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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MELISSA FISCHER, AUTHOR OF "THE ADVOCACY"

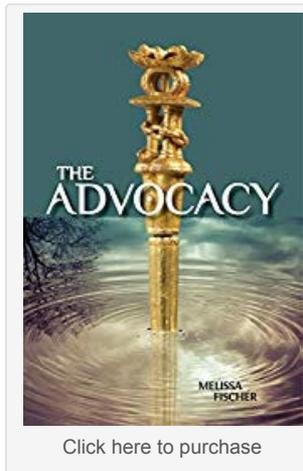
 FEBRUARY 26, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT \(EDIT\)](#)

**AM:** I'm glad we have this opportunity, Melissa, to talk about your profound new book, *The Advocacy*, which is set in 1992 in Obuasi, Ghana, a mining town known for its gold. You lived in this town in 1992 and remained there for a few years while you worked for the Peace Corps. How did your experiences shape and inform the writing of *The Advocacy*?

**MF:** Thank you, Allen, for your kind words and for this opportunity to talk about *The Advocacy*. I lived in Obuasi for two years, the normal duration of a Peace Corps tour. The experience touched me on a spiritual level. The richness of that life inspired my dedication to completing the novel over the course of 25 years.

I find that a story lives in the telling, not within the premise or plot. For this reason, I felt no pride about needing to invent a new set of facts. I allowed the facts of my experience to serve as the structure upon which I would hang the story. So – I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, I lived in Obuasi, I worked with four Ghanaian men seconded from various government agencies, our charitable organization was funded by the local gold mine. These basic facts lay the foundation of *The Advocacy*.

I chose the medium of fiction in order to have a canvas vast enough to contain the magnitude of what needed to be expressed. I was completely undone by life in Obuasi. I lacked Louisa Lehmann's capacity to integrate experience on the fly. I could not match her resilience. I returned to the U.S. feeling emotionally broken and unable to discern my path. This was the right and necessary attitude to bring to



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the writing. I did not write from a place of authority. I wrote from a place of respect and an utter lack of certainty in hopes the story would reveal itself to me.

**AM: Your protagonist, Louisa Lehmann, is a civil engineer. There's a lot of wisdom in your opening lines: "No one is interested in an engineer's tale, but everyone needs a civil engineer. Humanity can live without airplanes and missiles, cars and computers. But a shelter within which to sleep and harbor one's children, a cistern or well for drinking water, a road to travel in the harshest weather, a bridge to cross a river, a sanitary means to dispose of waste—these necessities bestow upon the civil engineer a universal passport."**

MF: There is something humble about the mission of the civil engineer. Personally, I need this, to be pulled close to the ground. Professionally, I love meeting people anywhere in the world within the context of helping them find dignity in addressing their most basic needs. It strips away pretense and I find beauty in that level of authenticity.

The lead to the novel grew out of the responses of some agents and writers. In my initial years sharing chapters at writing conferences, in addition to a lot of sound criticism, I received pushback from some agents and writers. Their comments did not feel constructive, but harsh, sometimes cynical, which I perceived as a reaction to my being a civil engineer writing fiction, and my choice of a civil engineer as the protagonist. It took me a while to preempt this snide element through naming it in the novel. Louisa Lehmann became self-conscious about the quality of her writing. She lamented the "prejudiced ear the world turns away from an engineer's tale."

This echoes a familiar sentiment within the civil engineering community that the public does not understand the service that we provide, that we are not respected and appreciated for our contribution. It is a conundrum that the ubiquitous nature of civil engineering in people's daily lives renders civil engineers invisible, rather than lauded.

Writing the novel forced me to confront this issue. Louisa began to manifest a towering pride in her profession, to opine upon the vital role of civil engineers. She spoke in ways that I never had. This was extremely freeing for me, both as a writer and as an engineer.

In the documentary of Toni Morrison's life, *The Pieces I Am*, there is commentary about the frustration of James Baldwin late in his life that he had not been awarded a Nobel Prize. The work of James Baldwin is no less for the lack of a prize. But there is something essential in being seen. Baldwin knew his worth and the world refused to acknowledge him. *The Advocacy* explores this theme in depth, the crucial need to be seen for who we are.

**AM: You don't have to read far into the first chapter to realize the depth you've given your characters. For instance, Louisa wonders whether the world can be measured and predicted, whether her profession, engineering, is absolutist by supposing itself against pure theory. She talks about how her father, a geologist, is empirical, wishes she were a poet, and says things like, "Earth is the source of all things." Did you mean to write a philosophical work?**

MF: I don't know if I'm a philosopher. It was my intent to write a transcendent work. I love engineering. This was not taught to me. My engineering self is as much a part of me as my writing self. Yet, writing

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about engineering in the traditional, professional sense, does not feed my heart. Engineering work alone is not enough to nourish my soul. I need to perceive and integrate and share my experience of what is sacred. Without that, my life is not worth living. Without that, I would feel incapable of expressing love.

