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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS GEORGE WEINSTEIN, AUTHOR OF "WATCH WHAT YOU SAY"

📅 DECEMBER 26, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [🗨️ LEAVE A COMMENT \(EDIT\)](#)

AM: Thanks, George, for this interview. I think we met once, years ago, at an Atlanta Writers Conference. This must have been around 2010 or 2011, when I was still a doctoral student in English and living in Atlanta—Alpharetta to be precise. What strikes me about the release of your new novel, *Watch What You Say*, is how prolific you've become. What's your secret?

GW: Thank you for this opportunity, Allen. Sorry to destroy the illusion of my apparent productivity, but the truth is that many of my titles—the Southern historical novel *Hardscrabble Road*, the novel of "forgotten" U.S. history *The Five Destinies of Carlos Moreno*, and the relationship drama *The Caretaker*—were written in the 2000s. It just took a very long time to find a publisher. Even worse, I had to part ways with that first publisher after my mystery novel *Aftermath* was released and find a new publisher to resurrect my backlist and then publish my new suspense thriller *Watch What You Say*. For each of my books, it takes me about two years to write umpteen drafts and edit the manuscript ad nauseum until I feel that it's ready to submit for publication. In the nearly 20 years I've been writing novels, I haven't managed to get faster than that, though with *Watch What You Say* more upfront planning and research meant fewer drafts, so I think the actual writing process was quicker for this one.



George Weinstein

AM: Tell our readers a little about *Watch What You Say*. This is your first thriller, correct?

GW: *Watch What You Say* is indeed my first thriller, a suspenseful kidnap tale. In the standard abduction story, there's a damsel in distress and coming to her rescue is the heroic husband, who's usually given a Navy SEAL backstory or some other badass background to make his exploits plausible. In *Watch What You Say*, it's the dude in distress—Bo Riccardi's husband—and Bo must try to find and save him even though she's a regular person with no military moves, law enforcement experience, or martial arts expertise. Rather, she is a gifted Internet radio interviewer. The kidnapper demands that Bo interview him live on-air or Oscar will die. Suspense, thrills, and chaos ensue.

AM: I mentioned graduate school earlier. I recall a number of aspiring young professors who claimed to possess a form of synesthesia. I heard those claims so many times that I'm now skeptical of intellectuals who say they're synesthetic. I mean, how many cases of synesthesia could there be in one small English department? You researched synesthesia for this book, specifically the character Bo Riccardi, who has not just synesthesia but chromesthesia. Am I wrong about synesthesia? Is it so common?

GW: According to the National Institutes of Health, 5%-15% of the world's population has some form of synesthesia, the blending of senses. It seems improbable that so many academics in one department

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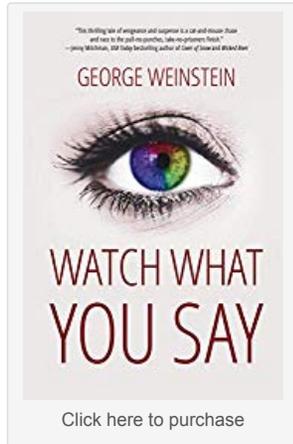
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claim to possess some version of synesthesia, but I think we've all experienced a flash of this cross-wiring at one point or another: a sound that seems to produce a color (maybe that's how "blues" music got its name), a taste that seems to produce a feeling of shapes in one's mouth, an odor that evokes a skin reaction, etc. It's possible these aspiring profs extrapolated from a single or a few instances to boast about experiencing the world in a way they thought made them unique and intriguing.

In Bo's case, she hears as much or more with her eyes as her ears: chromesthesia. Musicians as varied as Duke Ellington, Billy Joel, Mary J. Blige, and Tori Amos were/are all synesthetes with chromesthesia. In Bo's case, every sound produces a mental image of moving, colorful shapes. She's learned to interpret these such that, if you're speaking, she can tell your emotions and also your intent. This makes her the ultimate BS detector, as she can literally watch what you say. She hopes this will give her an edge over the kidnapper, but there are problems when one relies too much on a dominant strength, as Bo will soon learn.

AM: How did you get linked up with SFK Press?



GW: In your introduction, you mentioned the Atlanta Writers Conference, which I created for the Atlanta Writers Club in 2009 and have directed ever since, bringing literary agents, acquisitions editors, and other publishing professionals to Atlanta twice each year.

On May 8-9, 2020, we'll be offering our 21st conference. About the same time you were participating, another writer named Steve McCondichie—a real estate novelist, like in Billy Joel's "Piano Man"—was also searching for representation leading to publication. We became friends over a series of conferences. Years passed, Steve got his MFA, and he finally decided to start his own publishing company, which he called Southern Fried Karma, or SFK, Press. We'd stayed in touch. I told him of my experiences with my first publisher as a cautionary tale, and he offered me the opportunity to be his first traditionally published author. In 2018, he brought a few of my titles back into print with great new covers and crackerjack

editing. In 2019, he brought out the remainder of my backlist and published *Watch What You Say*, which was named in the fall of 2019 as one of only a dozen "Okra Picks" (favorite books) by the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance.

AM: Do you ever read your writing out loud?

GW: I've also run a critique group for writers since 2006. One of our tenets is that we always read our work aloud while the other participants follow along with written copies. It's a great way to spot problems with rhythm, repetition of words and phrases ("echoes"), missing words, dialogue that falls flat, narrative that goes on too long, and other problems that are sometimes hard to spot when writers are looking at a manuscript on their own. Something about reading aloud in public forces us to pay closer attention to what's actually on the page instead of what we think ought to be there.

AM: How is the writing community in and around Atlanta? I know you live in Roswell, right around where I grew up. I eat on Canton Street often when I'm visiting family.

GW: Judging by the growth in the Atlanta Writers Club (AWC), the Metro Atlanta writing community is thriving and growing ever larger and more diverse. When I took over as president the first time in 2004, we had 48 paying members and were lucky to get a dozen people at a meeting. I just took over the presidency again in 2019 for another term or two, and the AWC now boasts nearly 1,100 members, with a mailing list in excess of 7,000, 120-150 in attendance at every monthly meeting, and 230 or more at each conference. Our membership is trending younger than before, with much more minority representation, so I'm hopeful about our future.

AM: Was your writing process more or less the same for a thriller as it was for your other work?

GW: I'm becoming more disciplined about outlining beforehand and really understanding the story beats and genre expectations before I start work on the manuscript. As a result, I'm having to write fewer drafts, and the editing process is easier. In every novel, I tackle subjects I've researched to death. I've found that most readers love to learn new things, as do I, so much of my upfront work on *Watch What You Say* included interviewing synesthetes and reading books and articles by or about them, as well as learning about the evolution of cellular phone technology, the darknet, nefarious uses of social media, firearms, knives, and internet/web radio. When I'm excited about a subject, that enthusiasm is transmitted to readers through pacing, word choice, and the details I choose to share. The more I learn,

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the more I enjoy the process of entertaining readers while providing just enough education that they might explore the subject on their own after they turn the final page.

AM: Once again: many thanks for this interview. I hope we cross paths again soon.

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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 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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