

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MICHEL STONE, AUTHOR OF "BORDER CHILD"

 AUGUST 21, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: The paperback release of *Border Child* appears to be timely, Michel, in light of the separation of families that's occurring right now at the Mexican border [editor's note: this interview took place in early July]. I'm sure you're getting all kinds of interview requests. I appreciate your time. Where did the idea for the plot of *Border Child* come from?

MS: I met a young Mexican couple and their toddler son in rural South Carolina over a decade ago. They told me about their undocumented crossings into the U.S., that during that process the woman entrusted her son, an infant at the time, to a professional who specialized in border crossings with babies. This "coyote" for babies wasn't a friend or relative, but rather a paid stranger who promised to reconnect the child with his mother, who'd be crossing separately, in Texas. The "what ifs" of that mother's story haunted me, not from a political angle, but as a mother, as a human being. Writers write because we have questions, not answers; at least that's the case for me. Since meeting that family I've interviewed many others. Their motivations and experiences fascinate me.

AM: It seems to me that if everyone tried harder to relate to each other on a personal level, rather than abstracting relationships into political narratives, we might have less discord and more understanding across society. I think you're right to identify the complex circumstances that surround any isolated cases. But do you really think writers as a class are motivated by questions, not answers? The good ones, maybe.

MS: That's just it! I'm actually typing this answer to you on my smartphone as I ride the bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto, Japan with my 19-year-old daughter. No one else in this train car is Caucasian. I know a whopping five words in Japanese. So one could say I'm a fish out of water at the moment. But meeting someone who is different than me, regardless of the nature of that difference, usually results in my

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thinking, "Wow! S/He is just like me!" And that realization begets empathy. My novels may introduce readers to seemingly "different" characters, but as human beings we're all experiencing the realm of human emotions that connects us. Love is love and hope is hope in every soul on this planet, regardless of where you land on the map or what the people in that place look like. We are more alike than we're different. Perhaps the motivation to write fiction springs not so much from authors having specific questions but, rather, from a strong desire to better understand the human condition, to parse events into component parts that are more easily understandable, not only for their readers but for the authors themselves. Plus, it's fun to spin a good yarn.

AM: I used to live in Japan, and I think I've been on that same train ride. Your first novel, *Iguana Tree*, like *Border Child*, deals with borders. Is there something figurative about borders that relates to your personal beliefs about the importance of connecting with people on the individual level?

MS: Yes. Connecting with someone on an individual level diminishes barriers. Both of my novels, as well as the one I'm currently writing, were sparked by intimate personal interactions rather than by headlines about border-related issues. Someone's homeland can be determined by the arbitrariness of a border, but a person's character, experiences, and values are uniquely their own. Should a borderline be drawn along a river bank? A mountain range? Where an old cattle trail used to be? Or a forest begins? So often we think we can know a person based solely on broad superficial characterizations that one society or culture has imposed on another, but when we meet someone on an individual level, we stop seeing them as the "other" and see them as a unique human being. Mother Teresa said it beautifully: "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."

AM: In addition to being an author, you're deeply involved in your community. I used to live in Greenville, South Carolina, so I appreciate your involvement with the particular communities you're serving.

MS: Thanks, Allen. I've always enjoyed community involvement, and the older I get the more I realize the benefits of volunteering not only for the causes I believe in but also to myself. Through my community engagement I have met so many incredible folks I may not have met otherwise. Volunteering expands my sense of purpose, deepens my empathy for others, strengthens my leadership skills, keeps me mentally stimulated, and I hope improves the quality of life for those I serve. I'll tell you, nothing gets your mind off your own woes like stepping in to help someone else. It's life affirming. I try to center my work around the causes dearest to my heart: literacy, education, children, and matters of health. Last summer I created and facilitated a free weeklong "writing for empathy" camp for teens. It was underwritten largely by South Carolina Humanities. Those students inspired and energized me and we enjoyed an impactful week together. The experience left me eager to get on with my own writing, and I



Michel Stone (photo by Paige Phillips)

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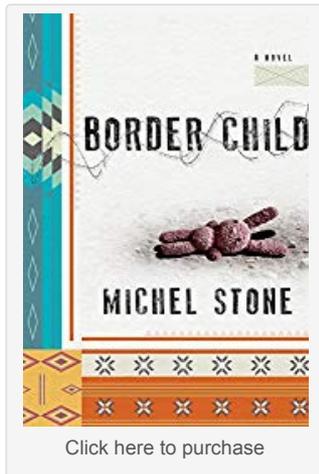
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believe stimulated participants and instilled in them the confidence to continue writing outside of the school setting.

