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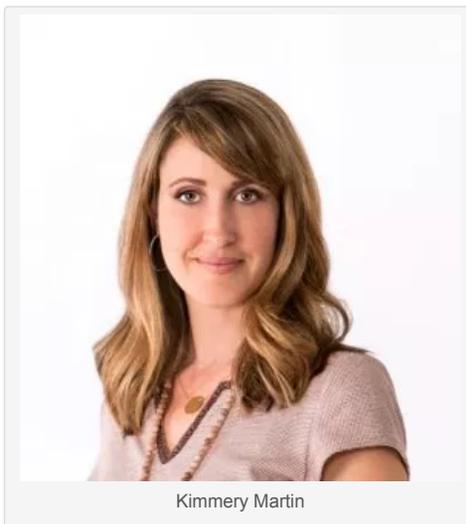
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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS KIMMERLY MARTIN, AUTHOR OF "THE QUEEN OF HEARTS"

 MARCH 28, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thanks for the interview, Kimmerly. You're a medical doctor by training, correct? What kind of practice? And how did you manage to find the time to pen this novel, which, given its plot that involves medical school and residency, as well as its hospital settings, could only have been written, I think, by someone knowledgeable in the field.

KM: My experience in writing is reflective of the ubiquitous advice hurled at all debut authors, which is *write what you know*. I know the practice of medicine. My training consisted of med school, a general surgery internship, and a residency in Emergency Medicine. When I started writing *The Queen of Hearts* I worked in the ER full-time. I have no background in writing but right away I found it compelling. In fact, I found it so compelling I began to rearrange my life to have more time to do it—I gave up TV for a couple of years, I stopped doing some volunteering that was meaningful to me, I hired some help with running my kids around, and, ultimately, I took a medical office job that allowed me more time to write.



Kimmerly Martin

AM: It must be an exciting time—seeing your novel getting so much publicity.

KM: Yes, it's been surreal. The odds of getting published are overwhelming when you break them down: literary agents often receive hundreds of letters a week from prospective clients and they might take on a handful a year. If you do land an agent, it can still be difficult for them to sell your work to a big publisher. And all of that is after the aspiring writer has already written and polished a manuscript to the point of near-perfection. The process involves a soul-sucking amount of rejection for many of us. So after enduring an epic struggle, it was the sweetest thing in the world one day to wake up and see my photo and my book cover in the *New York Times*. I still haven't recovered from that.

AM: Your book, *The Queen of Hearts*, plays with chronology, jumping back and forth in time from 1999 to the present, and with shifting narrators. Did you ever get confused? How did you keep the plot and characters straight using this method?

KM: *The Queen of Hearts* is the first significant piece of writing I'd ever done and I accomplished it with no background or training in writing. Lest that make me sound like some sort of literary genius, what it effectively meant was that my initial manuscript was super crappy. It required an immense amount of revision and a long time to mold the first draft into a coherent story. I didn't do it alone: I acquired a slew of beta-readers and hired a developmental editor, Betsy Thorpe. I also started attending writing conferences, like Writers Digest and the Iceland Writers Conference to learn helpful craft techniques.

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And of course, when Penguin bought the book, my editor provided invaluable guidance in restructuring the scenes. But the main thing that aided me, I think, was my lifelong voracious reading habit: I often read three to four books a week. This did give me some instinctual understanding of story structure.

