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A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JESSICA HOOTEN WILSON

 JUNE 22, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Jessica Hooten Wilson

AM: You've written three books in quick succession that should appeal to readers of *Southern Literary Review*. The first involves Flannery O'Connor, and the second and third, Walker Percy. I'd like to start by asking about the second book, *Walker Percy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Search for Influence*, because I'm also interested in notions of influence. Read my book on Holmes if you don't believe me. What distinguishes your treatment of influence from, say, Harold Bloom's, and what are your central claims about Dostoevsky's influence on Percy?

JHW: I take Harold Bloom to task in my book, both in my introduction and more explicitly in my conclusion, which is titled "A Christian's Response to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*." Despite Bloom's

genius, I audaciously argue that he misunderstands Christianity and thus influence as it functions in the Christian tradition. Bloom argues that the Protestant God places its followers in a double bind of "Be like Me" but "Do not presume to be too like me." The premise of his influence theory is profoundly religious, but the correct interpretation of the Protestant—or I would be more ecumenical and say Christian—God is a command to follow me down a path of kenosis, which is self-emptying. If one follows a leader into such great humility, then there is no rivaling. Medieval writers understood this path for centuries—they all glossed the old stories without feeling a desire to overcome them or outdo them with individual originality. Marie de France claims in her prologue that she retells ancient stories to help her readers in building their characters and developing virtue. Chaucer saw the value of Dante and Boccaccio and he purposefully reset the good and true of their stories in his time and place, as did Shakespeare after him.

I claim that Percy, after he converted to Catholicism, recognized how writers before him had imitated other Christian authors in order to tell the best stories and perpetuate the good, true, and beautiful. He had no idea how to be a writer, and especially how to write for a secular audience about the truths he discovered in his faith. But, as he tells Caroline Gordon, he thought Dostoevsky most succeeded in such a venture, in writing Christian novels that could do "ass-kicking for Jesus," as Percy says. So, he copied him—aesthetically, in content, and in theme. Yet, without any of the rivaling or need for originality that Bloom claims exists.

AM: What first drew you to Percy?

JHW: There's the real answer, then there's the answer that makes a good story and will make others want to read Percy.

The first is that Percy was forced upon me in various situations—graduate seminars, mostly. I thought he was a good storyteller, but it was not love at first read. I didn't get what he was up to, and there were too many middle-aged men having frivolous affairs with young girls.

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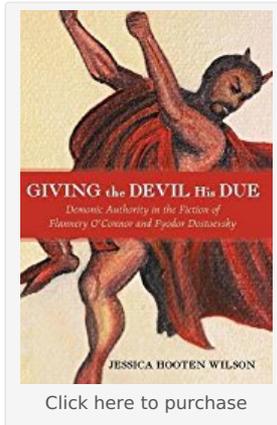
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However, my relationship with Percy began when I investigated his papers housed at the University of Chapel-Hill. Suddenly I found a kindred spirit: I read his teaching notes on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and his reading notes on *The Idiot*. I read his letters and manuscripts. Getting inside his work, I discovered his vision and philosophy. Suddenly I could read the novels with different eyes. What I hoped to have done in my two books on Percy is to give readers those eyes, that they may have more of my second reading experience than my first.

AM: What's your focus in your forthcoming book on Percy, the guide to his novels?

JHW: The offer to write the book came from Margaret Lovcraft, an editor at LSU press. It was her idea! We met at the St. Francisville Walker Percy Festival where I've met hundreds of autodidact followers of Percy. The goal of the book is to make Percy's philosophy accessible. Percy claimed to be putting great ideas into story form. I go through each of his novels and distill the philosophy from the narrative. Vocationally, I'm a teacher at heart. As I wrote the guide to Percy's novels, I imagined before me the faces of my students and friends of mine who do not possess the storehouse of canonical thinkers to locate Percy's use of Kierkegaard or Augustine. The book is a reader's guide, not a scholar's guide; it introduces Percy's ideas primarily through close reading.



AM: You're also a scholar of Flannery O'Connor.

JHW: I am. I fell for Flannery when I was fifteen. A professor at Rhodes College told me my short stories sounded like PBS sitcoms. As an antidote, he gave me "The Life you save may be your own." From then on I was hooked. I wrote my first book on O'Connor's connections to Dostoyevsky and I teach her short stories in every class where I can get away with it.

AM: Do you have a favorite O'Connor story?

JHW: "Greenleaf" is one of my favorites because I love holy fools like Mrs. Greenleaf. Mrs. May's response to her is perfect, "Jesus would be ashamed of you!" Her inability to see herself and others clearly is unparalleled; it rivals even the blindness of Mrs. McIntyre or Mrs. Turpin. Also, the story is rich with classical allusion, such as Jove and Europa, as well as Christian allusion, the "uncouth country suitor" as a Southern description of Christ the loving pursuer. Then, that ending with Mrs. May gored through the heart and pulled down into unbearable light is beautiful.

AM: Your book on O'Connor and Dostoevsky is titled *Giving the Devil His Due*. These authors are separated by a wide gap in time and space, yet you pair them together to explore Christian themes. What is their connection? Why consider them with and against each other?

JHW: Funnily enough, I recently presented at the Walker Percy Festival where I met a Russian immigrant who told me that her discovery of Southern literature was the first time she felt at home over here! It's a pretty common comparison anecdotally but not scholarly.

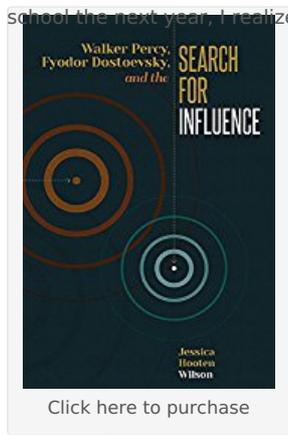
Originally, the discussion was superficial: both the US and Russia abolished slavery rather late on the world stage and at the same times; both regions were always being compared to their neighbors (for the South, it was that overbearing North whereas for Russia, it was the European continent). However, further inquiry showed me connections in their work that helped me better understand what was true about their stories, what correlated with reality in both their content and styles. They both are investigating the death of God in their society and how it correlates with a rise of autonomous individualism.

Many of my ideas come from my teachers. I then synthesized and elaborated upon what they taught me. It was hard in writing the book to distinguish my own ideas from these looming academic geniuses because without them, I would have no knowledge of the text. I was fortunate to study both O'Connor and Dostoevsky under top scholars—Ralph Wood taught me both; Paul Contino introduced me to Dostoevsky; and Louise Cowan taught me both Southern literature and Russian literature.

AM: And now you're teaching students of your own, passing along that inherited wisdom. Do you enjoy teaching?

JHW: I know exactly who I am and who I was meant to be in a classroom. My first teaching experience was teaching fourth grade at a classical school in Fort Worth, Texas. I experienced such confidence in my vocation in that first job. When I began teaching high

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school the next year. I realized how much I needed to learn to teach them well. Hence, graduate school. However, in graduate school, it was hard to remind myself that I was building up the storehouse of knowledge to be given away later. After all, I was there mostly to fill my tank and train my soul for teaching. Now, when I'm in the classroom, I light up like a firecracker when my students engage in conversation. We celebrate every discovery in the text, and I immediately call my husband after each class and ramble delightedly, debriefing that day's teaching. Long answer to say yes, I love teaching.

AM: And I'm confident our readers will learn from your books as well. Thank you for this interview, Jessica. I've enjoyed it.

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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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