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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MIKE BURRELL, AUTHOR OF "THE LAND OF GRACE"

📅 SEPTEMBER 11, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**AM:** Mike, so glad to do this interview with you. In the universe of improbable plots, the one you've created involving a religious cult devoted to worshipping Elvis has got to be the shining star. How in the hell did you come up with it?

MB: Yes, thank you for having me, Allen. This story sprang from an incident that occurred back in December of 1977. I was leaving a boring Christmas party and was asked by the host to drive one of his women guests home. She and her boyfriend had a fight, and he had abandoned her to whimper and sniffle alone in the guest bedroom.

My first mistake was seeing myself as some kind of knight, rescuing a damsel in distress. My second mistake was not asking where this damsel lived. Once I was committed, I found out she lived way north of Birmingham. In fact, she lived so far out in the sticks that, after a few turns, I became concerned about finding my way back to the interstate in the dark. She finally told me to stop in front of a little white clapboard house and asked if I wanted to come in for a drink. Faced with one of those "why not" moments, I made my third mistake and followed her inside.

As we stepped up on the porch, I could see an eerie light flickering through the cracks in the blinds. When she clicked on the lights, my breath left me at the sight of all the pictures of Elvis splattered across the walls. On a card table in the center of the little living area, a three foot statue of Elvis with a guitar looked as if he were serenading a half-dozen candles flickering from a cookie sheet.

After blowing out the candles, she grumbled, "My sister's going to burn this house slap to the ground one of these days."

"Y'all must really like Elvis," I said.

"Oh, we *love* Elvis," she said.

Thinking I would endear myself to this woman, I made my fourth mistake by saying, "I was really saddened by the news of his death."

Behind a pair of murderous eyes, she chilled my blood when she shrieked, "He's not dead. Don't ever say that to me again."

Determined not to make any more mistakes, I assured her I wouldn't mention Elvis again, made some fumbling excuse about time getting away, and got the hell out of there.



Mike Burrell

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That wild-eyed woman and the creepy little Elvis shrine have haunted me over the years. I didn't know exactly what I had seen. But I think I witnessed a lot more passion than a mere fan would show toward a dead pop singer. Had hero-worship become actual worship? I don't know, but it damn sure looked like it. I tried to write it into a short story, but I couldn't make it read like much of anything until years later when I turned it into a novel.

**AM: And this is your first novel, correct? Congratulations. How long have you been writing fiction?**

MB: Thank you. It's my first *published* novel. In 1998, I pounded out four-hundred pages of something that I'll call a practice novel. I didn't do like Larry Brown and take it into the backyard and burn it. It's still stored in my computer, and I wince every time I see it. What embarrasses me most is not that it's bad. I mean, it's bad, but I've seen a lot worse. What gets me is that it's not anywhere close to being as good as I thought it was and how good some people told me it was.

I was still fumbling my way through a few stories in 2008 when I got into a week-long workshop with Pinckney Benedict who encouraged me by telling me that I definitely had the "chops" to do this. But he cautioned that writing good fiction is hard, and it's a craft that must be learned and practiced like anything else that's hard. It's not just a talent thing where you sit in front of a keyboard and wait for a muse to take you where you want to go.

I went through the low-residency MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte where Pinckney taught. I did a lot of writing and a lot of reading during that two year program. All that writing included a hundred and twenty pages of *The Land of Grace* under another title and with a different protagonist. A couple of years ago, I was a hundred-and-fifty pages deep into another novel when I saw an Elvis impersonator doing Elvis 1956 on television and realized what was wrong with my story—Hell, I had cast the wrong guy for the lead. After I put in ol' Doyle Brisendine, I found my way to the end of the story.

