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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS KATHLEEN M. ROGERS, AUTHOR OF "THE FLYING CUTTERBUCKS"

 JUNE 4, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [1 COMMENT \(EDIT\)](#)

**AM:** I hope you are safe and well during this coronavirus pandemic, Kathleen. I just want to give our readers some context for this interview in light of the rapidly evolving circumstances. Right now it's March 2020, and we're locked down and confined in the home because of COVID-19. But by the time this interview runs, who knows where we will be? I hope out and about again. At any rate, I've been meaning to do this interview for two months, and being stuck in the house has finally afforded me the opportunity to read your excellent new novel, *The Flying Cutterbucks*. The book opens on Election Day this year! Then it flashes back to 2016 and ends back in 2020. How interesting that you frame the book with a future moment—and a near future moment at that. And that you're bold enough to render the current political scene in the backdrop of the story. The book seems, and is, timely. Did the coming election incentivize you to work harder and faster to complete the manuscript in time for election season?

**KR:** Allen, thank you for taking the time to read my book and for your thoughtful questions. I didn't start out to bookend the story between two elections. When I sent what I thought was the final draft to my agent, the story ended shortly after the 2017 inauguration. It wasn't until I signed a contract with Wyatt-MacKenzie in late 2019 that my publisher, agent, and I began to brainstorm a way to update the narrative and bring it into the present. Within a week, I'd written an additional chapter along with other material to open the book. At the time, I couldn't predict the global pandemic nor would I have wanted to so that theme is missing from the novel.

For the record, I'm in no way an expert on politics. My characters started tugging at my heart shortly after the 2016 presidential election. While some people cheered, including many of my neighbors and friends from church, as the wife and mother of two decorated combat veterans, I experienced a deep

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Kathleen M. Rogers

and abiding grief. And anger. Despite what the sitting president would like the American people to believe, not all veterans and military families support him. As a writer who's never shied away from tackling difficult subjects, I felt a responsibility to give voice to those who are afraid to speak out because they fear that, by doing so, they will appear unpatriotic. In early 2017, shortly after I signed with Diane Nine to represent my future work, I began working on the story that grew up to become *The Flying Cutterbucks*.

**AM:** Trudy, a baton twirler in high school and a former flight attendant, is the protagonist of the novel who returns home to be with her mother, Jewel. Trudy's father, an Air Force pilot, was shot down decades ago in Vietnam, causing her mother, at the time, to have a nervous breakdown. Trudy's story is told in chapters that alternate across time and space, jumping forward

to the present and flashing back to different periods, giving the novel a cinematic feel. Explain your decision to organize the book this way. Was it difficult keeping the chapters in the intended order as you wrote?

KR: All of my novels are multilayered and move back and forth in time while always coming back to focus on the present narrative as it's unfolding. I look at my characters the same way I look at myself. I am every age I've ever been. My little girl self is alive and well deep within me even though she's nowhere to be found in my outward appearance, unless you look deep into my smile and discover those crevasses on each side of my mouth are really my childhood dimples.

Being human, we live in the present while reflecting on our past, whether it took place yesterday or decades ago. We can be driving down a busy freeway, concentrating on the traffic around us, while thinking about the time we jumped rope in grade school or rode our bikes down a country road with cousins. The key to bending time in fiction is that brief flashbacks or whole chapters set in the past must be relevant to the present story at hand. Chapter headers are a good way for me to keep myself organized as I write a book. They serve as a simple outline. I like to think they act as a teaser and roadmap for the reader.

**AM:** Gender roles and relations are central to this book. The potential for male aggression and for female victimization seems to cause the female characters protectively to combine against male threats. They bond through small things like "girl talk," community, and collaboration. Two male figures are ever present in their absence: Trudy's dead father and her dead brother, who had an inoperable brain tumor. What should readers make of the gender conflicts in the novel?

KR: Too many men, especially men in power, continue to get away with brutal behavior against women and girls. And Lord knows how many men went to their graves never facing justice for crimes they committed against women and girls. While some men today are finally going to jail for committing sexual

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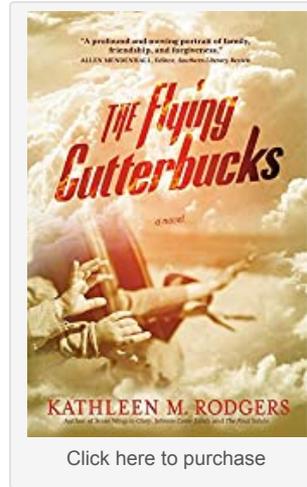
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assault, too many male leaders in our community, even at the highest levels of our government, continue to get away with it. Their sexual misdeeds go unpunished year after year.

