

# SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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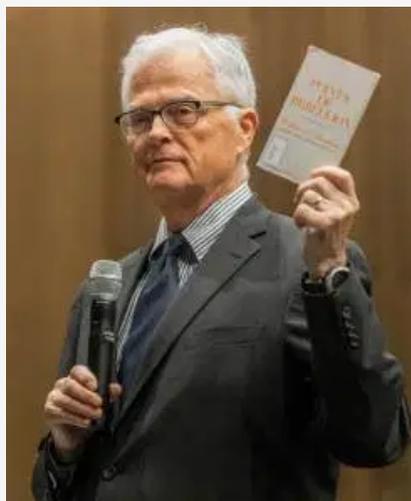
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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JUDGE WILLIAM ALSUP, AUTHOR OF "WON OVER"

 SEPTEMBER 11, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  1 COMMENT



Judge William Alsup

**AM:** Judge Alsup, I'm grateful that you've shared your time to do this interview for *Southern Literary Review*. The occasion for the interview is, of course, the publication of your memoir, *Won Over*, which has this subtitle: "Reflections of a Federal Judge on His Journey from Jim Crow Mississippi."

What made you decide to write this book? I'm guessing there wasn't a single, definitive moment, but a series of thoughts and events that inspired you to tell your story. But I'm thinking in particular of the lawyer who moved that you recuse yourself from a case because you were from Mississippi. The supposition there is that someone born in a certain place and looking a certain way has something fixed in his nature or consciousness—something incapable of change or development.

WA: Many times, I've been asked over the years what it was like growing up in Mississippi, the most segregated place in America. The fiftieth anniversary of 1963 came along in 2013. This caused me to reflect on the Civil Rights Movement and on my own youth in Mississippi. I realized that there were fewer and fewer of us who can remember that era. This provoked the memoir. It's the story of growing up white in Mississippi, turning eighteen at the zenith of the Civil Rights Movement, and coming to grips

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with the conflict between fairness and decency, on the one hand, and the unfairness and indecency of the Mississippi Way of Life, on the other hand. That conflict wasn't unique to me. Thousands felt its burden. How each individual dealt with the conflict was the question. My memoir tells one of those stories.

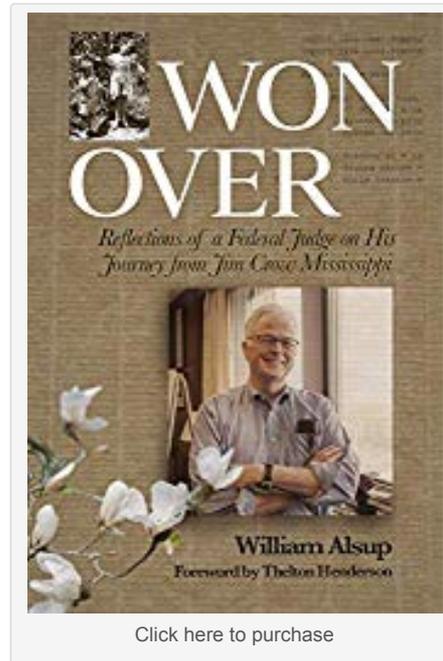
**AM: You state in the book that “[g]rowing up white in Mississippi ... opened, not closed, my eyes to the cruelty of racism.” Fortunately, that is the case with you. But it’s not the case with everyone, correct? Why are some still caught up in the cruelty of racism?**

WA: We should be careful in using the term racism. Many people throw it around now as an accusation, a hurtful accusation. Still, I agree with the point of your question, namely that some in America are still caught up in the cruelty of racism. Why? Prejudice and hatred based on race are not innate. They are taught — usually taught by family and in some cases by friends. The more widely conversant we become, however, the less susceptible we become to learning prejudice and hatred. Some people, though, confine themselves to a narrow universe and hence narrow ideas. For example, they find like-minded bigotry on the internet and stick with the same crowd and exchange the same bigotry. So, racism gets perpetuated.

**AM: You came from a home of modest means in rural Mississippi and worked your way through Mississippi State University and, after that, into Harvard Law School and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. How did you do it? Did the pursuit of justice and fairness motivate you?**

WA: My mom and dad drilled into us kids that education was the key to getting anywhere in life. My parents suffered through the Depression. They insisted that we get the higher education that they had been denied. In college, the Civil Rights Movement influenced me to aim for law school. I wanted to become another Atticus Finch. So, yes, by that point (1965), the pursuit of justice and fairness had become a personal motivation to seek a law school education.

