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A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOSEPH BATHANTI, AUTHOR OF "COVENTRY"

 SEPTEMBER 16, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)
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AM: Joseph, I'm thankful for the opportunity to interview you about *Coventry*, which is set in a prison camp. Like you, I've taught in prison. I took a prison literature course in graduate school. I've written about Moundsville Penitentiary in West Virginia and about my experience teaching in prison. So I'm particularly pleased to see that Livingston Press at the University of West Alabama has reissued this book, which was first published in 2006. Could you say a little about how you began teaching in prison or why you chose to write a novel about a prison?

JB: It's really interesting to me, Allen, that so many writers I run across end up doing a stint

teaching in prisons or jails or shelters. I find that writers are wonderfully generous when it comes to this kind of service, but I also think that's true of artists of all stripes and their vested belief that art is regenerative; and, of course, folks who find themselves immured in a variety of *those kinds* of places have big stories to tell. Writers, it seems, at least my generation, and the generation that preceded it, also made their ways through the novel, *Crime and Punishment*, and of course there's also that famous quote by Dostoevsky that I think is very true – never more so than now as the U.S. shamefully incarcerates 2.3 million of its citizens: "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

As a nation, the U.S. remains embroiled in an ongoing criminal justice disaster, especially given Covid-19's deadly presence in prisons and jails, though the righteous protests in the wake of George Floyd's ghastly murder are exerting dramatic pressure on the government and the general citizenry to recognize the systemic racism and dysfunction that characterizes and undergirds incarceration in America. Not even to mention that executions have been reinstated in federal prisons.

My own foray into prisons was quite accidental, though profoundly serendipitous. In 1976, I left my home town of Pittsburgh to become a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) Volunteer with the North Carolina Department of Correction at a small prison road camp just north of Charlotte in the then-very-small town of Huntersville. I could have been assigned to any kind of project anywhere in the U.S. But that's where I landed and the experience was immediately life-changing. I left Pittsburgh, just out of graduate school, burning to be a writer, and suddenly I found myself immersed in the otherworldly landscape of prisons and guards and inmates and the unearthly machinery of incarceration and confinement. It was a world I was instantly wrought up in and have stayed involved with ever since. That year in VISTA set an agenda for social justice in my life, though the term "social justice" had not yet been coined.

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It was during that first year of VISTA that I began teaching a very informal creative writing workshop at Huntersville, though I knew nothing about teaching. It's an epic understatement to say that I certainly learned a lot. In many ways, that first stint of teaching in prisons was the beginning of my own education; and it, once and for all, underscored what I already knew: that sharing our stories and "the human heart in conflict with itself" – to quote Faulkner, of course – is what unites us in shared humanity, and remains the beating heart of education. Out of those workshops came a couple of cheap –but very important – saddle-stitched publications with poems and stories, essays and drawings by the inmates. Those little books demonstrated not only the talent of the guys, but the need for arts programming in prisons.

Some of the very earliest writing I did – not very good – was about prisons. As I matured as a writer, I kept all those prison stories, everything I had seen and heard, and even imagined, in a little file in my head, and that file contained the underpinnings of *Coventry*. But it took years for me to figure out how I wanted to tackle that novel. I certainly wanted to cast it in a kind of impressionistic light – near magical realism – since the realm of prison is so very strange, so surreal. Nothing makes sense. I've also published a book of poems called *Concertina* that focuses exclusively on prison and prisoners.

AM: How did *Coventry* find its way into the hands of Joe Taylor at Livingston?

JB: Joe was actually slated to initially publish *Coventry*, but then it won a nice prize from Novello Festival Press in Charlotte and Joe was gracious and generous enough to let me go with Novello, but with the informal caveat that perhaps one day, should *Coventry* go out of print, Livingston would pick up the paperback rights – which is exactly what happened and I couldn't be happier.

AM: Long shot, but have you ever come across Katy Ryan in the English Department at West Virginia University or Kyes Stevens at Auburn University? Katy, my former professor, founded the Appalachian Prison Book Project, and Kyes runs the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project.

