

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS HEATHER WEBBER, AUTHOR OF "MIDNIGHT AT THE BLACKBIRD CAFÉ"

 AUGUST 28, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Heather, thanks for doing this interview about *Midnight at the Blackbird Café*, a novel about Anna Kate, who finds herself back in Alabama upon her grandmother's death. I'm curious how someone from Massachusetts who lives in Ohio decided on Alabama as the setting for this book. And for the readers' sake, I'll point out that we're doing this interview from a distance, and I just happen to be in Alabama.



Heather Webber

HW: It's all due to Southern magic—plain and simple.

I first visited Alabama in February 2007. I had flown from southern Ohio to participate in the Murder in the Magic City book conference in Birmingham and the corresponding event, Murder on the Menu, in Wetumpka. During the hour and a half drive from one city to the other, among the small towns, pastures and fields, old farmhouses and new neighborhoods, kudzu vines and Spanish moss, I bonded with Alabama. It's a deep

connection that I, to this day, cannot fully explain.

It's as though I could sense the land's energy, its history, and its magic. It felt strangely like...home.

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I eventually decided that if I couldn't physically live in Alabama, I could travel there as often as I wanted through my books. I have a mystery series (written as Heather Blake) set in a fictional town in northern Alabama, and happily, I'm back with *Midnight at the Blackbird Café*.

AM: Did you find anything here that served as a model for the Blackbird Café, perhaps without the magical realism—or perhaps *with it*?

HW: Not necessarily with the café, but with the setting. Since I believe mountains possess their own kind of magic, I knew I wanted to set *Midnight* in a mountain town, and I think Alabama readers will recognize that the town of Wicklow is exactly where Mentone would be found on a map. While doing research for the story, I came across a snippet about a former artist's colony in Alabama (the Dixie Art Colony), and with that I knew I'd found the heartbeat of Wicklow—because I believe artists are a little bit magical, too.

AM: What's your earliest writing memory?

HW: The first time I remember truly connecting to writing was in the eighth grade. I wrote an essay about my grandfather's love of Chuckles (the candy not the clown). Some thirty-plus years later, the affection and emotion behind the words remain with me, which says everything about the power of writing, doesn't it?

AM: I think so. I can remember being four or five and using a semi-colon in some sentence I was writing. I'm sure I used it incorrectly, but I was so proud that I knew what one was and I held up the sentence to show my relatives—we were at a family reunion—and was pleased at their affirmation.

Food figures prominently in your novel, and that's interesting because we can all relate to descriptions of food, which brings up associations with all the senses: taste and sight and smell and touch and sound.

HW: I'm always taken aback when social media experts suggest not to post about food. It's a topic that binds us together as a global community. Food fellowship. And you're absolutely right about the associations. Only the other day I mentioned that the scent of tropical punch immediately takes me back to childhood. Everyone has these types of connections—it's what makes us so relatable to each other, even if we're from vastly different backgrounds.

AM: I think a lot of our readers would love some writing tips. So many of them are emergent or aspiring writers, and we receive lots of requests for writing advice that we cannot respond to because of the volume of emails we receive. Any advice for these people?

HW: Writing advice can be tricky, because what works for me might not work for someone else. However, having said that, there are some pieces of advice I swear by. One is to write consistently—a certain amount of words or pages a week. If you write only one (250-word) page a day you'll have a book before the year is through. Also, every writer needs a healthy dose of perseverance because publishing is a hard business—even after you're published but especially before. It took nearly five years

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of writing, and many rejections, before I was offered a contract. Keep writing, keep submitting, keep reading, and keep learning the craft.

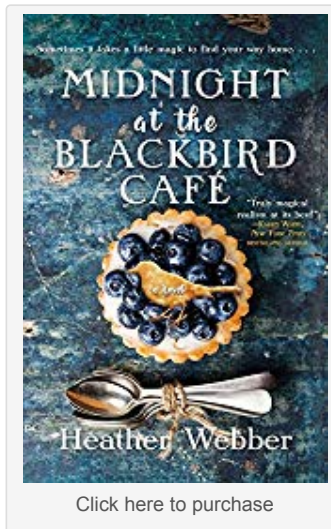
AM: That's excellent advice. What was the most difficult part of alternating narration between Natalie and Anna Kate?

HW: As Anna Kate and Natalie are a lot alike in many ways, the most difficult part for me was ensuring each had their own distinctive voice and personality. Especially with dialogue, it helped that Anna Kate didn't grow up in the South. Other noticeable differences were seen through their actions, in the ways they dealt with other people, stress, anger, and happiness.

AM: Whenever I think of blackbirds, I think of Wallace Stevens's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." What are three ways of looking at a blackbird in your novel?

HW: For me the blackbirds in *Midnight at the Blackbird Café* are fairly simple—yet powerful—representations of love, life after death, and solace. Ideally, when readers close this book, they'll have found comfort in the belief that after someone dies they're not really gone, whether that feeling comes from a treasured memory...or from a dream that seems very real.

AM: Lovely, Heather. Thanks for the interview. When you find yourself back in Alabama, I know the perfect café where we can meet up. Until then, happy writing.



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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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