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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS KATHERINE CLARK, AUTHOR OF THE HARVARD BRIDE AND THE EX-SUICIDE

 MAY 11, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)
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AM: I'm only now reading *The Harvard Bride*, which I somehow missed upon its release, and now we're on the verge of the publication of *The Ex-Suicide*. I'd like to talk to you about both books.

KC: Don't forget *The Headmaster's Darlings* and *All the Governor's Men*, the first two novels in the Mountain Brook series.

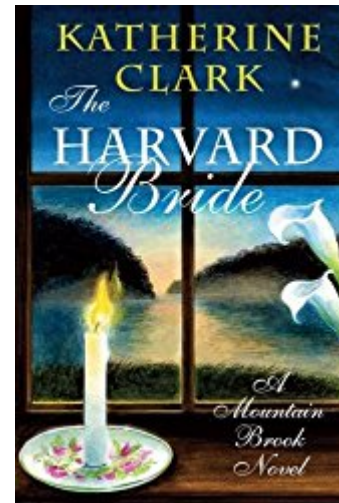
AM: You're an Alabama native; I'm an Alabama transplant. I'm curious about your depiction of Mountain Brook in *The Harvard Bride*. It seems similar to the suburb of Atlanta where I grew up—a place where “money and status were magical forces which conferred complete protection on those who possessed them.” To what extent did you set out to critique certain social conventions in this area, and

Katherine Clark

to what extent were you merely describing?

KC: When I started writing the first novel in the series, I did not intend to write satirical fiction. But as soon as I started writing about Mountain Brook, what happened on the page was satire. Mountain Brook is one of those places that satirizes itself because it's so over-the-top in many ways. Simply observing or describing the reality of life in Mountain Brook is enough to create satire.

AM: The character Daniel is quickly and immanently recognizable, at least for those of us who spend time around lawyers. But Caroline is a more complex case. She's bookish and curious and a product of the very environment she now resists. Did you find yourself trying to work through tensions in her personality, or did you try to let those tensions hang there suspended, as we all hold onto competing impulses and desires and habits of thinking?

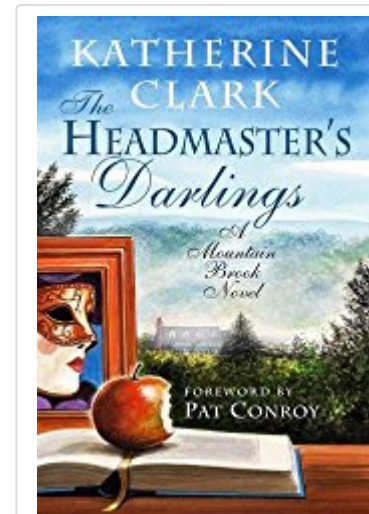


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KC: My mission with the Caroline character was to recreate the tensions or inner conflicts that exist in a person who has a love/hate relationship with her hometown. It's the dilemma William Faulkner made famous with his Quentin Compson character, especially when he declares: "I don't hate the South! I don't hate it!" The reader knows from this vehemence and defensiveness that Quentin both does and does not hate the South. Characters who are at war within themselves make for interesting reading.

AM: Caroline goes off to Harvard to study and then returns home a different person. You did something similar, no?

KC: I did go to Harvard and sure, it changed this Alabama girl. But I never returned home afterwards to live in Birmingham. While there are several autobiographical parallels between myself and the



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Caroline character, much of her story in the novel is the product of imagination.

AM: I'm curious about your transition from university professor to professional novelist. How did that come about?

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KC: I've wanted to write fiction since I read my first work of fiction in first grade. So I've had a long apprenticeship. I got a Ph.D. and became a professor so I could support myself while trying to write novels. Then eight years after I got married, my husband needed to move for his job, and I was unable to find a teaching position in our new location. So I concentrated full time on writing, treated this as my new job, and the Mountain Brook novel series is the result.

AM: When I first heard in 2016 that Pat Conroy had died, I immediately tweeted the news alerts, tributes, and obituaries. I was shocked. One of my first thoughts was, *what's going to happen to Story River Books?* For readers' sakes, I'll mention quickly that Conroy was the editor-at-large of Story River Books, an imprint of the University of South Carolina Press. It appears, to me, that the press is pushing forward. What's the editorial process like without Conroy? And, if I may, what was it like with him?

KC: I don't know what the editorial process is like without Pat, since he read all four Mountain Brook novels and discussed them with me through and through several years before he passed away. He also gave me an idea for a fifth Mountain Brook novel, which I'm still pondering. He wanted me to continue with the Nick and Caroline characters from *The Harvard Bride*, and gave me a great idea for a plot. If I try to pull that off, then I'll experience what the editorial process is like without Pat Conroy.

Here's what was so great about Pat as an editor: He was a passionate cheerleader, full of praise and enthusiasm for his authors. When he was in the middle of reading my manuscripts, he would call me up in the middle of the day to laugh or exclaim about something I'd written. Can you think of anything more gratifying or encouraging for an emerging author?

His respect for my work built my confidence as a writer to a level I would not have reached without him. Then, when he slipped in a suggestion, a question or a criticism, my confidence was so solid that I could consider the critique and act on it without losing faith in my efforts. He treated me as an equal—as a writer with ability equal to his—which is not the case, but the dynamic he created by treating me that way has helped spur me to keep on writing and get better at it.

AM: An *AI.com* article once called you a “protégé” of Conroy. Is that the right term?



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KC: If a protégé is someone who is supported and guided by an older and more accomplished mentor, then absolutely I was a protégé of Pat Conroy's.

I was not young when I first met him, so it cannot be said that he mentored me through my coming of age or my coming to consciousness. On the other hand, I was an unpublished novelist with 2 ½ manuscripts I didn't know what to do with when I first met him.

Pat guided and supported me through the process of making those manuscripts the best they could be, and then told me he wanted to publish them under his imprint Story River Books. This gave me the courage to finish the third novel and also write a fourth. Then Pat started talking about a fifth, and even began helping me hatch a plot for it.

AM: *The Ex-Suicide* is about to come out, and may in fact come out by the time this interview reaches publication. What's this book about?

KC: *The Ex-Suicide* is about a family living in the house across from the Birmingham Country Club that was once occupied by the writer Walker Percy, who coined the term "ex-suicide." This is my most ambitious Mountain Brook novel thus far, because it attempts to engage with the legacy of Birmingham's racial past.

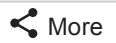
AM: Should we expect to see some of the same Mountain Brook characters we've come to know from your other books?

KC: Yes, this novel focuses on characters who have been on the sidelines in other Mountain Brook novels. And of course Norman Laney makes his appearance as well.

AM: Thanks for the interview, Katherine. I look forward to reading *The Ex-Suicide*.

KC: Thank you, Allen.

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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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