

# SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOHN SHELTON REED, AUTHOR OF "MIXING IT UP"

 JUNE 12, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT \(EDIT\)](#)

**AM:** John, I really appreciate this interview. Your latest book is *Mixing It Up: A South-Watcher's Miscellany*. I noticed that you dedicated the book to Beverly Jarrett Mills. She was helpful to me over recent years, and I wish I had known her much earlier and far longer. I sense that she and others, like you, represent a school or field that today is hard to find.

JSR: Thanks for asking me to chat. Yes, I dedicated the book to Beverly, "a great Southern bookwoman and my friend." For over forty years she promoted Southern literary and historical studies, first at the LSU Press and then as director of the University of Missouri Press. She also published six of my books.

You're right that most of this work is now seen as old-fashioned—"pre-postmodern," you might say. Most of it wasn't political, at least overtly, and when it was it was often from the right. A lot of it, including some of those books of mine, might have a hard time finding a publisher in today's climate. Without Beverly, they might have had a hard time even then. I think she did civilization a service by putting those books in libraries where they can be found when the impending Dark Ages pass. But then, I would think that.



John Shelton Reed

**AM:** I have to say, I love the way this book is arranged. You've collected many of your publications here, and you've organized and presented them in a way that gives readers a sense—this reader at least—that you're looking back on your career and categorizing your writings. For example, you state at the beginning of the section titled "Writing About the South": "When I got tired of writing about the South I could usually arrange to write about people who were writing about it. In the nature of things, a good many of them were my friends, but it's hard to review books by friends when they're bad books. Fortunately none of these were."

That's an excellent introduction to several book reviews. There's a fascinating sense that each chapter is itself a piece of history even as, in many cases, you're analyzing history—a sense, in other words, that your treatment of a subject has become itself the subject.

JSR: I'm glad you like it, Allen. I wrestled with ways to organize the motley collection of stuff I wanted to include, and finally settled on grouping them based on why I had occasion to write them. I couldn't come up with a better way, and I think it makes sense, but I've worried that readers who pick up the book because they're interested in the South might be put off by all the stuff about *me*.

**AM:** Let's talk about the South. You state in the book, "We can be sure that the culture of the twenty-first-century South will be different from that of the last century, just as the twentieth-

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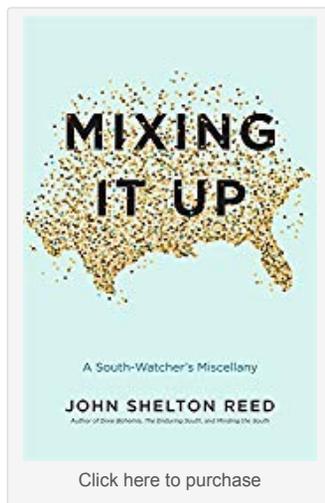
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century South differed from the nineteenth. Like other living organisms, cultures change as they age. But there is no reason to suppose that the change will produce a culture identical to that elsewhere in the United States." The word identical serves as a hedge—you could be confident then that the South would never have a culture identical to cultures elsewhere in the country. But do you think the divide between cultures has narrowed, that the South is less distinctly Southern than it once was? College football down here in Alabama would suggest no.

JSR: Whether the South is less distinctively Southern depends on what you mean by "Southern." One of the essays in this book is called "Everything That Could Be Happening, Is." It points out that in some ways regional differences are smaller than they used to be, although sometimes because the rest of the country has changed to resemble the South. In a few cases regional differences have vanished, but then emerged as differences in the other direction. In other ways, regional differences have stayed the same or even grown. You mentioned college football. As late as the 1920s that was a *Yankee* sport. And Southerners keep inventing new ways to be different. Country music and NASCAR, for example, make use of technology that wasn't around until the twentieth century.

Whatever you mean by "Southern," though, large parts of the South aren't Southern any more because the people who live there aren't. In my first book, *The Enduring South*, I think I showed that regional differences were surviving modernization pretty well. What I didn't anticipate in the 1960s was that so many people would migrate to the South that self-identified Southerners would become a minority in many places. (My only defense is to say that no one else anticipated it either.) This affects everything from politics to barbecue.

**AM:** Well, I'll take college football over ice hockey any day. Do you still think it's true that "the South is the part of America that New Yorkers and other foreigners seem to find most exotic." I rather like the thought of being exotic.



JSR: Ice hockey. Yes. It's a sad thing that the Carolina Hurricanes even exist, much less that they've won the Stanley Cup. All of their players and most of their fans aren't from around here.

And that relates to your question about whether the South is still seen as exotic. These days I'd have to say that *parts* of the South are, but other parts, like where I live in North Carolina's "Research Triangle" aren't seen as – and aren't – exotic at all. It feels as if most non-Southerners now have relatives or friends who've moved here, although I guess that's an exaggeration. Atlanta went down this road some time ago. Flannery O'Connor liked to tell the story of a real-estate agent showing a Yankee couple around and saying, "You'll like this neighborhood. There's not a Southerner for miles."

When my wife and I moved here in 1969 Chapel Hill to Raleigh was thirty miles of bad road through swamps and forest. Now it's a clogged up Interstate highway through miles and miles of subdivisions and shopping centers, with all the charm of San Jose.

