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A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOE TAYLOR, AUTHOR OF "THE THEORETICS OF LOVE"

 FEBRUARY 5, 2020 BY ALLEN MENDENHALL  LEAVE A COMMENT (EDIT)

AM: Not long ago, Joe, we did an interview about your book, *Ghostly Demarcations*. Just months later we're now discussing *The Theoretics of Love*, your new novel that NewSouth Books, which is right down the street from my office, published about the time we did that last interview. Let's start by having you speak broadly about this novel. What's it about?

JT: I was at American Library Association giving away sample copies this summer and telling interested folks that it was a semi-murder mystery and a semi-love story. The woman from Ingram was standing by shaking her head. Finally she said I had to do better than that. So the next librarian who came up got her spiel: "It's a thrilling murder mystery set in Lexington, Kentucky." He walked away and she turned to me and said, "Maybe he's one that would have done better with your semi-murder mystery, semi-love story." Yep.

AM: What's theoretics?

JT: A bastardized form of "Theories." A semi-word to go with the other semis? The novel travels through the female protagonist's fear of love—a fear stemming from her young college self's disillusion as her roommate and her boyfriend cheat on her. She finds out only when they are involved in a drunken wreck that kills the boyfriend and leaves her roommate something of a physical basket case. Clarissa Circle's mantra throughout the rest of college and her Ph.D. dissertation in physical anthropology becomes "No One Ever Touches Anyone." It's a mantra that her off-and-on lover, a black murder detective, points out is hardly consistent with physical anthropology. Not to mention with being a physical anthropologist who's called in by the Lexington Police to sort out bones and bodies that may or may not involve murder.

AM: What's love?

JT: And that is the brunt of the whole novel. In the concluding chapter, one of Professor Clarissa's students works up a Game Theory spreadsheet, offering the odds of anyone finding happiness in love. His results are dismal—at least theoretically—though his own experience may just refute his own theory, his own theoretics. And Clarissa's.

AM: Much of this novel takes place in Kentucky, in particular at the University of Kentucky. You're an alumnus of that institution, correct? Explain your decision to set the action there.

JT: Yes, I majored in—horrors!—philosophy there at UK. Dr. Clarissa Circle is very loosely based on a physical anthropology professor I had as an undergraduate—a spry, funny woman who often enough was called in by the Lexington Police to ascertain whether the skeleton just dug up on some horse farm or under some fence line was an Amerindian who'd died over a century before of natural causes or a murder victim from a decade or less ago.



Joe Taylor

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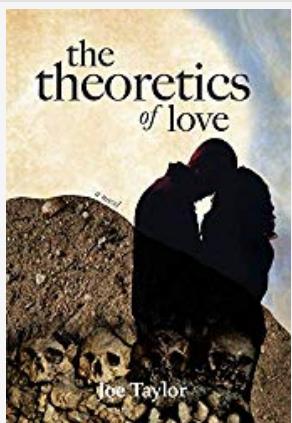
AM: In our last interview, you stated, "I'd go to the wall arguing that *Theoretics* is indeed a novel, despite the multiple viewpoints from varied voices." How did you decide to tell the story in this way?

JT: Okay, it's crunch time in the confessional. *Mea culpa* etc. I had written about three short stories and found the locale, the theme, and some characters repeating. Voila! A multiple viewpoint novel emerged. With a semi-straight plotline. (ho-ho)

AM: Our state is known for its football. And I love football. But do you ever worry, as I do, that our communities lack in arts and literature and culture? Not that we don't have these things—it's just that they aren't as valued or appreciated as they should be. Do you agree?

JT: Yes, I do agree. And my home state of Kentucky is just as nuts over basketball, be it the Louisville Cardinals or the Kentucky Wildcats. I look west to Mississippi with envy. The sports, the literary, and the music traditions there seem to commingle in a productive, non-strangling way.

AM: I love that you chose the name Methuselah for the hippy local historian in the book.



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JT: And I love Methuselah's beard. It may just resemble the beard that someone near and dear to my heart has worn for fifty years. For some reason, when I lived in Lexington, people were astounded with the historical minutiae I laid out—the old train station, the Ben Ali Theater with its three balconies and its opera house piano, the once hollowed courthouse with its Escher-like winding stairways, the Hunt-Morgan house and stallion (whose gonads were periodically painted red by frat boys). Methuselah counters Professor Clarissa's "No One Touches Anyone" theorem, and as well he underlines Willy the murder detective's opposite theorem that "Everyone Touches Everyone."

AM: Would you call *Theoretics* a murder mystery?

JT: Guardedly, for it certainly involves several murders, some solved, some unsolved. It's also a love story, a hate story. Ditto,

that is, some consummated, some drizzled away.

AM: I know I asked you about humor during our last interview, but I'm compelled to do so again because you've managed to write another funny book. Humor is such a risky thing for a writer to attempt. If it doesn't work, then readers are put off. But you make it work. How do you do it?

JT: If you'd asked me this half a year ago, I could have blithely responded that my outlook demands that I deal with life in an ironic, humorous fashion. That it comes part and parcel to my personality. Just three months ago, however, I finished a bleak novella that may have three weak laughs in its 109 pages. Praise Zeus I got that out of my system and can return to my innate and wobbly ironic stance.

AM: Thank you for the interview, Joe. Write another book soon so we can do another interview!

Be careful what you wish for! I have a comic novel (see my above stance) entitled *Back to the Wine Jug* coming out early summer. It's written—egads!—in rhyming quatrains and features that wondrous pre-feminist feminist Victoria Woodhull, that eternal seeker of just one honest (wo)man Diogenes and his lantern, and the weirdly obsessed J. Edgar Hoover. All have returned up top to Birmingham to see if they can straighten out the mess that our current political milieu has become. Will they be successful? I doubt it, but everyone will have fun getting there.

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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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