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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS LORNA HOLLIFIELD, AUTHOR OF "TOBACCO SUN"

 AUGUST 14, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thanks, Lorna, for doing this interview. The title of your debut novel is *Tobacco Sun*. I want to ask you about that title, but first I want to quote from some opening lines of the book. "Tobacco," you say, "a strangely fragile, yet willful crop, desperate for survivorship, proved it could somehow adapt to the more arid ground in the state's wide middle. No matter the wars fought over top of its sprouts, or the roads built by its stomping grounds, some of the germ always managed to make it another season."

The passage goes on in this lyrical and pensive vein. There's something metaphorical about tobacco here, isn't there?

LH: I consider this my first character introduction. Especially in the South, we seem to be so connected to the places we ran around barefoot as a child. The trees matter, the dirt matters, the agriculture matters, and the people are reflections of it all. In the prologue, by acquainting the audience to the land, I am giving them glimpses into what kind of humans they are about to encounter. The tobacco remains a huge presence, and metaphor throughout the novel.

AM: And where did you run around barefoot as a child?

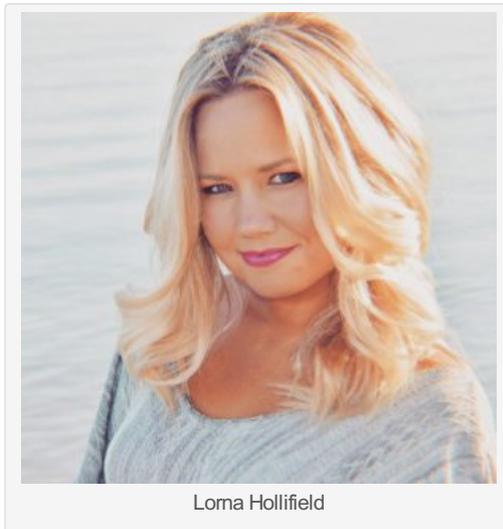
LH: Everywhere! I still hate shoes. I grew up outside of Asheville, North Carolina, in a tiny town called Candler. Summers were spent playing in water hoses and eating watermelon in my grandmother's front yard. I'd also climb our chestnut tree barefoot. That sometimes ended with me crying while mother got the tweezers!

AM: Now you're based in Charleston, right? I once heard Charleston described as a "literary city." Do you think that's the case?

LH: I would say so! I've met many authors from aspiring to best-selling. The city is the current stomping grounds for beach writers like Mary Alice Monroe and Dorothea Benton Frank—and has been the past stomping ground of the great Edgar Allan Poe. The list could go on and on. I think the history coupled with the beautiful scenery kind of makes it the perfect little Petrie dish to grow writers. Literature is part of Charleston's rich culture. I'm proud to be a part of that world.

AM: *Tobacco Sun* tells the story of two sisters from North Carolina after the close of the Second World War. What drew you to this period?

LH: I needed a time period without modern distractions where I could really showcase these salt-of-the-earth personalities. I also like the post-war era because everyone was looking for redemption of some



Lorna Hollifield

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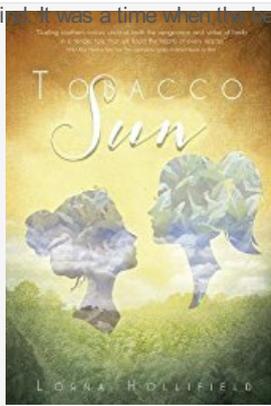
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kind. It was a time when the beginnings of modern psychiatry started being explored, which is important for the plot.



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AM: Interesting. Do you feel that people are no longer looking for redemption today, or at least not looking for it with the same sense of earnestness or urgency that was common after the war?

LH: I think it's different. At that time men were drafted, people lived on rations, and the entire world was at odds. On top of that, memories of the Great Depression still loomed. Everyone was looking for the rainbow in the sky. We need this now, in some ways more than ever. I think there's more distraction in modern times though (sometimes good, sometimes bad) that changes the mood.

AM: This is, as I've said, your first novel. Where were you when you first decided to write it?

LH: I was at home listening to music. A band called The Civil Wars used to do this really cool "folky" music and something about it conjured up my vision of Jimmi-Lyn. Once I had her character I thought she'd fit well in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere I'd once driven through with my husband. Sydra came out of thin air sometime before that, and then I realized she was Jimmi-Lyn's sister. And just like that, they started talking to me.

AM: Fascinating. As they spoke to you, did you ever try to plug up your ears, refusing to listen and resisting the direction they wanted to take, or did their qualities and characteristics materialize naturally? I guess I'm asking if you told the story as you set out to tell it, or if the book took on its own shape unexpectedly.

LH: I always have a loose blueprint, but as I become my characters, it always changes somewhat. I think it helps make dynamic characters though. I envisioned Sydra a villain, but then I started rooting for her. It seems outside my own imagination at times. They do what they like. I'm just the girl typing.

AM: Well I hope you keep on typing. I look forward to seeing more of your work.

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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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