**AM: There's a lesson in tenacity here for aspiring writers. Are there writers you enjoy reading to inspire your writing, writers who may be different from those you'd read for pure pleasure?**

MB: These are the writers I reread for craft:

Francine Prose and Richard Yeats—great practitioners of the free and indirect style of close third-person narration. In Prose's *Blue Angel* and Yeats's *Revolutionary Road*, a reader is always viewing the world through the eyes of the point-of-view character while moving unnoticed in and out of the character's voice.

George V. Higgins (*The Friends of Eddie Coyle* only)—dialogue. Realistic dialogue.

Graham Greene—plotting. He's the master of the plot. He wrote with the movies in mind—even the literary masterpieces like *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Quiet American*.

Raymond Chandler—the most elegant sentences written by an American (well, actually he was born in England). Never mind that *The Big Sleep* really didn't make a lot of sense, it's an American classic.

John Kennedy Toole, Joseph Heller and Stanley Elkin—humor, satire, and in the case of Elkin, an amazing, jazz-like style of prose that cannot be duplicated on this planet.

**AM: You grew up in Alabama and have worked in several industries.**

MB: I grew up in rural DeKalb County, Alabama in the valley that lies between Sand Mountain and Lookout Mountain. It was there that I was introduced to the world of work at a very young age. I was six years old when my uncle asked my cousin and me if we wanted to be "pilots." You kidding? Hell, yeah, we wanted to be pilots. We were hopping with excitement as he led us through the milking room of the dairy farm to the concrete lot where the cows gathered before milking. He had just turned the cows loose into the pasture, and we had to dodge the cow flops dotting the lot. He handed each of us a big shovel and picked up one himself. "If you want to be pilots, what you'll need to do is pick it up over here," he said, a big grin spreading across his face as he scooped up one of the cow flops. Then he tossed the contents of his shovel on the mountain of manure in the corner of the lot. "And *pile it up* over here." He walked away laughing.

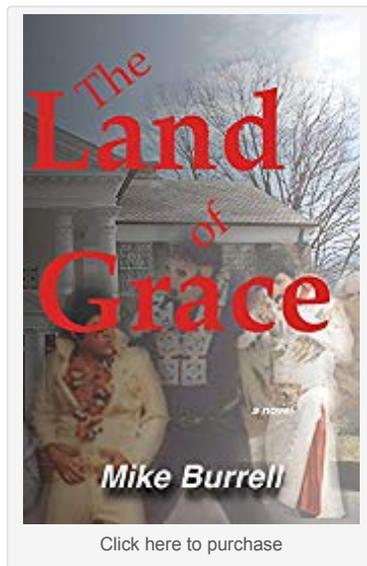
My uncle's cruel joke began my career of taking care of other people's cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens. Mostly chickens. Man, I hated chickens. I fed chickens. I cleaned up after chickens. I gathered chicken eggs, weighed them and boxed them. I caught chickens and sent them off to be turned into soup. Did I mention that I hated chickens? In the summers, I worked from dark to dark, hauling hay for five bucks a

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day. When I finally got a job with the A&P supermarket in Fort Payne, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

I bagged groceries, stocked shelves, displayed produce, cashiered, and cut meat (I was a miserable failure at cutting meat). It was a bunch of long, hard hours, but I paid my way through college working for the A&P. Of course that was long before an undergraduate degree cost six figures and your first-born child. I had ducked the military draft for four years, but the Vietnam War was still going on, and the Army was waiting for me immediately after graduation.



Even with a college degree, I was still shaking hay seeds from my hair (still am, really). So I don't believe I had even heard of military intelligence before the Army sent me to the Army Intelligence School at Ft. Hollabird, Maryland. There I studied Vietnam history, Vietnam geography, North Vietnam Army units, weapons, and Viet Cong guerrilla tactics. So I assumed I was headed to Vietnam. Instead, I was assigned to a Psychological Warfare unit on Okinawa where I used none of that training. I had a security clearance, but I was never privy to any kind of intrigue. Most of the classified stuff I saw was either of no real consequence or duplicated in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* or *Time Magazine*. We wrote tons of reports on the culture and economics of Asian countries while wondering what the hell they were ever used for. I didn't really care. It was fairly interesting, I had a good time, and I left that island without getting shot at.

