

# SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[SUBMISSIONS](#)
[BOOKSTORE](#)
[CONTENTS](#)
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NOVEMBER 30, 2017

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)
[READ OF THE MONTH](#)
[AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#)
[CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS](#)
[MISCELLANEOUS](#)
[NEWS & EVENTS](#)

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Johnnie Bernhard, Author of "A Good Girl"

## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOHNNIE BERNHARD, AUTHOR OF "A GOOD GIRL"

 NOVEMBER 29, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**AM:** You've been a regular contributor to *Southern Literary Review*, Johnnie, so I'm particularly happy for the occasion to interview you about your new novel, *A Good Girl*. Tell us about Gracey Reiter.

JB: Gracey Reiter is the protagonist for my work of historical fiction, *A Good Girl*. A middle-aged woman, Gracey is conflicted by crossroads in her career, marriage, and family relationships. Her conflicts are universal to the human condition – the loss of innocence in youth, the emotional difficulty of aging parents, and life's meaning as one ages. Woven into this conflict is the story of six generations of an Irish-German immigrant family. The reader will discover these same universal conflicts with each generation, compounded by significant events such as wars, the Great Depression, hurricanes, and other political and economic events.

Gracey reflects upon the lives of her mother, grandmother, and great grandmothers and finds strength and wisdom. The male characters of the novel are complex characters, as well. Gracey interacts with them in the role of wife, mother, daughter, and granddaughter. *A Good Girl* is the story of family, two countries, and three centuries. It is the story of self-discovery, as well as of the immigrants' place in American history.

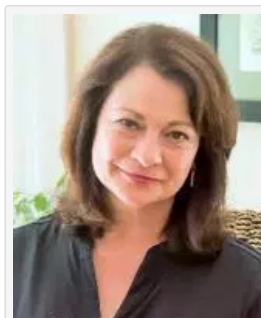
The novel was shortlisted in the Wisdom-Faulkner International Writing Competition, a finalist in the national Kindle Book Award, and a nominee for the 2018 PEN-Bingham Prize. It was chosen for panel discussion at the 2017 Mississippi and Louisiana Book Festivals.

**AM:** Was it difficult to alternate time periods? Did you have a strategy for keeping the narratives straight?

JB: My strategy for alternating between time periods was based on a common thread woven through all six generations. It is the Bible of Aileen Walsh of Galway, Ireland, the matriarch of the Walsh-Mueller family. The family Bible is passed down to the next generation, ensuring all six generations have taken part in not only viewing the family tree printed on the opening page of the Bible, but also adding to it. The family tree begins with Aileen Walsh of Galway, Ireland in 1830 and ends with Patricia Grace of Forkhill, Ireland in 2015. This family's immigration story makes a complete circle.

The second connecting thread was a hand embroidered handkerchief with the initials AW owned by the matriarch of the family. This handkerchief is passed down to all the women in the family. It evidently becomes a wedding gift for the American daughter returning to Ireland in 2015.

Perhaps the main organization tool I used was a complete character sketch of each character that included physical attributes, emotional attributes, the era in which they lived, including social and economic issues, and the clothes that he or she may have worn.



Johnnie Bernhard

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[General](#) (7)

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[News & Events](#) (79)

[Read of the Month](#) (104)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

My historical research was based on information from the Texas State Historical Association and online articles in the *Galway Advertiser* of Galway, Ireland.

**AM: Have you traveled through Ireland?**

JB: I have been to Ireland many times. I adore the people and the culture. Their sense of pride, resilience, and hospitality is second to none.

**AM: You used to teach. Did you teach writing?**

JB: I taught high school English, including AP English, but I began my writing career as a journalist in Houston many years ago. I believe the dual degrees taught me valuable skills in writing, including the use of sensory details and the economy of words in narration. I most recently taught a writing course at the University of South Mississippi. As an author, I attend many conferences teaching workshops and participating in panel discussions on writing and literature. I enjoy working with writers.

**AM: Does *A Good Girl* attempt to teach anything?**

JB: The teaching components would be in the novel's multiple themes of the immigrant story in America, the importance of family, and the power of self-discovery.

**AM: This is your debut novel. How did you write it? I mean right down to the basics—did you use a computer? A pen? A typewriter? Did you have a writing routine?**

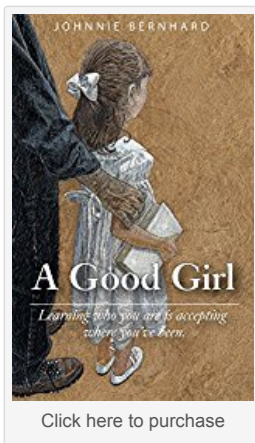
JB: *A Good Girl* is my debut novel. My second novel, *How We Came to Be*, is set for release in May 2018. I am traditionally published by Texas Review Press, a university press in partnership with Texas A&M University Press.

My best energy is in the early morning. This is when I write. I am fortunate to have an office with a lot of natural light. I compose on the computer, but also have note pads in my purse, as well as other places in the house. I never know when I'll get an idea.

The interesting thing about writing is when you hit the sweet spot, the manuscript takes on a life of its own. There were times I'd wake up in the middle of the night and write. Some days I'd accomplish a paragraph or two, while others I wrote a chapter. The editing process with multiple drafts is just as important as the writing. I had a beta reader and participated in a critique group during the editing process. This is before working with the editor at the publishing house.

**AM: For those who don't know, what's a beta reader?**

JB: A beta reader is an unpaid reader who reads your manuscript, offering suggestions on dialogue, plot, theme, characterization, etc. In return for this service, you read the manuscript of the beta reader. This is not developmental or copy editing, but rather an overall review of the manuscript. It is important to align genres and skills with your beta reader, ensuring a fair exchange of work.



**AM: This is probably as good a time as any to mention that you not only write but also help other writers.**

JB: I do enjoy helping other writers. I understand the arduous task of writing, editing, publishing, and marketing. It is a very difficult business to break into, as well as sustain. Of course, the more you know about the business, the better off you are. Attend conferences, participate in critique groups, and read the masters of your genre. The most important advice I can give to any writer is to believe in the story you are writing. This passion will sustain you despite the rejections from literary agents and publishers. It's all part of it.

**AM: Have you had any mentors who were writers?**

JB: My favorite authors are Barbara Kingsolver, Walker Percy, and William Faulkner. Of course, there are many authors I currently read, beyond the mastery of those three. I learn something from each one. It could be an interesting sentence pattern or the use of sensory detail.

**AM: You seem to have a knack for dialogue.**

JB: Writing dialogue is about listening carefully to what others say. People do not use complete sentences when they speak. I often read dialogue out loud during the editing process, so I can best

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judge how "natural" it is.

**AM:** Well, I appreciate the time you took to dialogue with me. Let's finish by having you name the easiest ways for readers to purchase *A Good Girl*.

**JB:** *A Good Girl* is available at [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), [Texas A&M University Press](#), [Target](#), indie bookstores, and [Books a Million](#).

**AM:** Thanks, Johnnie.

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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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