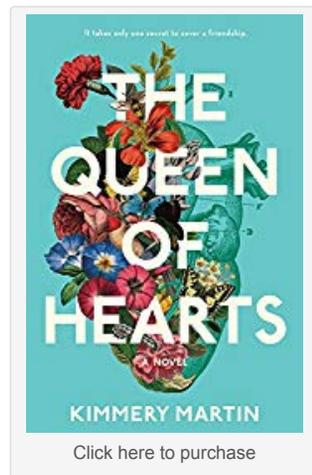
In the case of *TQOH*, my initial vague idea was to create a story about a group of friends in medical school, a time that was formative in my own life. We worked hard but we also played hard and I wanted to try to capture some of the intensity and camaraderie of that experience. Now, in retrospect, that is not the basis of a story. There's no plot there. At the time, though, I was unburdened by any knowledge about the components of a good plot so I merrily plunked myself into a chair and started writing. Within a relatively short period of time, I'd completed all of the chapters of the book that take place during the characters' time in medical school. Then I thought: what if we could see these women in their present-day lives, when they are wives and mothers and practicing physicians? In that case, the reader could evaluate how the events that shaped them during their training wound up affecting them later. So I started weaving in present-day chapters and also added Emma, the trauma surgeon, as a POV character. I didn't use any kind of software or even notes to keep track of details because by then I'd practically memorized the entire thing. And once, again, this resulted in a messy product that needed a lot of revision; I think something like 100,000 words and several other plot lines were ultimately cut. But it got there in the end!

AM: That's an inspirational story. It takes tenacity to get to what you think is the end only to realize you need to keep going. Is the determination it takes to complete a novel similar to or different from the determination it takes to complete medical school and then residency and so on?

KM: You could make the argument that both require infinite reserves of patience, a tolerance for criticism, and some understanding of human nature. But writing is a bit more of a labor of love: at least with medicine, you know you'll be paid!

AM: You mentioned your voracious reading habit. What are you reading now?

KM: *South Pole Station* by Ashley Shelby. It's a novel about an artist who is awarded a grant to live at the South Pole for a year amid a group of scientists and maintenance workers. Then a fringe climate-change denying scientist shows up and plunges the entire place into disarray. It's a great read: snarky and witty and clever. My favorite kinds of fiction are the books from which you effortlessly learn something in detail about an interesting setting or industry or topic, and this book is remarkably well done in that respect.



AM: I think your novel falls into that category. I want to return to your comment about adding Emma later in the manuscript process. Why did you make that decision? Where did Emma come from?

KM: A lot of this is now shrouded in mystery because I didn't have the sense to make notes or keep a spreadsheet when I started the novel. In the earliest drafts, Emma was a more peripheral character and Zadie's husband was more pivotal. In fact, he was a POV character at first, and a lot of the storyline revolved around him. Then I realized there was some tension coming from Emma's subtle envy of Zadie. Zadie is a charmed-life kind of person, and unusually for a protagonist in a novel, she doesn't drive the plot, because she's generally very happy. Emma's machinations are what lend the storyline its arc, even though she's a more minor character. So I amped up her role in the drama.

When the book sold to the publisher, their deal was contingent on me re-writing pretty much the entire second half of the novel to include a different plot line they wanted. Zadie's husband got whacked out for the most part, and Emma's role grew even more. She's probably the most interesting character; she's complex and sometimes contradictory. She evokes the strongest reaction from readers (aside from the near-universal adoration of Delaney, the three year-old in the novel). Some people hate Emma and others find her sympathetic. To most readers, it's probably pretty obvious what she did; to me the interesting question is *why* she did it.

AM: Where are you from, Kimmerly?

KM: I grew up in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains of Eastern Kentucky, outside a small town called Berea. It was a lovely childhood.

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AM: I've heard that's a pretty place. And now you're in North Carolina?

KM: Yes, in Charlotte, which is a fabulous city.

AM: Been there many times. I went to school at Furman University, an hour south of Charlotte. One last question before I let you go: how much fun do you have while writing? I imagine you enjoy it. Your personality—from what I gather from this interview and our email correspondence—seems present in your novel.

KM: Oh yeah. I enjoy writing. It turns out managing the angst and drama of imaginary people is preferable to managing my own. Plus I am a smart-ass by nature so I have a lot of fun with the conversations of my characters. I think I'll close with that. Thank you so much, Allen, for reading *The Queen of Hearts* and for including me in the marvelous company of your many interviewed authors!

AM: And thanks so much for doing this interview. Your enthusiasm is contagious.

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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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