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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOE TAYLOR, AUTHOR OF "GHOSTLY DEMARCATIONS"

 OCTOBER 1, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**AM:** Joe, I'm so happy about this interview. We're just down the road from each other, so I'm glad for the opportunity to connect. Your new book is *Ghostly Demarcations*. I'd like to start by asking about the title, specifically the word "demarcations."



Joe Taylor

JT: Allen, well I half stole the title from a poem by Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," where Stevens uses the phrase, "ghostlier demarcations." My idea—other than giving homage to Stevens—is that while many of the stories have undeniable ghosts, others have situations that might be more psychological than supernatural. Consider "Madonna on a Country Road" and "Faithful Companion," for instance. Also, I view the entire collection as something of a meditation on death, especially the opening and closing stories. I guess since death lies in the background of all our minds, the word "demarcations" serves twofold: as our wishful thinking of separation, and as our shadowy awareness that the line isn't that boldly drawn.

**AM:** So you "stole" from Stevens. Reminds me of the T.S. Eliot line: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." There we have it: you're mature! As for the topic of death, you've reminded me of this sentence from "Angels Wings" in your book: "Is death a soap bubble lifting particles too dirty, too tired, too disillusioned, or simply too untimely, out of life with a cleansing motion, to ship out on its silvery back?" I wonder: death seems to be associated with the dirty, the decaying, but is it clean, really? Like a soap bubble?

JT: What an interesting take your question makes! I think of the spiritual, "I'll Fly Away," which certainly seems to see death as a relief. And, I suppose, for many people in the dire straits of illness or poverty or depression or simply the inaction brought on by aging, death can be clean, like a soap bubble. For most not in those straits, death is frightening. And, as you mention, it always involves corruption. If we were immortal though, I guess we'd spend all our time lazing about, thinking, "Ho-hum. Tomorrow will be soon enough to stand up and move about." Untimely death is certainly not a soap bubble, and to bring up another folk song, popularized by Ralph Stanley, "O Death, please consider my age. Please don't take me at this stage." So, to return to your opening, I like the word "mature," and my vote right now is with Ralph Stanley.

**AM:** A mysterious old woman—we'll put it at that—in the "Tit for Tat" story states, "Death's not funny. It's the only thing we have." That may be so, but the story itself has funny material. I loved the narrator's remark here: "When you're young, five minutes of silence comes unnatural, even ominous, so I broke in around four minutes to ask, 'Are you two okay?'" And then the remark about how the dog (which is named Louie, Louie!) may have known the word *publication*. Readers of this interview will have to buy the book and read it for themselves to get the context

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**for that joke. But that's what I want to ask about: humor. Did you know you're humorous? That's a tough thing to pull off in writing.**

JT: Sometimes I wish I could write something that wasn't humorous. Humor is a hard sell in America these days, though you'd think we'd all be grasping for any kind of laugh. In this particular story, I wanted to counter Galen and the narrator—Galen's oversexed attitude and the narrator's naïve obsession with publication—with the old woman's tragic obsession with her son's death. As the narrator suspects, Ashley finds the two are sometimes benighted post-teenage fools. But the narrator's ironic stance doesn't hold him in much stead when he's confronted with the three deaths at the end. And the Episcopal priest—bless his heart—doesn't help a bit, since his main interest lies not in spiritual comforting, but in finding a new sexton to replace Ray and Ashley (and their "belly-baby"). You're right: the story does read basically as humorous—except for the wake-up call at the end. And the old woman and her husband are indeed meant to be haints (my favorite Kentucky word) or ghosts. Louie, Louie appears in a couple of other stories—his name derived from the sexually insinuating Kingsmen song, of course. You'd think someone with fourteen dogs would have stories replete with that creature.

**AM: Do you have a favorite story in the book?**

JT: While I depend upon and trust instinct in my writing—at least for the first couple of drafts—I distrust it immensely in judging a favorite from my own work. Reason? I either love something because it's the latest thing I've written or because I have some obscure personal connection to the work that would translate as complete gibberish to any onlooker. Nonetheless, to answer your question, my favorite story in the collection is, I suppose, "Madonna on a Country Road." Why? Well, because that snowy backroads night remains vivid in my memory and because I had a tumultuous crush on a young woman named Libby. See what I mean? Gibberish to all others. But, to answer your question differently in a prolonged academic diatribe, here goes:

"Madonna" and "Galen's Mountain Child" are the most satisfying of stories that clearly depend on two timelines for a conclusion. I think that both conclusions work very well to look back and complete the prior timeline's incomplete story.

