

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOANNE KUKANZA EASLEY, AUTHOR OF "SWEET JANE"

 MARCH 25, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: I'm glad our mutual friend, Johnnie Bernhard, connected us, Joanne. Johnnie has written for *Southern Literary Review*, and we've reviewed her books. How did y'all meet?

JKE: Thanks for your time, Allen. I attended a book signing for Johnnie's second novel *How We Came to Be* at a local library in the Texas Hill Country. We've kept in touch, and she's been a mentor to me.

AM: Your novel is *Sweet Jane*. It strikes me that voice is so important to this book. You change narration and time periods from chapter to chapter, and the perspective of the storyteller seems critical.

JKE: I thought long and hard about the novel's structure. Alternating chapters set in the past in young Jane's first person voice, with chapters in current story time of adult Jane in close third person, gave me opportunities to juxtapose her emotional growth, or lack thereof, as a child and as an adult. Relating past events to her current dilemma allowed for some interesting connections. The task of developing and differentiating Jane's voice at age six, eleven, sixteen, twenty, and as an adult was a challenge.



Joanne Kukanza Easley

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AM: Without revealing too much plot, or giving away spoilers, what would you tell readers your book is about?

JKE: Ultimately, Jane's story is one of self-acceptance. Her fraught past with her mother, which she has never examined, brings in the issues of grief and forgiveness. In a way, the novel is a delayed coming of age story.

AM: "I loved being in love." This may be the best line in the book. Anyone who's been in love will know that feeling. They may also recognize what a "devastating tumble into love" feels like. When you're writing about love, do you actually *feel* it?

JKE: I do. There are love stories from my life that I can conjure at will. And I have a good imagination.

AM: There's always a story behind the story—a reason why an author decided to write a book, a moment when the idea for a book struck. What's the story behind this story?

JKE: One Saturday morning at a writing group held at Mother's Café in Austin, Texas, a writing prompt—didn't get that far—resulted in my vision of a teenage girl on the side of the road, hitchhiking away from a troubled home. She had no plan; she didn't get that far. From there I had to know more: why was she leaving, who would miss her, how would she fare, would she ever return home? Over time, Jane became real as I created her history and family.

AM: Who's your favorite living author?

JKE: Since my favorite author Pat Conroy has passed, I have to choose John Irving. *The World According to Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* are my favorite books.

AM: Do you find it difficult writing about childhood? Did you try to transport yourself back to your own youth as you wrote?



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JKE: I have such vivid memories of my childhood that it is easy for me to channel my inner child. A bit of a tomboy, I played explorer in the vacant lots in Chicago, rather than in the prairie in West Texas, like Jane. My two sons' childhoods provided more recent perspective.

AM: If you could name any celebrity you'd want to read your book, who would it be?

JKE: Reese Witherspoon for obvious reasons.

AM: You spent a career in nursing before retiring to live on a Texas ranch. I wonder, does writing require the same type of care that nursing requires? Could you think of early drafts as patients in need of healing?

JKE: That's an interesting analogy, and I can see how it applies. Early drafts certainly need nurturing and care; deciding on a care plan for a novel or a patient requires

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analysis and critical thinking.

AM: Thank you so much for this interview. Maybe you and Johnnie and I can get together some time to discuss our writing over a nice bottle of wine, or two.

JKE: That sounds great. I appreciate your time, Allen.

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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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