I definitely wanted to write in a way that opens the reader to perception and possibility. I cultivated a sensibility for language of wonder and contemplation. In plot-driven novels, chapters should end with the reader eager to know, *what happens next?* *The Advocacy* is a character-driven novel, in which I strove to end chapters with fullness, leaving the reader replete – I hope, with appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the people, the place, and that time in Ghana's history.

**AM: What about a political work?**

MF: I did not set out to write a political work. It would be accurate even to say I made every effort to avoid a political statement. Yet *The Advocacy* is highly political. There are many layers to this. If I were to say that I had meant to write a political work, I think the implication would be that I had a pre-determined political message that I wanted to propagate via the novel. To me, this is the opposite of literature. Writing fiction is about listening and discovering, not about pre-meditation.

How is it possible to write a novel about the relationship between subsistence farmers and a multinational gold mine without being political? I had no patience for cliché. I wanted something human. I wrote from my heart and insisted upon truth. I was so averse to pushing an agenda that my editor had to ask, "Where are the scenes of conflict with the gold mine?" I had rolled my eyes. How clichéd to paint the multinational corporation as the villain. Obviously it is; what need to say it?

But I trusted the advice. I took what was then a scene of confrontation with the mine occurring near the end of the story, and adapted it into the initial scene of conflict. Appropriate moments for successive scenes of conflict had to be identified, and the scenes crafted for consistency with the context. An unintended result of implementing this revision was the pulling into alignment of many of the sub-plots. I watched it happen with surprise and excitement. This was the proof to me of the wisdom of providing this arc of explicit conflict between West Africa Gold and Louisa Lehmann.

It would be easy to label as "political" the portrayal of the last months of Ken Saro-Wiwa's life. He is a political figure. He is also a human being. One who could not remain silent in the face of the violence – to his people, to the land, to the dignity of Ogoniland. Is it de facto political to speak truth? When is truth just truth? Does truth become political when someone attempts to silence it? I wrote about Ken Saro-Wiwa to honor him. Not to mention it would have been absurd to write a novel of environmental justice set in West Africa of the early 1990's without including his story.

Last September, I went to Pershing Square for the international climate strike. It was the first time I had encountered in person the young people – elementary, junior high, and high school students – who had taken off from school to protest. A group of maybe junior-high-aged girls was leading a crowd in chants and slogans. They held posters with the faces of the CEOs of major oil companies labeled, "Climate Villain." It is a sad day when children behave as adults to compensate for the failure of adults to fulfill their role. Yet, in this moment, it is necessary. I recognized Louisa Lehmann in these students, their thirst for integrity and their courage to demand it. They stand on the shoulders of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

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**AM: Could you say something about the relationships between indigenous communities in Ghana and Western influences in the region? How much has changed since you lived there?**

MF: I have not returned to Ghana since I left the Peace Corps in 1994. My focus was writing about a specific time and place. I did not want my memories tainted by new realities. I understand that cell phones are now commonplace, that it is no longer safe to walk the streets of Accra at night, that illegal gold mining operations have decimated the environment, and that scam artists are prevalent. This is a very different Ghana.

I suspect I would not fare well as a Peace Corps Volunteer of today. Solitude was a crucial aspect of my experience. Being cut off from my own culture forced a kind of receptivity to the immediate world around me that I'm not sure is possible, now. I imagine today's volunteers have access to cell phones and the Internet. I imagine frequent emails and possibly WhatsApp videochats with friends and family. Facile access to the familiar, for me, would undermine the depth of my experience.

Even in villages, locals may be walking around with cell phones, intruding upon what was once an incorruptible present. This would grieve me.

The gold mine of my day has been sold to another company. Somehow, the mine concession was overrun by illegal mining activity, which is purported to be the cause of the mine shutting down five years ago. In 2019 the mine reopened – part of the efforts of President Akufo-Addo to stimulate the private sector and end all debt for the country. Whereas 10,000 staff were employed by the mine in the early 1990's, the new operation will be more machine-intensive, employing less than 600 people.

One of the epigraphs in *The Advocacy* is from the 2014 book by Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. He speaks of the commercialization of Christian mega churches in Accra where salvation is equated with material concentration, which seems a predictable outcome of Western influence. On the other hand, Quayson also speaks of the persistence of local, Ghanaian gestures for responding to the confluence of Ghana and the Western world. For example, he describes philosophical slogans painted on vehicles that suggest a literate populace, but which can only be comprehended through a facility with the idioms of Ghanaian oral tradition.