Aunt Star says throughout the story that men have all the power, and yet she pushes back against it time and again and tries to instill that strength in her two nieces. Trudy's father was a fighter pilot, a man's man, and yet we learn that he was protective of his wife and daughters, a man who had no need to prove his manhood by hurting women. Trudy's little brother didn't get to live to become a man, but we get the feeling he would've followed in his dad's footsteps. Other male characters in the story come across as masculine, but they're definitely not afraid to show their sensitive side. In other words, not all boys and men are brutes and bullies.

**AM: There's a traumatizing scene involving Dub—I hesitate to say much more than that because I want to avoid spoilers—that takes place over more than one chapter and is conveyed in the present tense. The rest of the book is written in the past tense. I have my guesses about what you were up to, but I'd like to hear what you have to say about writing that scene in the present tense.**

KR: Allen, thank you for pointing this out. Those two key scenes that take place in 1974 are crucial to the overall plot. I needed to give those brief and violent scenes a sense of urgency, and the only way to achieve that was to write them in present tense. I wanted my readers to experience what my main characters felt at the time the trauma was taking place.



**AM: Let's talk about you for a minute. Do you love writing or do it compulsively? Or perhaps sometimes you love it and sometimes you don't.**

KR: I'm laughing because I like to joke that I have a love/hate relationship with writing. For me, writing is hard work. And good writing always requires revision. The best explanation for my process is that I "worry" the story into being. When I'm actively writing a scene or dreaming up the next chapter, I hyper focus on every detail. Even when I'm not sitting at the laptop writing or scribbling notes on paper, whole scenes are spinning somewhere inside my head. And while this might sound crazy, when I was trying to find my voice for Trudy, I often called on my protagonist from my last two novels even though those books have nothing to do with *The Flying Cutterbucks*. I grew to love my protagonist and I trusted her judgment, and when I called on her to help me find Trudy, my former protagonist answered, reassuring me that I could do it again. My characters are always with me, sometimes guiding me into future stories they will never appear in.

**AM: You live in North Texas now, correct? Whereabouts? How's the atmosphere for writing?**

KR: I live ten minutes west of DFW Airport in a suburban community. I'm happy to say I have writing friends all over North Texas, including Dallas, Fort Worth, Denton. I've been an active member of The Writer's Garret in Dallas for years even though I don't attend as many workshops as I used to. Regardless of where a writer is based, the Internet offers so many more opportunities for writers to find

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community than what I experienced when I was first starting out decades ago. When my husband was active duty, we moved every few years. Looking back, I realize that my writing grew from each experience. I've lived in several states, including Alaska, and what I've discovered is that no matter where we call home, writers have a way of finding each other. The key is to help each other grow and lift each other up. Allen, you are one of those writers who lifts others up.

**AM: Thank you, Kathleen! *The Flying Cutterbucks* is set in New Mexico. Weren't you born and raised there? What was your childhood like?**

KR: Yes, I was born and raised in Clovis, New Mexico, home to the Santa Fe Railroad, Cannon AFB, and the Clovis Wildcats. Eastern New Mexico looks more like West Texas, lots of ranchers and farmers and small towns. In some ways, my novel, *The Flying Cutterbucks*, is a love letter to the land of my birth. I grew up in a close-knit family. I'm the third one down out of six kids. I became a writer to have a voice. My dad sold life insurance door to door and my mom was a fulltime homemaker until she went to work part-time as a church secretary at our Methodist church. When I was in high school, my dad left and Mom went to work fulltime as a federal employee at nearby Cannon Air Force Base. Feeling lost, I ended up writing for the high school newspaper my junior/senior year. By declaring myself a writer, I had something to call my own. Writing has carried me through several decades. Even when others only saw me as a pilot's wife or a young mother or the crazy neighbor lady who talks to all the kids, I've always clung to my other identity: Writer.

**AM: You're already working on your next novel, correct? What's that about?**

KR: Here's a teaser: "Set in a small town in eastern New Mexico, where water and opportunity are as rare as a mermaid sighting, three sisters and two friends form a secret club and dream of the ocean. But betrayal and broken promises threaten to tear everyone apart, and friendships and family bonds are tested." Since I already know how the book will end, I'll write toward that vision.

**AM: Thank you so much for the interview, Kathleen. Stay safe and well out there during these strange times!**

KR: Take good care, Allen. It's an honor to know you.

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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).

## COMMENTS

**Kathleen Thompson** says

June 5, 2020 at 8:20 AM (Edit)

Allen, I just lost my first effort to reply! Your interview of Kathleen M. Rodgers was very thorough and interesting. This is a first for me to find my own writing technique put into words of another writer: "I worry the story into being."

I identify fully with this other Kathleen and wonder if she is also a cross-genre writer. Her use of titles and time for organization is a technique I use also—in lieu of a clear narrative thread which I sometimes have difficulty managing.

Best wishes to you both.

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