncle of mine on the other side of the family, who were stock farmers. I could write a very long list of how my childhood helped shape the narrative, but you get the idea.

AM: What makes you write?

EH: It's fun, in that painful, demanding way that maybe running marathons—which I don't do—is fun. Writing is the thing I do that takes all of me, that absorbs me completely.

AM: Your first book was a collection of stories. What made you turn to the novel?

EH: The novel was my first love, for the way you can disappear into one, and, then, when you have to come out and leave it, you know it's still there and you can go back into it whenever you have the time. But I love all kinds of stories: telling a story is for me the most natural way to engage a situation. This is characteristic of what are apparently called "narrative thinkers": people who, if you ask them how their day was, will tell you a story. But it may also be culturally learned in Southern families.

When I began to write fiction I wrote short pieces, as many writers do, because they seem more manageable, you can see the whole thing at once, and that helps when you know that you don't know what you're doing. But one of the things I discovered in writing some stories in *The Ant Generator* was that the situations that interest me most often go deep in time and character. I really am a novelist.

AM: Would you describe yourself as a reader or a writer first?

EH: Oh, a reader. As unappetizing as the idea is to me of living without writing, I was a reader before I could write, and I will be a reader after I can't write, if I live to that point.

AM: Do you write every day?

[Essays](#) (8)

[General](#) (7)

[Grants and Contests](#) (16)

[News & Events](#) (74)

[Read of the Month](#) (80)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

➤ ARCHIVES

Archives

Select Month

➤ TAGS

[Alabama](#) [Allen Mendenhall](#)
[Amy Susan Wilson](#) [Appalachia](#) [Author](#)
[Interview](#) [Charleston](#) [Claire Hamner](#) [Maturro](#)
[Contests](#) [Contributor](#) [Daniel Sundahl](#)
[Donna Meredith](#) [Eudora Welty](#)
[Fiction](#) [Flannery O'Connor](#) [Florida](#)
[Georgia](#) [Interview](#) [Julie Cantrell](#) [Karen](#)
[White](#) [Louisiana](#) [Mississippi](#)
[New Orleans](#) [nonfiction](#) [North](#)
[Carolina](#) [novel](#) [Oxford](#) [Patricia](#)
[O'Sullivan](#) [Philip K. Jason](#) [Poetry](#)
[Read of the Month](#) [Rhett DeVane](#) [Short](#)
[Stories](#) [SLR](#) [South Carolina](#)
[Southern Literary](#)
[Review](#) [Southern Literature](#)
[Tennessee](#) [Texas](#) [The Civil War](#) [The](#)
[Oxford](#) [American](#) [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) [Virginia](#)
[William Aarnes](#) [William Faulkner](#) [Young](#)
[Adult](#)

EH: Every day but Sunday, under ordinary circumstances. Sabbath time, whenever I take it, is essential to health and love and community and my writing as well as I can the rest of the time.

AM: If you could read only three books ever again, what would they be?

EH: What a horrible thought! If they had to be novels, I'd be like that character in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, who ends up held captive in the jungle by a nutcase who demands that he read Dickens to him for the rest of his life. Fortunately, you said, "books," not "novels." Much as I love novels, there are no three novels I'd want to read for the rest of my life.

All the same, my mind leaps instantly to ways to cheat. Like, my big book from graduate school, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, which I never spent enough time with. That would give me drama and poetry. Then—still looking for ways to cheat—maybe *The Bible*, partly since there are so many different books and genres in it. And, for a third book, if I'm allowed two volumes and a magnifying glass, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, not the e-edition but the one with all the historical word derivations. There's more than enough fascination in that for the rest of my life.

AM: Religion is important in *Mayhem*. Are you a religious person?

EH: In my resolutely unorthodox way, I am, and happy in a church that welcomes people like me (so please, good folks who think yours will save my soul, bless you, but don't try). I believe in Christianity as a way, a practice. Religion is important in *Mayhem* because churches were/are socially important in small towns in the South—thus a dramatic resource for a novel set partly in one. The main religious characters are meant to practice Christian forgiveness where others make categorical gender judgments of a woman found in an ambiguous situation who is, in fictive fact, suffering from PTSD.

Several of these characters are clerical, and I was recalling how—before the Civil Rights era famously revealed this—certain religious leaders might cautiously cross racial lines, transgress other social mores in witness, and get away with it because of their position.

I also became interested, working on *Mayhem*, in how Christianity has interacted with the ancient honor-shame culture, which it historically softened and interiorized. (An excellent book on this is Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor*, which helped me write the novel.) In American Christianity there's been a more recent backlash of that ancient tribal culture, creating an ugly public "religious" culture of judgment and shaming.

And in case that's more than anybody wanted to encounter about religion here, I should add I might be a little overenthusiastic about the topic, since *Mayhem* is the first piece I've written that engages it.

AM: Thank you for taking the time to discuss your writing with us. I wish you the best with *Mayhem* and all your future projects.

SHARE THIS:



LIKE THIS:



Be the first to like this.

RELATED

[Allen Mendenhall Interviews Howard G. Franklin, Author of "Gideon's Children"](#)

May 20, 2015

In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

[Allen Mendenhall Interviews Barbara Davis, Author of "The Wishing Tide"](#)

November 13, 2014

In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

[Allen Mendenhall Interviews Lindsay Parnell, Author of Dogwood](#)

August 13, 2015

In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

FILED UNDER: [AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#) TAGGED WITH: [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#), [ELIZABETH HARRIS](#), [MAYHEM](#), [SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW](#)



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.

LEAVE A REPLY