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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOHNNIE BERNHARD, AUTHOR OF "HOW WE CAME TO BE"

 JULY 11, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

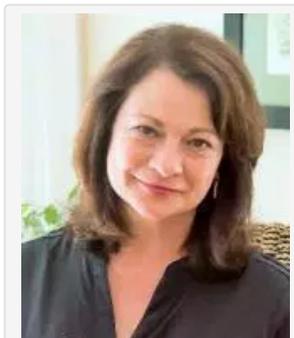
AM: Thanks for the interview, Johnnie. It hasn't even been a year since our last interview about *A Good Girl*, and here we are discussing a new novel, *How We Came to Be*. How did *How We Came to Be* come to be?

JB: I had been exploring the characters of Karen and Leona for quite some time. I love juxtaposition. In these characters we have perfect examples of juxtaposition with two women from two very different cultures and generations brought together out of the shared experience of loss and loneliness. I worked on the manuscript on and off for about a year. Once those characters were fleshed out, the plot unfolded. I also wanted to explore some very current topics in our culture: the illegal use of prescription drugs, the changing dynamic of family, and texting as a form of communication.

AM: I noticed the texting and immediately realized that I don't read enough contemporary fiction. That, or contemporary authors aren't fully representing contemporary life. I'm not sure which.

JB: The genre for *How We Came to Be* is Upmarket Fiction, a blending between commercial and literary. It is Commercial Fiction because there's a tight premise in the story line, but it's also Upmarket / Literary Fiction because I chose, as the author, to make commentary on social issues and the human condition.

Ultimately, I wanted readers to consider the ramifications of conversations without eye contact and body language. Texting, like



Johnnie Bernhard

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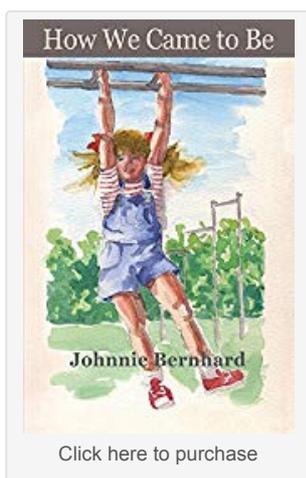
emails, has replaced century-old forms of communication, such as letter writing and verbal conversations.

AM: You pay close attention to seasons in the novel. So much revolves around the Christmas holiday, but then there are the winds and early rains of March and eventually ninety-degree heat. Is something figurative or metaphorical going on here, or were you simply plotting the narrative chronologically? Perhaps a bit of both?

JB: Yes, there is figurative language in the novel to draw attention to the birth of the friendship between Karen and Leona, beginning on Christmas Eve. It refers to hope and healing in Christianity with the birth of Christ. The wind and early rains of March symbolize a change in Karen, as spring often symbolizes a rebirth. The ninety-degree heat is simply a stated fact of life on the Gulf Coast, where I have lived my entire life. Heat and humidity — that is our summer!

AM: I didn't know you lived your entire life on the Gulf Coast. Which parts?

JB: I'm originally from Houston, but I've lived in South Louisiana and South Florida. I currently reside in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, a quaint town on the Mississippi Sound near Biloxi.



AM: And you're deeply involved in the Mississippi literary community, right?

JB: I'm involved with the literary communities of Houston, Central Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. I teach craft at different conferences in New Orleans, Houston, Central Texas, and in South Mississippi. I attend both the Mississippi and Louisiana Book Festivals as an author in panel discussion. These book festivals are such a great opportunity for networking with authors, writers, and readers. I'm fortunate to be able to travel with book club presentations in various locations, as well as to meet with writers' groups. And I'm a judge for the Texas Center for the Book, Letters about Literature Competition.

Tomorrow I have an interview with a radio station in New Orleans [editor's note: this interview was conducted in early June], followed by

a meeting with the Bayou Writers of South Louisiana. It will be a full day, but a day well spent sharing ideas and a love of literature.

AM: When did you develop this love for literature?

JB: My mother was a voracious reader. There could be no better modeling for a child in reading development than to see a parent read. I am from a modest background, but my mother managed to have a home full of reading material — newspapers, books, magazines, anthologies.

As a child, I loved the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, followed by the Nancy Drew series. In middle school and high school, I had excellent English teachers, who introduced me to American and British Literature. In college, I studied the Russian and South American authors. I continue to read both contemporary and classic literature. There's so much to learn within those pages!

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West Virginia William Bernhardt William
Faulkner

AM: What book are you reading now?

JB: I just finished Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*. This is an excellent book on writing and reading. O'Connor doesn't mince words. Her insight is unapologetic and invaluable. I adore her.

AM: Do you have a favorite author?

JB: For contemporary literature, I love everything Barbara Kingsolver writes. She is a master storyteller. There are many contemporary Irish authors and poets I enjoy. Faulkner and O'Connor never fail to amaze me with their intellect. I have read everything Gabrielle Marquez Garcia has written and continue to re-read his work. *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky stands among the greatest works of literature in its philosophical debates of faith, reason, judgment, and doubt.

AM: *How We Came to Be* is written in the first person. As you wrote, did you ever find yourself "becoming" Karen Anders, transporting yourself into a world of your own creation?

JB: I chose to write *How We Came to Be* in first person to give the novel a more contemporary feel and pace. Karen Anders, the protagonist, is dealing with very contemporary issues: a fluctuating economy, the difficulties of teaching in an urban high school, the dynamics of family, text-only communication, among other things. While I was a high school English teacher, there are very few similarities between Karen and me. It made the writing more enjoyable, freeing me to create without the hesitancy to "protect" an actual person who may share the same traits of the character.

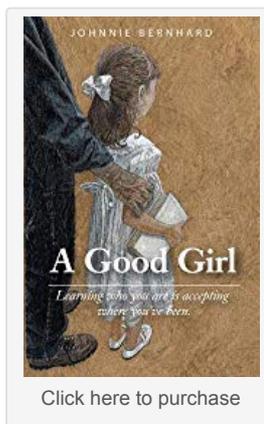
A Good Girl is written in third person. The third person, omniscient narrator is the best point-of-view in Literary Fiction, because it allows the writer to give the thoughts or feelings of each character.

AM: How did you come up with Leona Supak?

JB: I was in Budapest in 2015, a week after the government closed the train station there, preventing war refugees from Africa and the Middle East from transporting into Eastern Europe. The aftermath, with the approaching winter coming, was heartbreaking as individuals and families followed the train tracks, looking for a town that would allow them to stay.

With stories shared by my mother-in-law, a young girl in Germany during World War II, and research, I developed the beautiful and wise Leona. I literally cried when writing her backstory. This is not my attempt to make a political statement. This is my humble attempt to demonstrate the lasting effects of war. It is the human story, regardless of nationality, race, or religion.

AM: Thanks for this story, Johnnie, and for this interview.



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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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