As far as setting and mood, which is almost the *raison d'être* for ghost stories, I think that "Tit for Tat," "Kids Know," and "Tacete" fill that bill well. In "Kids," I can easily picture, for instance, the old American Legion baseball stadium in a downpour, under the bleachers, with headlights intermittently shining on growing puddles of indiscernible coloring amassing ever more rain. And the slowly emerging blood in the puddles offers a nice creep factor. The graveyard in "Tit for Tat" is a given creepy, and the wonder dog Louie, Louie's nervousness heightens that matter. With "Tacete," the flat black, circular room, the clomping footsteps on the enclosed spiral staircase, the self-snuffing candles, and once more a rainy night combine well.

As far as humor, well surely "Faithful Companion." Friends who've heard me read it comment that they will never view either a dentist office or dental floss in the same way again. It's only marginally a ghost story, of course, though Francine the skeleton gives a swell touch.

Creepiness? "A Red Phase" with its dolls—an automatic creep factor in most people's books. Maybe "Louie, Louie and the Blonde Hippie." The roses, the constant appearance of Dawn Carol's ghost with her cornrow blonde hair, not to mention the ghost dog, the frightened priest—all send a cumulative chill.

Plot and action? "I'll Be Home for Christmas" and "Ms. Sylvia's Home Cure" easily take that category. Vengeful ghosts and crazed ghosts, terrorizing all around them. One where the ghost wins, one where the living do. I'll not identify which story is which.

Form? Another easy one: "The Perfect Ghost Story, Plus One," which does just what it indicates it might: bounce two ghost stories off one another, one of them silly, the other deadly.

I'm not entirely happy with "Angel's Wings," but many folk choose that one to comment about. Me just bumbling author, yes?

The wonder dog Louie, Louie first appears in "The Mansion, the Chandelier, the Belle." How can I not love that story?

And "Truly Mine"? It's a fine story to end the linked collection with a thematic exclamation point.

**AM: I'd like to mention, Joe, that you edit or direct—not sure which is the right term, probably both—Livingston Press at the University of West Alabama. I see, too, that you're coming out with a novel by Joseph Bathanti, whose work we've reviewed at *Southern Literary Review*. Tell**

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readers a bit about that press.

JT: You are correct: I edit, direct, publish, typeset, act as publicist and all-around gofer for Livingston Press! I have done so for nearly 30 years. I enjoy it a good deal, finding and publishing new work, especially at a time when many presses are shutting down over-the-transom, open reading periods in favor of requiring an agent to submit for the writer. Livingston Press concentrates on fiction, with occasional forays into poetry or non-fiction. (A recent book by Don Lago about the Apollo XI moon landing indicative of the latter.) And yes, I'm quite happy to bring out Joseph's *Coventry*. I'd accepted it right before it won the Novello Award, and we mutually agreed to ease off so Novello could publish it. Now it can come out for the first time in trade paper. Livingston press sponsors the Tartt First Fiction Award, which gives new writers a chance for publication. The press has also published a good many debut novelists—all part of the excitement in giving a writer a break. Interested folk should just send the manuscript to the press as a Word attachment, along with a brief bio and a brief synopsis. I'm of the Let-me-read-the-book school more than the Let-me-read-the-synopsis-you've-written school.



I would be remiss in not mentioning that I have a novel forthcoming from NewSouth Books: *The Theoretics of Love*. It's a multiple viewpoint love/murder/hate novel. Unlike with *Ghostly*, which I view as a linked story collection centering on a theme of impending death, I'd go to the wall arguing that *Theoretics* is indeed a novel, despite the multiple viewpoints from varied voices—a forensic anthropologist, a murder detective, a "lost" artist and a "lost" religious schizophrenic, a classical guitarist, and an ageing hippie local historian. It comes out in September.

**AM: Why don't we cut this conversation short and just pick it back up soon when *Theoretics of Love* comes out. I urge our readers to look for *Ghostly Demarcations*, especially those who enjoy the fantastic and otherworldly. Thanks for the interview, Joe. I look forward to discussing your new novel 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](http://AllenMendenhall.com).



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