JB: I'm afraid I don't know Katy or Kyes, but I'm aware of the cutting-edge work that the Appalachian Prison Book Project engages in. There are similar initiatives all over the country – writers and artists infiltrating prisons and shelters and giving those banished populations a platform to speak and showcase their art.

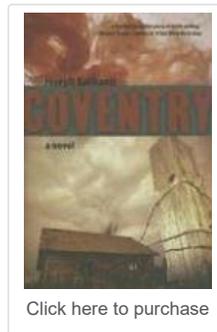
AM: There are religious themes in *Coventry*. Are you a religious person?

JB: You know, I'm asked this often because all of my work is rife with religious allusions, some very deliberate, other subconscious, I'm certain. I am the product of a fairly intense and immersive Catholic education, from first grade through high school. I hesitate to say I'm a religious person, simply because that cloaks me in a certain mantle I'm perhaps not ready to claim. I would, however, like to think of myself as embodying a certain spiritual consciousness that infiltrates my writing, often subconsciously.

I'm definitely preoccupied with the notion of *grace* – unearned and undeserved favor that God bestows upon us. Some might call it luck. Perhaps, these days, we might even term it *privilege*. At any rate, the moment I stepped on a prison yard for the first time, I saw versions of myself. In terms of shared humanity, there was little separating me from those men I saw, many my age (I was 23 at the time), so many more a good bit older than I. The difference between me and them was not – and remains not – that I was somehow better – au contraire – but the indisputable fact that I had enjoyed, without earning or deserving – as a result of luck? privilege? happenstance? grace? – a life that protected me from the deprivations and ravages that lead to incarceration. Of course, it's all much more complicated than this, but I hope my spirituality is rooted in the *Beatitudes* and the *Parable of the Sheep and Goat* (Matthew 25: 31-46). It's all there. All that said, I do not want to set myself up as a paragon of holy virtue. But I also want to be very much on guard against a hierarchy that equates economic stability and right-wing Nationalist fervor (good people have money and means; bad people don't) with spiritual health. We are all "the least of these," and need to imagine ourselves on a prison yard.

AM: You've written in several genres. As the former poet laureate of North Carolina, you've published many books of poetry. Do you go through phases in which you write more fiction than poetry, or vice versa? Do you find yourself in certain moods or states of mind that lend themselves to one genre over another?

JB: The way you phrase this question, Allen, nicely approximates the ebb and flow of my writing as I move among the genres. Indeed: *phases* and *moods*. I do tend to have streaks where I'm writing in one genre and not another. Usually, there's a practical side to this which has everything to do with what



piece of writing I'm keenest on, or have a looming deadline for, but often it comes down to what is working for me at the time, what I'm able to sit down to and get moving on, rather than languish in front of the screen or page without getting traction. I can't waste that kind of time. So I try to work on whatever's working for me, if that makes any sense. Since I've now been at this for so many years, I also have so many things close to completion or that need to be revised, so it's always comforting to have these orbiting projects to return to. I tend to bounce around, and gravitate to the rift with the most ore. Nothing, however, is as exciting as starting something brand new.

I certainly prefer to write fiction or any kind of sustained prose when I can come back to it day after day, like in the summer, when I have some time off from teaching. Writing long prose (fiction, especially) in fits and starts is often counterproductive. It's easy to lose the thread and the torque. Poetry is a genre of such utility. It folds up like a tent, is light, easy to tote, can be stuffed in your pocket, and it's satisfying to just whip out a page and get a decent line or two down over coffee between classes. With a poem (a page) you can take in the entire landscape at a glance. Prose of multiple pages demands a more thorough survey; it can get unwieldy, impenetrable, if you step away from it for too long. You literally forget where you were, and you never want to forget what initially excited you about a piece of writing you launch.

AM: The relationships between guards and inmates at Coventry Prison strike me as realistic. I remember when I was teaching in a prison, the guards gave me a hard time. There was, I gathered, a fine line separating those on one side of the bars from those on the other side. It might have been that the difference between some of the guards and some of the prisoners was that the former were fortunate to have never been caught. I didn't have any trouble with inmates, but one of the guards stole a keychain that my sister had given to me.