But large swaths of the South have been pretty much untouched by all this. In fact there are counties like that just the other side of Raleigh; when I need a regional booster shot I go there, or to parts of South Carolina, or most of Mississippi. It's not that these places haven't changed—they sure have, for the better in many respects – but they haven't been overwhelmed by migrants from other parts of the country. If I were in a nasty mood I'd talk the language of ecology and speak of "invasive species," but that wouldn't be polite.

Seriously, these are mostly good folks and I enjoy their company. There are just too many of them.

**AM:** I learned something today: that there's such a thing as the Carolina Hurricanes. Did you retire early? You still seem young to me.

JSR: Well, thanks for saying I seem young, but I'm a pensioner, a widower, and nearly an octogenarian. I did retire early, but that was nearly 20 years ago.

Whatever else I was, I was a North Carolina state employee with a good pension plan, so after 30 years at UNC I realized that my wife and I could live on what it provided and I wouldn't have to go to faculty meetings anymore.

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For the first decade or so of retirement, I took my show on the road to different colleges and universities. You'd be surprised how many doors open when you say, "You don't have to pay me." (I needed a sign: "Will teach for lodging.") Some of them paid me anyway, and they were all in delightful places. I was a visitor at Centre College, East Tennessee State, and a clutch of SEC schools, at Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of London. My favorite gig may have been a visiting professorship in history at The Citadel: I got to impersonate an officer and my students saluted me. I kinda liked that.

**AM: Are you still teaching?**

JSR: Not really. I give an occasional guest lecture, but that's about it. Lately I've been pretending to be a food writer—mostly writing about barbecue and cooking it and traveling around eating it. The tax deductions are great.

It started a while back when my wife and I wrote a sort of historical, ethnographic, cultural anthropological study, with illustrations and recipes, called *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue*. I'm proud to say that it won a first place Award of Excellence from the National Barbecue Association and was also a finalist for the International Association of Culinary Professionals' American cookbook prize—not bad since it wasn't actually a cookbook. (I subsequently wrote one, though: *Barbecue: A Savor the South™ Cookbook*).

**AM: Any opinion on the best barbecue? Let's see: best restaurants, best region for barbecue, best meat cuts?**

JSR: Oh, Lord. How much time do you have?

Let me limit myself to North Carolina barbecue, OK? Texas, Memphis, Kansas City—there are at least four major barbecue regions and a half-dozen minor ones, each with its own ideas about what to cook and how to cook it. I like them all (with the possible exception of the mutton barbecue served in the neighborhood of Owensboro, Kentucky), but I like them *in situ*. When I'm in Austin, I want to eat beef brisket with no sauce and maybe some link sausage; when I'm in Memphis I want to eat ribs; but I want to eat brisket and ribs in North Carolina only if they're clearly labeled as exotic imports. You understand? Barbecue should tell you where you are.

So, in my view, there isn't really a best region for barbecue—or maybe I should say that the best region is the one you happen to be in. And in each region there are places that cook the local barbecue well, and there are . . . others.

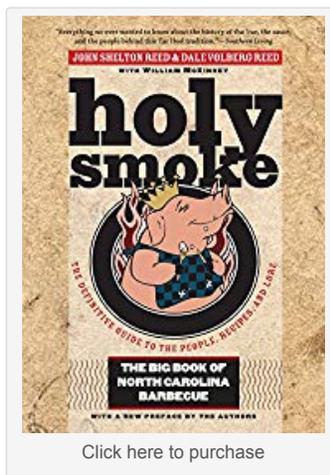
I know North Carolina best, so I'll stick to that. Just talking about my state is complicated enough. We have two major styles in North Carolina, eastern and piedmont (and possibly a third style emerging in the mountains, but I'll ignore that for now). Classic eastern-style barbecue is whole-hog, chopped or pulled, with a "sauce" containing vinegar, red pepper, salt, maybe some sugar, and not much else. (I put sauce in quotes because it is really more of a seasoning: it penetrates the meat and doesn't just sit on the surface.)

This is the kind of barbecue that was being cooked everywhere until well into the nineteenth century. For the last hundred years or so, though, people in the foothills west of Raleigh have been cooking just pork shoulders and adding a little tomato to the sauce, usually in the form of ketchup. They also serve coleslaw with a vinegar-based dressing that is a lot like their barbecue sauce: peppery, sweet, and red (from tomato).

Plenty of people have pointed out that the two North Carolina styles are much more like each other than either is like what's served elsewhere, but that hasn't kept Tar Heels from fighting about it. If you want to know the best restaurants for North Carolina barbecue, you'd need at least one representative of each school.

It goes without saying that you want places that cook with wood. Sadly, most places in our state no longer do. A buddy and I have started an organization to combat, or at least to lament, this trend, and you can read about the Campaign for Real Barbecue at [TrueCue.org](http://TrueCue.org). We also have a list there of places that are keeping the Faith.

Given that you're choosing among wood-cooking places, the truth is that there are a dozen or so that might be cooking the best barbecue in the state on any given day. Cooking with gas or electricity



produces more consistent results (consistently mediocre, in my view). Also, wood-cooking places keep closing. Two of the best—Wilber's in Goldsboro and Allen & Son in Chapel Hill—shut down in the last year.

If any of your readers are coming this way and want some advice, maybe they should just write, say where they'll be, and ask for it. There's a contact form on the Campaign's website.

**AM: I'm afraid I'm too hungry to continue the interview! Thanks, John, for taking the time to do this. I'm off to get some barbecue!**

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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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