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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MARJORIE HERRERA LEWIS, AUTHOR OF "WHEN THE MEN WERE GONE"

 AUGUST 21, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

APM: Marjorie, so happy we get to chat about *When the Men Were Gone*, your novel that features protagonist Tylene Wilson, a teacher during World War II who winds up coaching a high school football team. There's a sort of *A League of Their Own* vibe to the book. When did you think up this narrative, and did you expect the novel to receive so much attention from sports fans?

MHL: So happy to chat about this with you, Allen. When I first heard about Tylene and her coaching experience during World War II, I set out to write a biography. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for me to realize that her life story had been relegated to the dusty bins of history, and even then, very little remained. Much of the information I needed no longer existed. A records fire in 1960 contributed to that.

After a few years of research, I came to a crossroad: With not enough information, I would either let the story die, or, I would create a novel, fictionalizing accounts yet still memorializing what she had done. I chose the novel, and from then on, I set out to create the story while remaining true to the person she was. Yes, she wore a dress, heels, and a string of pearls to football practice and to football games. Yes, her heel did get caught in the turf during a game, and yes, when she jarred it loose, it flew off and nearly clipped an official on the side of the



Marjorie Herrera Lewis

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head. I included many of the stories that had been told to me, but when you ask of how I thought up the narrative, the answer to that is I began writing and I let the narrative take me. I had no outline. I just started writing. Because this is my first novel, I had no idea what to expect from the public. I've been overwhelmed by the reception. I was blown away by *Sports Illustrated* naming it a Best Book of 2018 and with Newsweek naming it a Best Book (so far) for 2019. I couldn't be happier.

APM: Congratulations, by the way! Am I correct that you also coached football? Like Tylene did?

MHL: Thank you! Yes, that's correct. I was an assistant football coach at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth during the 2017 season. It was the first season Texas Wesleyan played football since 1941, the year the team won a share of the conference championship. Then Pearl Harbor happened, and the team decided collectively to serve the country, and the program disbanded until the 2017 season. I never thought I'd be a college football coach, but I was inspired by Tylene. Had I not discovered her story, I never would have thought about coaching. It was an incredible experience.

APM: Did you ever think you'd be a novelist?

MHL: No, I never thought I'd be a novelist. I knew I'd write a book one day, but because I was a career journalist, I figured it would be nonfiction. Now, novels are all I want to write.

APM: Did you have any difficulty finding a publisher? What was that process like for you?

MHL: My agent, Andrea Somberg with the Harvey Klinger Agency in New York, was responsible for finding a publisher. She was incredible. Fourteen business days after I signed on with her, she sold the novel to the William Morrow imprint of HarperCollins. She had generated interest from other big publishing houses, but HarperCollins was first to offer, and I really wanted to accept rather than go to auction, so that's what we did. Of course, we did receive rejections from some publishing houses along the way, as to be expected, but overall, the process for me was fantastic. Because this is my debut novel, I had no idea what to expect, so I couldn't have been happier.

APM: How much historical research did you do to write this novel? You mentioned earlier that you'd researched Tylene Wilson for a few years before you realized you lacked the information to complete a nonfiction book—a biography.

MHL: I love research, so digging through files and newspapers and talking to people and searching the web was a lot of fun for me. I love discovering long-lost bits and pieces and pulling them all together. I loved meeting people at libraries and genealogy societies and universities. A highlight was meeting the Brownwood town historian! I loved it. It wasn't until I was told of a records fire in 1960 that destroyed much of what I was lacking, so at one point, I had to stop searching and start writing a novel. By that time, I had already discovered obituaries, birth certificates, town history, war history, gender history, and Tylene's personal history, so I was ready to go.

APM: Do you like other sports besides football?

MHL: I do. My father played baseball in college, so I fell in love with baseball at a really young age. I also had a basketball hoop at home, so I played a lot of basketball, including playing on my high school

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team. I enjoy hockey, volleyball, tennis, golf, softball. I played just about everything but soccer, one sport I know little about.

APM: Sports come with their own vocabularies. What did you do, if anything, to make sure the character dialogue matched the period in which the novel is set? I would imagine that certain football terms or expressions used then are not the same as those used today. I'm an Auburn football fan, and I've talked to former players who discuss plays and offenses that aren't around anymore. Auburn used to punt on third down. Surely there are practices like that—and terms for them—that have fallen into disuse as the game evolved.

MHL: This is a great question. I had to be especially careful about how the game was played and how terms were used to make it authentic. One example is I had the defense play in a 7-2-2

formation, something popular at the time but something you'd never see today. I also mentioned that the top receiver had caught three touchdown passes in the last couple years, something a top receiver might do in a single game today. I wanted to make it clear that passing was rare then. Surprisingly, the newspaper clips I found used terminology mostly recognizable today. A couple things were different but close enough, so I didn't stray far from what we'd hear today only to keep from confusing readers who may not be familiar enough with football lingo. I decided to just to keep it simple.

APM: I'll try to keep the last question simple: who is your favorite writer?

MHL: Truman Capote. I love his style, and I admire his ability to write fiction and nonfiction and do both so well.

APL: Thank you for the interview, Marjorie. I really enjoyed it.

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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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