AM: When did you realize you were a writer, one that could publish and gain a readership?

MS: Not sure I've realized that. I mean, I have published a couple of books, but my insecurities about my writing ability linger, and perhaps perversely I hope they always do. The insecurities keep me honest and hungry to improve my craft. I hope something I've written speaks to someone, but I can't worry too much about gaining a readership. Instead, I worry about always writing better, about honing my craft. Readership doesn't always equate to fine writing. Selling books is wonderful, of course, but I'd rather have a few authors whom I greatly admire say, "*Michel Stone is the real deal*" much

more than I'd like to write a mediocre book that sold a lot of copies.

AM: How much research went into writing *Border Child*? Did you already know a lot about the system of child-smuggling coyotes along the border?

MS: Plenty of research! I read a great deal of nonfiction on the subject but more important were my dozens of interviews with undocumented folks who crossed our southern border, many of whom were teens who crossed independently from their parents. After my first novel came out I traveled the country for speaking engagements at colleges, libraries, and book festivals, and in doing so, the research began to come to me, meaning DACA students and their parents would approach me at book signings to tell me their stories. Additionally I have spent time in Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua learning all I can about those cultures. In significant ways my experiences in Latin America are reminiscent of my childhood growing up in a rural farming community on a South Carolina sea island in the 1970s and 80s. Their values and those of my family and the community in which I came of age are quite similar.

AM: Interesting. Sounds as if you did field research in addition to book research. I know from email responses that our readers include many new and aspiring writers. I wonder if you might say something for their benefit about the process of identifying an agent and publishing a book.

MS: Agents—a topic we could talk about all day. I'm on my third one. My first was a sweetheart of a gentleman who passed away from cancer within months of my signing with him. He and I were introduced by our mutual friend C. Michael Curtis, longtime fiction editor of *The Atlantic*. I didn't learn of his illness until the day before he died. My second agent was attentive until the ink dried on my contract with him: then I couldn't get him to return emails or calls.

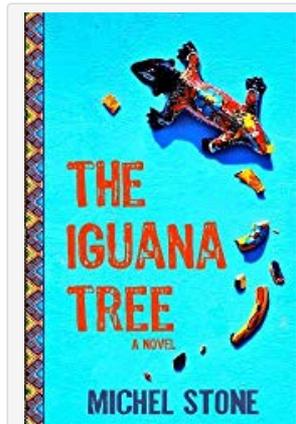
My third and current agent is Marly Rusoff and she sold the *Border Child* manuscript to my inimitable editor Nan Talese at Doubleday. Marly has been a joy. I've also worked with film agent Lynn Pleshette in L.A. She sold the option rights for both my novels to be developed for a television series. Agents serve as a litmus test and I'm certain many editors wouldn't give my work a glance if it didn't land on their desks via a literary agent.

[West Virginia William Bernhardt William Faulkner](#)

I cannot speak to self-publishing because I haven't done it. The publishing process is the proverbial roller coaster. One day you're popping a bottle of bubbly about some seemingly fantastic development and the next day, well, you may be crying in your beer. An agent with whom you feel a comfortable rapport and respect is ideal. And "old and experienced" isn't necessarily the goal.

Sometimes a hungry young agent will serve a writer best, hustling to get a manuscript into editors' hands.

AM: Thanks for your wisdom and insight. I wish we had more time to carry on this conversation. It's been fascinating. One last question: how do you hope readers will respond to your work, both *Border Child* and *The Iguana Tree*? What I mean is, do you expect your novels to do more than entertain? What in your mind makes them successful?



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MS: I hope readers empathize with my characters who, at first may have seemed so different, but in truth, on many levels, are just like my readers. Everyone on the planet, regardless of skin color, religion, country of origin, socio-economic situation, occupation, or gender, sooner or later, will experience hope, disappointment, joy, love, sadness, despair and a range of human emotion. I write to entertain but also to deepen readers' empathy. If the lens through which a reader sees the world has been broadened from having read one of my novels, I'll feel the book is a success.

AM: I think the book is a success, Michel, and I look forward to reading more of your work.

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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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