

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS KAREN WHITE

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AM: Thank you so much, Karen, for taking time out of your busy schedule to do this interview with *Southern Literary Review*. We're excited about the release of your new book, *The Time Between*. You've said that this book might be your favorite so far. Why is that?

KW: I think that with each book I grow as a writer. This book has more complex characters and plot lines than I've ever done before. I "stretched my writing legs" with this book and I'm really proud of the results.

AM: The story is set, for the most part, on Edisto Island and in Charleston, South Carolina. How did you choose this setting? If I may, I'll add this question to that one: the backdrop of Hungary during WWII—where did you get the idea for that?

KW: I love the South Carolina Lowcountry and have set the majority of my books there (including a series of four books set in Charleston). I chose Hungary for the WWII element of the story because of its unique position during the war as an Axis ally. The Hungarian government at the time hated the Nazi regime, but they hated the Soviet Communists more, and found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place for much of the war. However, because its Jewish citizens were protected by some extent by their own government, Hungary became a refuge to Jews fleeing from Nazi-occupied European countries. This all changed in two short months in 1944—which became the crux of my story.

AM: I think it was Hemingway who said that there is nothing to write because all you do is sit down at the typewriter—or, in our era, the computer—and bleed. In what ways, if at all, did this story “bleed” out of you?

KW: This book is very emotional on many levels—all the characters have experienced some sort of tragedy in their lives and have had to find a way to move on. I’m very much like an actress who “becomes” her characters, and I immersed myself in Helena’s and Eleanor’s complicated lives and emotions. It was exhausting, and after a day of writing I could barely speak!

AM: Everyone is necessarily bound to understand the world through his or her own experiences, and I always want to know how those experiences shape the stories authors write. How has your experience influenced this novel? I don’t mean to suggest that your biography is somehow plugged into the text but to find out whether and how certain personal experiences affected what did or did not make it into the text?

KW: I think in the beginning of an author’s career, there are much more autobiographical elements in their work. However, as much of their personal issues are expressed in each subsequent work, the author is allowed to delve into other fictional lives as their careers progress. *The Time Between* is my 17th novel, so a lot of my “childhood angst” has pretty much been played out in my earlier works. Apparently, my disappointment at having never been given a sister (I was raised with three brothers) continues to play itself out in my novels! There are two sets of sisters at the heart of *The Time Between*. I think I will never tire of exploring this very complex family relationship in my fiction, most of it derived from listening to my mother and her sisters (all five of them!) talking over my grandmother’s kitchen table late into the night when they didn’t know I was listening.

AM: Two themes emerge in this story: family and memory. Everyone can relate to these. Do you find it challenging to undertake these themes in a new or different way—that is, in a way that people can understand based on their own experiences but also that is far enough removed from those experiences that it exercises readers’ imagination?

KW: I get asked this question a lot, mostly because my novels usually center around family and dark secrets from the past. I think I get a fresh perspective on this with every book because with each novel I write, the characters are unique to me (and my readers), with different backgrounds, perspectives, values, and pasts. I use my characters to tell me their story—instead of me forcing them into a pre-planned scenario—which makes my themes of family and memory new and exciting with each book.

AM: How do you stay so productive?

KW: I don’t believe in writer’s block! There are many, many times I don’t feel like sitting down and writing, but deadlines never go away. I’m a big believer in writing anyway—it’s ALWAYS easier to fix a bad page than stare at a blank page. That’s my motto.

AM: Thank you again for taking the time to do this interview. I hope all of our readers will add *The Time Between* to their summer reading list.

KW: Thank you!

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