**AM: When you were growing up, an African American woman named Ivory worked for your family. My family had similar arrangements: my father was in no small part raised by an African American woman named Sarah, and my mom by an African American woman named Mattie. To this day, my parents speak lovingly and affectionately about these women, who meant a lot to them. I remember my dad taking me to Sarah’s house when I was a child so that I could meet her. We showed up unannounced, and she let us in and we had tea or a Coke or whatever, and Sarah opened her wallet and showed me, right there in her hand, photographs of my dad and his siblings when they were children—children who were about my age then. She had kept those**



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photos in her wallet all these years—along with photos of her sister and children and other relatives. These relationships were problematic, too, and here I might refer to the novel *The Help*, which ably rendered the complexity of the white-black household dynamic.

WA: I appreciate your story about your own parents and Sarah and Mattie. There was genuine love, respect and affection but, yes, the novel *The Help* shows the problematic side. Both races got thrown together into an indecent, harsh system yet still, despite the obstacles, good people of both races found ways to be decent and kind to each other, always subject to the taboos of the era. It became part of the human predicament of the South.

**AM: There's so much history in your book, from segregation and the Civil Rights Movement to Hurricane Katrina. Do you think you've lived through an extraordinary period? Of course, all eras seem momentous and unique to those who're living in them, but is there something more about the era you grew up in that makes it perhaps more important than other eras?**

WA: Across the history of movements in America, the Civil Rights Movement, in my opinion, made more of a seismic impact on the course of our nation than any other, save and except for Abolition and the Civil War, which must stand apart as a special case. The Civil Rights Movement towers over the Suffragettes, the Labor Movement, the Women's Movement, the LGBT Movement, the Green Movement, all of which achieved remarkable progress, but none of which achieved the dramatic realignment of life in our nation as did the Civil Rights Movement.

**AM: The Senate confirmation process is different today than it was in 1999 when President Clinton nominated you to a federal district court. What was your nomination and confirmation process like?**

WA: It was contentious then too. There were times when I thought my nomination would get tabled over issues having nothing to do with me but were rather over fights between Senator Orrin Hatch and President Clinton. But you are right, as time has gone on, the contentiousness has steadily worsened.

**AM: You talk about freedom of speech—or threats to it—on the campus of Mississippi State while you attended there. Of course, that issue is in the media today, but in a different context. What do you think about the current claims about threats to freedom of speech? If, as a judge, you can't answer that question, I completely understand.**

WA: It is important that we all discuss our differences and reasons for our differences so that we can find ways to find common cause. We are all in this together. We ought to be able to discuss our differences in a spirit of goodwill. At a minimum, such "dialogue," as we called it in the sixties, allows us to sharpen our own arguments. It might even persuade us to the other side or vice versa. Free speech, dissent, and exchange of ideas work hand in glove with democracy. In fact, they are critical in making democracy effective.

The Mississippi Way of Life in the sixties insisted on its own version of "political correctness," but it insisted on the wrong side. Those of us who wanted the other side to have a say were often shunned. It was important that the moral force of the Civil Rights Movement be heard despite efforts of the

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Mississippi regime to suppress it. My experience in Mississippi is why I still believe in letting all people of goodwill have their say, whether you agree with them or not.

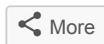
**AM: Please tell our readers about the time in 1964 when you drove to visit Charles Evers, who was the brother of Medgar Evers.**

WA: I described the visit in the book. In brief, Charles Evers took over in Medgar Evers' place as the field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi after his murder in June 1963. Over the Christmas break in 1964, Danny Cupit (my MSU roommate) and I decided to pay Charles Evers a visit at the NAACP Headquarters in the black part of Jackson. It was a dreary December day. The receptionist seemed surprised that two white boys would be dropping by announced. So seemed Charles Evers but he saw us anyway, probably wondering, at least at first, what in hell we were up to. We met in his office for about thirty minutes, just the three of us. We expressed our condolences over his loss and wanted him to know that at least some white kids in Mississippi felt the murder had been tragic and as wrong as wrong can be. We also asked if he would support one of our professors, Flavous Hutchinson, for a federal judgeship. Professor Hutchinson was one of two "liberal" teachers at MSU. We also asked if he would come to visit MSU and give a speech, which he said he would (and eventually did after our challenge to the speaker ban). He told us his phone was tapped by the FBI and that we should be careful when we called in. I was nineteen years old. What was I getting myself into, I wondered.

**AM: Thank you, Judge Alsup, for doing this interview. You've been quite generous with your time.**

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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](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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