

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[SUBMISSIONS](#)
[BOOKSTORE](#)
[CONTENTS](#)
[FREE SUBSCRIPTION](#)

DECEMBER 18, 2018

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

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Julia Nunnally Duncan, Author of "A Neighborhood Changes"

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN, AUTHOR OF "A NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGES"

DECEMBER 17, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: This is, I think, our third interview in the past few years, Julia. That means that you're prolific, given that each interview has been on the occasion of the publication of your latest book. Today we're talking about *A Neighborhood Changes*, a collection of poetry. I want to start by asking about the first poem in the book: "Memories." The first three lines read, "Someone told me / that dwelling on the past / is a sign of senility." Had that been said to me, I would have grown defensive. My poem would have tried to rhyme "senility" and "fertility" and would have pushed back against what I take to be an absurd claim. Of course, I lack the context of the speaker's identity and of your relationship with her. But you're so unlike me: You're far more gracious and thoughtful. Rather than judging this claim, you question whether you understand her meaning. And rather than wasting time determining whether she's right or wrong, you simply state your reasons for consulting memory: "Memories release me— / whatever that says about my mind." I understand that you may not be the speaker of the poem, but the point about my objection to the implication of senility remains.

JND: Good question, Allen. The context of the inciting remark in "Memories" was a book signing. The lady—a stranger to me—who made the remark was pleasant in demeanor and tone, in fact a little self-deprecating, so I didn't take offense at her observation. However, it did cause me to think about how I am more prone now to recall events from my past than ever before. And I have wondered if the past has a way of permeating the mind as one grows older. I have noticed this tendency in others of my generation and earlier ones. In any case, at author events, I usually let indiscreet remarks—if I hear them—roll off my back. But this particular one couldn't be shaken off so easily, and my line "whatever that says about my mind" was at least partially meant to be tongue in cheek.

AM: Explain for readers what you do in the section of the book called "True Friends: Inspirations from Literature."

JND: People often ask me, "Who is your favorite author?" And my response might be, "It's not so much that I have a favorite author; I have favorite books." And to be honest and more precise, I have favorite *moments* from literature. So in this section of *A Neighborhood Changes*, I pay tribute to moments in literature—scenes from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Ethan Frome*, *Sons and Lovers*, and others—which have moved me or reminded me of situations from my own life. For example, my poem "Habit" was inspired by a scene in *Sons and Lovers* in which Walter Morel pours his morning tea into a saucer to drink it. This action reminded me of men from my childhood who poured their coffee from their cup into its saucer before sipping it. You just don't see that anymore, probably because cups and saucers are not as common today as coffee mugs, and people don't tend to prepare coffee in percolators, which made the coffee scalding hot. Though my poem is about the men from my childhood drinking coffee this way, I credit the character Walter Morel for reminding me of something I had almost forgotten.



Julia Nunnally Duncan

TOP POSTS & PAGES

["Licensed to Lie," by Sidney Powell](#)

["How We Came To Be," by Johnnie Bernhard](#)

[About](#)

[A Dog Named Slugger, by Leigh Brill](#)

["The Story Keeper," by Lisa Wingate](#)

["The Prayer Box," by Lisa Wingate](#)

SEARCH THE SITE

FREE SUBSCRIPTION

Email Address

[unsubscribe from list](#)

powered by [MailChimp!](#)

TOPICS

[Author Profiles & Interviews](#) (145)

[Book Reviews](#) (422)

[Conferences and Festivals](#) (36)

[Contributors' Bios](#) (98)

[Essays](#) (21)

[General](#) (8)

[Grants and Contests](#) (17)

[News & Events](#) (79)

[Read of the Month](#) (117)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

ARCHIVES

Select Month ▼

TAGS

Alabama Allen Mendenhall Amy Susan

Wilson Appalachia Author Interview

Charleston **Claire Hamner**

Matturo Contributor Daniel James

Sundahl **Daniel Sundahl**

Donna Meredith
Fiction Florida Georgia

Interview **Johnnie Bernhard** Julie Cantrell

Karen White Louisiana Mercer University

Press **Mississippi New Orleans**

nonfiction **North Carolina** novel

Oklahoma Oxford Pat Conroy **Philip K.**

Jason Poetry Read of the Month Rhett

DeVane Short Stories **South Carolina**

Southern Gothic **Southern**
Literary Review Southern

Literature Tennessee Texas The Civil War

University of South Carolina Press Virginia

West Virginia William Bernhardt William

Faulkner

AM: How frequently does the “I” of your poems represent the “I” who is Julia Nunnally Duncan? You’ve suggested already that the opening poem has autobiographical significance.

JND: In *A Neighborhood Changes*, my use of the personal pronoun “I” indicates that the perspective is my own. Most of the poems in this collection are personal observations or reflections on people and events from my life. I rarely write persona poems.

AM: The past weighs heavily in these poems, as it does in your essays. I’m reminded of the line: “The past beats inside me like a second heart.” Is the past your second heart?

JND: What a great quotation! I admit that the past pervades my thoughts. But my interest in the past is not exclusively in my personal history, which I do write about a lot, but also in the past in general. The final section of *ANC* is a series of reflections on medical photographs taken by R.B. Bontecou, M.D., which are collected in Dr. Stanley B. Burns’s book *Shooting Soldiers*. The injured Civil War soldiers in the photographs are incredibly compelling to me as I study their faces and wounded bodies and wonder about their lives. I savor historic photographs, including my own family ones, because they are a window into the past. Yes, I would say the past is indeed my second heart.

