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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS EMILY CARPENTER, AUTHOR OF "THE WEIGHT OF LIES"

 JULY 6, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: *The Weight of Lies* is a thriller that critics have labeled as "Southern Gothic." Are they right?

EC: I wholeheartedly endorse the Southern Gothic label. There are some other elements at play in the book—bits of romance, horror, and family drama—but overall, I'd really hoped for that delicious moss-draped, muddy, "there's-something-off-about-this-place" feel you get in the best Southern Gothic books. The bulk of the novel takes place on a private island off the coast of Georgia. Throw in a mysterious, unsolved murder, and, frankly, it doesn't get more Southern Gothic than that.

AM: And you live in Georgia?

EC: I do. I am from Alabama and went to Auburn University, but have—for the most part—lived in Georgia since the 90s. I've had the good fortune to vacation on Sea Island, St. Simons and explore several of the other smaller islands off the coast, and they provided the inspiration for Bonny, the fictitious island in the book.

AM: War Eagle! I live in Auburn and earned my doctorate there. Do you ever make it back?

EC: I do occasionally. I love Auburn—have great memories there. I miss it. War Eagle!

AM: Central to *The Weight of Lies* is book-within-a-book framing: Your characters write or have written books. How did you come up with this approach?

EC: It's a job I know, obviously, being a writer, and so can speak with a little bit of authority on it. Which means I didn't have to do a whole lot of research.

But seriously, the book-within-a-book structure is definitely not an idea I came up with. Other books have done it—one I'm thinking of in particular is Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*.

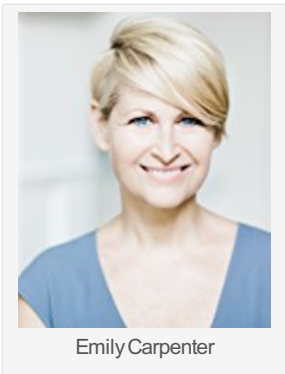
I didn't necessarily set out to handle it like she did, with the brief excerpts of the book inserted every other chapter, but as the novel evolved, I discovered that approach seemed to work for the narrative and injected a lot more tension and suspense into what was going on, so I did end up doing it.

I was fascinated that this young woman Meg could've grown up with such a wildly famous novelist mother—basically her whole life was shaped by the success of one book—and she had never managed to read it. I think that said a lot about who she was as a person, how she had dealt with things in her life. And so this is the turning point where she's finally going to just read the damn thing, see what all the fuss is about and decide for herself if her mother is a hero or villain or something in between.

AM: You mentioned Rainbow Rowell. What other contemporary authors do you enjoy reading?

EC: Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, Philippa Gregory, Gillian Flynn, Jo Jo Moyes, Joshilyn Jackson, Paula Hawkins. As you can see I'm all over the map in terms of genre.

AM: Do you have a favorite genre—as a reader, not as a writer?



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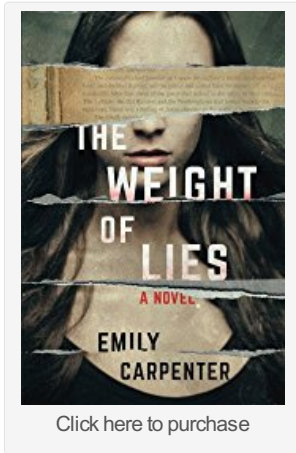
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EC: I really do love suspense, which is why I decided to write it. It's my go-to genre. It all started with Nancy Drew probably. I used to pretend I was her when I was a little girl, only my neighborhood was disappointingly lacking when it came to mysteries that needed solving by a ten-year-old.

AM: Interesting how the person we are as children turns out to be so like the person we are as adults, no matter how much we protest or attempt to change our likes and preferences. Did you write as a child?



EC: I read mostly, voraciously. I attempted a few stories, but because creative writing wasn't really a part of the school curriculum, I don't think I realized it was something a kid could do. And I didn't really understand how to go about it. Isn't that strange? It was like I needed to be given permission to do it.

The first time I remember a teacher actually assigning us a creative writing exercise I was in junior high and I wrote this descriptive paragraph. The teacher read mine out loud and complimented it and it was like a life-changing experience for me, being told I was good at something. I've never forgotten it. Never forgotten how special that teacher, Mrs. Flowers, made me feel.

AM: Were there others who helped to cultivate your facility with the written word?

EC: Not really. During college, I did dabble in writing for the school newspaper, and at one point, I had an English professor suggest I major in English because he thought my essays were good. But for the most part, what little writing I attempted, I kept under wraps.

After college, I tried my hand at screenwriting, which wasn't really taught anywhere near me, so reading craft books was pretty much the extent of my training. I've never taken a fiction-writing class—except one weeklong workshop two years ago from Benjamin Percy, which was fantastic. Craft books have been a lifeline.

AM: Do you ever teach writing?

EC: I don't really consider myself a teacher, but maybe one day. I could probably see myself getting into a week-long workshop format. I probably have about a week's worth of helpful information to share with folks. I did start a writing accountability program called [The Draft House](#) with another author M.J. Pullen where we help people reach word counts and finish a first draft of their novels.

AM: How strict was your writing schedule for *The Weight of Lies*?

EC: I drive myself fairly hard when I'm drafting a book. For *Weight* I made myself write 1,000 – 2,000 words a day, not including weekends.

These days I'm a little more forgiving because I've realized I can't always forge ahead if the story isn't there yet. Sometimes it's more productive to allow myself that thinking time, in order to settle on just the way I want to write a scene.

The only problem with me is, I'm no good at skipping ahead to write another scene. I'm so linear, to a weird degree. I feel as if each scene builds on the last, not only in terms of plot, but tension. So that slows me down at times.

AM: Has your linear mode of thinking led to any new book ideas?

EC: So, I should clarify: I'm super-linear when I'm drafting a new book, but I'm all over the map when it comes to new ideas. Sometimes I'll think up a hook or it'll just be a scene, character or even a climactic moment. New ideas do not respect my need for order.

AM: Thanks, Emily, for taking the time to discuss *The Weight of Lies* and your writing.

Thank you! Great chatting with you.

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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 of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

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