I got out of the Army during an economic slump. I kept having promising interviews, but nothing worked out. In the meantime, I got hired by the Alabama Department of Revenue. When I eventually became the audit manager in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, I had a lot of smart employees who made my life easy, and I enjoyed the adversarial nature of the job. I studied law at night to prepare a place for me to land when an opportunity to retire came along.

Shortly after I retired from the Revenue Department, a friend from college was elected to the circuit court in Bessemer. I worked as his clerk for a year, then rented some space from another lawyer and hung out my shingle. For a while, it was exciting handling criminal cases. Dealing with my clients, the cops, the judges, the prosecutors, private investigators, and visiting the courtrooms, the jails, and crime scenes, I felt as if I were living inside an Elmore Leonard novel.

But after a while my practice dissolved into a slog just to keep the bills paid. I really had an itch to write, but I'm not a multi-tasker. It didn't seem to matter whether I had one client or a hundred, the law just ate up all my time. Then I lucked up when I took on a civil case. The case had such great potential that I devoted most of my time to it and ceased taking any new clients. When the case finally settled, I didn't really have much of a practice left. Fortunately I had earned enough from the case that I could choose between writing full time or taking on the daunting task of building my practice back. I didn't have a very hard time making that decision.

I earned an MFA, published some short stories and wrote a couple of unpublished novels. I was a hundred-and-fifty pages into another novel when Joe Taylor said he wanted to publish *The Land of Grace*. Now my job is trying to sell my book.

**AM: As a lawyer myself, I have to ask whether you think your legal experience hurt or helped you as a creative writer.**

MB: I've handled every kind of criminal case from capital murder and tax evasion down to indecent exposure and theft of jumper cables, and I couldn't even begin to write one of those Grisham-type legal thrillers. My brain doesn't work that way. But I've used the personalities and motivations of some of my criminal clients for the characters of my stories. My first published short story dealt with a young drug addict who got a job at a predatory used car lot and how his association with some real crooks changed him. The male protagonist was inspired by a female client of mine, and the setting was inspired by a couple of used car dealers a colleague of mine represented. The protagonist in a story I just had published in *Still: The Journal* was inspired by a woman I interviewed for a civil case. So having the opportunity (or misfortune) to see people at their very worst and some of them at their best is something that will inspire stories for as long as I can put my fingers on a keyboard.

**AM: I take it, then, that we can expect to read more of your work in the years to come?**

MB: Years to come. Man, I like the sound of that. Yes, more work in years to come is my plan. As I said previously, I was 150 pages into my next novel when Joe Taylor expressed an interest in *The Land of Grace*. I have some notes and character sketches for a couple of other books and some short stories in various stages of completion. Those stories are calling to me to get back to them. But I have to ignore their call because of the obligation I feel to let people know about the book that's already out there.

**AM: It wouldn't be an interview if I didn't ask if you are an Elvis fan. Not a cultist, of course. Just a fan.**

MB: In the '60s I became a big fan of Credence Clearwater Revival. Then Led Zeppelin and The Allman Brothers Band. These days I'm listening to Gov't Mule, The Tedeschi Trucks Band, Gary Clark Jr. and Alabama Shakes. But every time I hear Elvis, I can't help thinking the guy could have sung the Bessemer telephone book and made it sound pretty good. If he's singing one of those tunes from the Sun Records days, I shut my eyes, and I'm eleven years old again, watching Elvis catch lightning in a bottle on a flickering black and white Zenith. Hell, I have to be an Elvis fan. His songs were the music of my youth.

**AM: Next time you're in Montgomery, look me up and we'll grab a beer over some Elvis music. Thanks for the interview, Mike. I hope our readers will all buy a copy of *The Land of Grace*.**

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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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