What appears simple, a "bumper sticker," is not. It evokes a core strength of Ghanaian culture, the oral tradition. Vehicles first came to Ghana by Western influence. The writing of local languages began with Western missionaries. Yet, an authentic Ghanaian voice survives the Western medium of expression. In fact, the Western medium is appropriated to convey a contemporary Ghanaian response to the convergence of Ghana and the West – which are not singular forms, but multi-layered. Only one versed in the traditions of a culture rich in metaphor can perceive the full nuance. This resonates with the enigma of Amadu Kofi al-Attar in *The Advocacy*. Louisa's journey in relation to Kofi may suggest the depth of commitment required of us to understand one another.

**AM: What do you do now? I mean when you're not writing. Where do you live? Are you still involved in peacekeeping and economic development?**

MF: When I first left the Peace Corps, Rwanda was exploding. I worked six months at Ngara, Tanzania in Rwandan refugee camps. Then I attended graduate school in construction management and took a

job with a public agency in Los Angeles. My intention was to stay long enough to finish the novel, which I thought would take five years. I was only off by twenty years.

While working full time as an engineer, I've completed 5-1/2 years of training related to pre- and perinatal health and how to support recovery from birth trauma. I volunteer in a neonatal intensive care unit. My dream would be to retire from engineering so that I could write every day and open a practice working with babies.

Through my job, I've also had the opportunity to spend three years starting up a composting facility in the San Joaquin Valley. I had the privilege of working with top-notch people – composters, farmers, regulators, community organizers – all of which helped me to see the links between compost, healthy soil, nutritious food, healthy communities, carbon sequestration, and the reversal of climate change. This will form the core of the next Louisa Lehmann novel.

**AM: Where are you from, Melissa? Where did you grow up? When did you start writing?**

MF: I have been told by more than one linguist that it is impossible to place my accent, to detect my country of origin. This may be because I lived overseas at a young age and was exposed to speakers from many different countries. I have an ear for the rhythms of language that perhaps has resulted in a unique voice.

I'm a native Californian, was born in Ventura, and grew up mostly in Bakersfield. My father worked for Occidental Petroleum, which afforded our family two opportunities to live in Tripoli, Libya. Those experiences infected me with a life-long interest in other cultures, with respect for what is foreign, and the desire to see more of the world when I grew up.

Sometime around the age of seven, I recall someone gave me a gift of a journal. It had a small lock on it and I wrote in it a little. I was an avid reader and between the ages of seven and nine I recall having the vivid awareness that I would grow up and write a novel. I loved how reading made me feel and I wanted someday to touch people in that way.

It wasn't until high school that I wrote on a daily basis. In English class, we were assigned a topic each day on which we had to write at least one page. I wrote the assignment and never stopped writing. I filled many pages with everything I thought and felt. I received a lot of encouragement from my English teachers to continue in this.

I didn't attempt my first novel until after college. Actually, after I quit my first job. I had worked four years in construction and was living in Atwater, California, a small town in the Central Valley. I lived in a cottage in an almond orchard and worked a half-day job as a "narc" at a high school. I wanted to see if I had the discipline to return day-after-day to the same story, if it would hold my interest, if I was capable of finishing it. Although I never attempted to publish that work, it gave me the confidence to continue as a writer.

**AM: There's a great question towards the end of the novel: "Africa is a great teacher. Who is not her student?" I'm tempted to ask you what you think the answer to that question is, but I'll ask instead what you learned from Africa—about yourself, about people, about the world.**

MF: *The Advocacy* is the most eloquent answer I can offer. The writing of the novel was a deep exploration to truly understand my experience and, in so doing, to know myself. A key motivation to write was the intense frustration I felt upon returning from the Peace Corps whenever a similar question was posed. I could not deliver a neat reply. My failing in this regard notwithstanding, a few thoughts do come to mind.

For most of my life, Africa has been what opens to me that which is greater. I have always craved that experience and, so, craved to return to Africa. I have worked to develop my relationship with the Divine such that I am not dependent on the extravagant gesture of traveling to Africa to invoke it. I have learned to incorporate sacred practice into my life. I am curious to discover how this will alter my experience of Africa the next time I return. I believe I will be a much more resilient recipient of her gifts.

I suppose Ghana taught me that I am an American. As a child in Libya, I was held by my family. I didn't look beyond that. As an adult in Ghana, there was no parental buffer. I recall hearing the national anthem play on the *Voice of America* and feeling more patriotic than ever I had in my life.

While traveling through Nairobi, I had my bag stolen. It was night and too dangerous to walk out of the part of town I was in. I was allowed to make a phone call from the office of the bus station. I asked to call the U.S. Embassy. The bus station employees told me the embassy was closed. I said, "No, there is a Marine on duty." They dialed the embassy and the Marine answered. I felt a swell of patriotism and gratitude for that Marine.

**AM: Wow, fascinating. Thank you, Melissa, for the interview. It's been insightful and inspiring.**

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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).

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