AM: What moves you to write essays over poetry, or poetry over essays? Do you go through phases or moods? Do you determine to commit yourself to one genre for a given period?

JND: Most of my poems are narrative, so it would be possible to write an essay from them, but usually an essay results when I want to explore a character or situation in more depth. For example, my poem “Newcomb” tells a story about a family visit to my father’s childhood home in Tennessee. Yet the main idea or image I wanted to convey was my seeing my father cry for the first time and the impact that experience had on me. Getting into more detail about that moment or the time leading up to it didn’t seem necessary to the point I was trying to get across. I don’t really calculate in advance that an idea will be a poem or a situation will be an essay. The work just evolves into what it is, and I go with it.

I will say I do tend to write genres in blocks of time—an essay or two and then a few poems. But I have worked on an essay and poem simultaneously. Poetry is easier for me, though, and I find it a kind of refuge after I’ve labored over an essay (which often requires more research). When people ask me what I like writing best, I say, “Poetry’s my first love.” I started writing poetry at about seven years old, and it’s always been a pleasure for me.

AM: There’s something William Carlos Williams about these lines in “Habit”: “To let it cool / they poured the brew / from their cup into the saucer / and sipped it then. / This way of drinking coffee / was a habit of men / I noticed / when I was a child.” The simplicity of these lines is profound. I’m not sure whether it’s because “habit of men” seems universalized yet time-bound, or whether it’s because you are a child here. And the ambiguity: did men stop drinking coffee like this by the time you grew up, and if so, why? And why is it significant that men would drink coffee in this way? I’m convinced that it is, reading these lines, but I can’t quite say why.

JND: In my world at the time, most men I observed drank their coffee this way, so it was universal to me. And yes it was time-bound in the sense that it was a custom that didn’t last beyond my childhood (incidentally, my mother says that men in her childhood during the Great Depression also drank coffee this way). As I noted in a previous response, cups and saucers have been mostly replaced by mugs, and drip coffee makers don’t brew coffee as hot as percolators did. I don’t think people even have to blow on their coffee as much anymore. Pouring coffee into a saucer allowed it to cool faster. This is my scientific explanation, though the men I watched in my childhood probably didn’t calculate why they poured coffee into a saucer; they’d likely picked up this habit from others they’d seen, perhaps older men. I think they did this gesture without thinking about it.

For me, the significance is that drinking coffee this way was part of my childhood culture. It’s like the way I used to hear folks saying *ye* for *you*—you hardly hear that anymore, though my mother still says it. I treasure these old ways.

I like your William Carlos Williams connection, Allen. I didn’t set out to write a simple poem about a simple habit, but I guess I instinctively translated the idea this way.

AM: I mean “simple” to refer to the language—and to be high praise. I’m an admirer of Richard Poirier, who believed that the modern American poets wrote distinctly American poetry in part because of their use of plain idiom to express extraordinary and profound feeling. The contrast would be the ornate and ostentatious style of some European poets who worked too hard to express the complexity of their feelings in complex language. I think you’ve got a gift for precise

images and clear, unadorned language that conveys complex emotions. It's funny: just this morning my wife and I had a conversation about how we make our coffee, and it all started because I was thinking about your poem. My wife is Brazilian, and the way her family made coffee was entirely foreign to me—but the coffee in Brazil is strong and hot and seems to warm the soul.

One comes away from your writing—not just in this book, but in the others as well—with a strong sense of place, of connection to the geography in which your life experiences have played out.

JND: I do feel a strong connection to the place where I grew up—where I still live. My little region of Western North Carolina has helped form me, I'm sure, the way a place can.

In my writing, I've tried to capture the place and time in which I've lived. And if I can do that, it's enough. My culture is changing quickly. I've noticed that few children in my area have a Southern accent anymore. I try to recall the voices from my past, and I listen to the voices of older people still here so I won't forget the words and expressions that have been used for generations—words like "reckon" and "yonder" and "lookee." People of my mother's generation would add an "r" to the end of vowel sounds. For example, the name *Emma* would be pronounced *Emmer*. The word *ought* would be pronounced *ort*. You don't hear younger people pronouncing words this way. I treasure these old words and pronunciations because they're passing from everyday speech. I hope my essays and poems and the dialogue I write will preserve something of the place and culture I've known so well.

AM: I think they have, Julia, and I thank you for that—as well as for this interview. I really appreciate it.

SHARE THIS:



LIKE THIS:

Loading...

RELATED

[David Huddle Interviews Julia Nunnally Duncan, Author of "A Part of Me"](#)

March 23, 2017
In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

["From Proper Nouns to Slant Sonnets: A Conversation with Poet Anya Silver About Place and Time"](#)

July 10, 2014
In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

[Allen Mendenhall Interviews Jessica Dotta](#)

September 25, 2013
In "Author Profiles & Interviews"

FILED UNDER: [AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#) TAGGED WITH: [A NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGES](#), [ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN](#), [JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN](#)



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.



LEAVE A REPLY

[RETURN TO TOP OF PAGE](#)

COPYRIGHT © 2018 · ENTERPRISE THEME ON GENESIS FRAMEWORK · WORDPRESS · [LOG IN](#)

⤴