JB: This goes back, in some ways, to the question about whether I'm a religious person. While I saw little "difference" between myself and the inmates in terms of shared humanity, I also often found little difference – in terms of, yes, shared humanity, but also demographics – between the guards and the inmates.

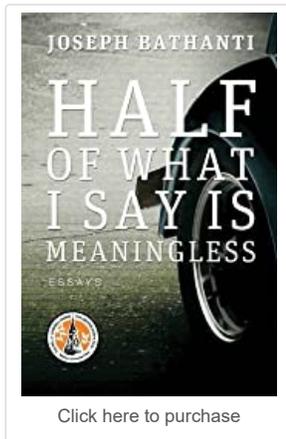
When I arrived in NC in 1976, all that was required in order to score an entry level job on a prison yard as a guard was a high school diploma, maybe even a GED. There was little to no training for them. That began to change as criminal justice curricula started popping up in community colleges, colleges and universities. There was certainly not much in the way of professional aspiration – except at the administrative level. In other words, there was not a burning among most of the guards I first knew to, say, regenerate the prisoners, to rehabilitate – no vested passion in changing the world, no evangelical, driven social worker ethos. The inmates were hardly clients. They were forced to live in subhuman conditions, which was generally seen as a logical condition of their punishment.

But the guards, too, were snared in the System. They were paid paltry sums. I liked a lot of those guys. Some of them were my friends. Many of them were kind, well-meaning folks, simply trying to put bread and milk on the table for their families. I played softball and basketball on the guard team that traveled around playing the inmate softball and basketball teams at the various units in the South Piedmont Area. Of course, there were a handful of guards who were inflexible, narrow hard-asses and didn't particularly relish having leftist VISTA interlopers, who knew zero about prisons, attempting to subvert custody in favor of do-gooder programs for "criminals."

The women VISTAs – my wife, Joan for instance and her fellow women VISTAs – were given a hard time – not by the prisoners – but by certain administrators and certain guards simply because the notion of a woman on the yard among male prisoners was so foreign and threatening to the very sexist, often misogynistic, fabric of prison. This was also before women had visibly taken custody jobs in men's prisons. However, it's so very important to say that many of those prison employees I met, especially those in the program offices, were lovely, dedicated professionals doing everything they could to ease the scourge of incarceration and reentry.

That similarity between the keepers and the kept was something I was trying to get at in *Coventry*. At heart, I'm unapologetically on the side of the oppressed and disenfranchised (to wit, prisoners). But I tried to not take sides in *Coventry*. I wanted, for instance, to portray *Coventry's* protagonist, Calvin Gaddy, and his fellow guards et al., as confined, denatured, dispirited and deviled by the same System as the prisoners.

AM: We've reviewed your work before at *Southern Literary Review*. One reviewer especially enjoyed your collection of personal essays, *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless*. Have you adopted the South as your home after all these years in North Carolina?



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JB: I have absolutely adopted the South and I surely hope it's adopted me. I have now resided in North Carolina for 44 years. I like to say that Pittsburgh is my beloved home town, but North Carolina is my beloved home state. I instantly felt keen affection for the South and that affection turned swiftly to love. Venturing south, I felt I had found my spiritual home, but I surely don't mean that in any quantifiable of denominational vein. On my very first day of VISTA training in Atlanta – in the Georgian Terrace Hotel, in the very ballroom where the ballroom scene in *Gone with the Wind* was filmed – I met (and fell in love with) my wife, Joan, of 43 years. Joan, an Atlanta native, was also assigned to my VISTA project and we became instantly inseparable. So it helped immensely to have as my mentor and tour guide an authentic Southerner to shepherd me through those first days and, in essence, for the rest of my life.

I owe a profound debt of gratitude to North Carolina and the South. That's where I've been nurtured as a writer – where I became a writer, where my two beloved sons were born and raised, where I've made my living, where so many grand things I could never have imagined have happened, and which I can't imagine happening elsewhere. The community of writers I've been blessed to be among in North Carolina is simply spectacular. They were beyond kind, so very welcoming, when I first showed up burning to be a writer. They graciously made a place at the table for me.

I love the South and I very much love North Carolina.

AM: Cal Gaddy. We can't conclude this interview without a question about him. For those who haven't read *Coventry* yet, let me add that Cal works at Coventry where his dad was a prison guard; his wife, Rachel, is pregnant, and she used to work with pregnant women on all sorts of matters—from prenatal care to adoption to counseling. I know it's been a long time since you first created this character, Cal, but how did you come up with his hopes and struggles?

JB: As I mention earlier, one of the first things that initially struck me in my earliest work in prisons was the generalized and shared aspect of confinement among the guards and the prisoners, that unmistakable veil of oppression and darkness. But, before I bear down on this, I have to underscore the fact that the guards get to leave the prison every day and the prisoners remain. I don't want to suggest at all that the guards suffer in the powerfully palpable very real ways the prisoners suffer. Never! Nor are the guards vilified for all of their lives in the way that offenders and ex-offenders are.

However, for approximately eight hours every day, guards and inmates share that prison nether world and breathe its same tainted oxygen. Prison is a charged and nefarious world that keenly affects the guards – and the documented incidence of drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, poor health, self-injurious behavior among them bears out the unbearable stress that impacts them.

So, I wanted to place Cal Gaddy in the impossible situation of being essentially a good and conscionable man, attempting to reconcile his upright desire to be a sterling son, husband and father with the fact that he makes his living keeping men caged. He is decidedly complicit – there's no way around that fact – and he's too smart not to know it. How will he deal with such conflict and contradiction, and still keep heart and soul together? Not to mention the looming mythos of his haunted father as a kind of archetypal, Old Testament chain-gang Jehovah spewing fire and brimstone – right and wrong, nothing in between. Will Cal be able to dodge what seems his birthright, a twisted and self-destructive destiny, a fate that he seemingly cannot escape. I hope he does. We'll see.

Robert Frost, in "The Road Not Taken," say that "way leads onto way." We see that happening with Cal. He leaves college because his mother unexpectedly dies. He has full intentions of returning and becoming an engineer, as he had planned all along. But then he gets a little turned-around, ends up taking what he assumes to be a temporary job as a guard at his father's prison, *Coventry*, and finds himself unable to unshackle himself from that world. As the novel moves ahead, we see that System becoming Calvin and he becoming that System. But I still want to believe in his fundamental goodness. We need good people, like Calvin, running prisons. But can he stay good? Is he still good at the end of the novel, or has he sold his soul? Again, we'll see. However, without revealing too much, he suffers a precipitous fall from grace.

Rachel's pregnancy is probably the only autobiographical aspect of *Coventry*. My wife, Joan, had rather dramatic, operatic pregnancies that resulted in beautiful children. Rachel's pregnancy is modeled (stolen from) after Joan's pregnancy with our first child, Jacob. There was very little I invented. It's also important to say that Rachel is powerful enough to save Calvin. Yet again, we'll see.

One last thing worth mentioning. The novel opens with the execution of Zedda Pate, who is modeled after Velma Barfield, the first woman executed in the United States (in Central Prison in Raleigh, NC, in 1984) after the 1976 moratorium on the death penalty was lifted, and the first woman executed since 1962. I had read somewhere – and this could be apocryphal, but I don't think so – that a fraternity at a college very near Central Prison staged a *Kill Velma Barfield Party*. Hence, the opening of *Coventry*. Joan and I are very much abolitionists when it comes to the death penalty.

AM: I've seen photos of you clean shaven and with an impressive white beard. Which do you prefer these days?

JB: Usually, having a beard or not, is simply a question of happenstance. I don't often consciously grow a beard. I simply stop shaving. These days I have a beard and aim to keep it until the Covid crisis is behind us – at least that's what I said initially.

AB: Thank you for doing this interview.

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Allen Mendenhall is publisher and editor-in-chief of Southern Literary Review. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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