

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS MIKE NEMETH, AUTHOR OF "THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY"

NOVEMBER 6, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: So glad to have the chance to chat, Mike. Before we talk about your new novel, *The Undiscovered Country*, which is a sequel to your novel *Defiled*, I'd like to explore our Atlanta connections. Where in the city do you live? I grew up in Marietta, close to Roswell Square, and lived in Alpharetta for a few years before I moved to Alabama.

MN: We moved to Atlanta when I was discharged from the Army at Fort Gordon (Augusta) in 1975. We've lived in Marietta, Norcross, Midtown and Vinings, in that order, but moved out of town when we retired in 2014. We now live in Villa Rica, midway between Atlanta and my wife's family in Jacksonville, Alabama. We have the best of both worlds: access to the big city and quiet country living. It's good for writing out here.

AM: We'll have to meet for lunch one day. "The undiscovered country" is a line from *Hamlet*. It's also the title of your book. What's the significance of that phrase in the life and world of Randle Marks, your protagonist?

MN: In *Hamlet* "the undiscovered country" refers to the mystery of the afterlife. There's an element of that for Randle as his mother's perilous medical condition raises his awareness of his own mortality. But my use of the phrase as the title is meant to imply that life is as mysterious as death. Randle is searching for the truth about the life he already has lived—the undiscovered country he uncovers as he unravels his family's secrets. And then, of course, there's the undiscovered truth about his origins, his birth father. So, maybe I should have called the novel *The Undiscovered Countries*.

AM: The past is powerful and mysterious in *The Undiscovered Country*. The plot moves forward by looking backward.

MN: I wanted to characterize southern culture in several ways. In *The Prince of Tides*, Pat Conroy wrote, "In families, there are no crimes beyond forgiveness." I wanted to communicate that sense of family bond by revealing multiple circumstances that might have torn the family bonds apart, and yet, they didn't. Because this was a southern family, I also hoped that readers would sense that in the South, the past is never past. As we know, some people's sense of time stretches to antebellum days. So, the past influences southern thinking in a more profound way than you might find in other cultures.

AM: There's something about dysfunctional families that also characterizes much of Southern literature.

MN: Ah ha, a trick question. Are Southern writers obsessed with dysfunctional families? Yes. Or, are dysfunctional families more prevalent in the south? Maybe. Probably. Dysfunction is the seed of good drama. The trick is to tease a satisfying resolution out of the messy relationships. That's fun for the



Mike Nemeth

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writer and fun for the reader. From the other perspective, dysfunction blooms in the fertile soil of passionate beliefs, fierce loyalties, and intense rivalries that characterize Southern families. Throw in an inbred sense of irresistible predestination, a few immoral compulsions, a burning desire to hide our flaws and maintain dignified appearances, and you have the makings of a fine Southern family drama.

AM: I read one review that called your book an interesting thriller because it involves a murder that no one knew had happened. Do you agree with that? What about the label "thriller"? Do you agree with that? Did you set out to write "a thriller" or a narrative that was thrilling?

MN: The question of genre took me completely by surprise when my first novel, *Defiled*, was published. I thought I had written a legal thriller but my publisher and retailers said, "No, you've written Crime Fiction." The textbook definition of Crime Fiction is that an anti-hero struggles with faceless institutions for moral superiority. In my case, the usual institutional targets are the legal system, the healthcare system, and the mental healthcare system. When I wrote *The Undiscovered Country*, I knew that was my genre and wrote it to suit, with the addition of our cultural attitude toward aging as an "institutional" target.

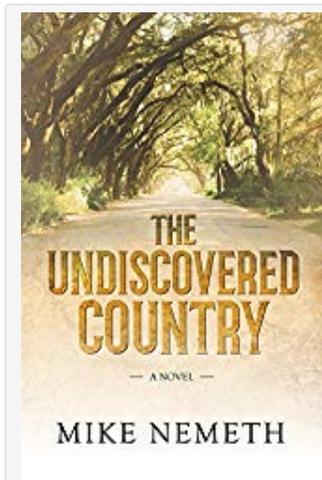
However, a novel makes room for more than one purpose. As I said earlier, I want my stories to feel Southern and evoke Southern emotions and pride. I also believe that every good story is a mystery based upon conflict. "What will happen next?" should be the question the reader asks herself at the end of every page. So, *The Undiscovered Country* contains layers of mysteries, including the mystery of who committed a murder no one knows had been committed until it is solved unexpectedly.

I'm a big fan of Agatha Christie, not because I like cozy British mysteries, but because her range of imagination is so impressive. She gave us every kind of murderer and every kind of murder weapon. Although I wouldn't call *The Undiscovered Country* a murder mystery, I'm proud to say it contains a murder mystery that is hidden among all the other mysteries and is committed with a weapon never before seen in literature.

AM: In many ways it's difficult to interview an author about a mystery because you don't want to give away the plot. May I ask about pacing? It's important to all novels, of course, but especially to thrillers and mysteries. Does pacing come naturally to you? How hard do you work at it, and how deliberately?

MN: I'm blessed with a wife who is an excellent first reader. She reads each chapter as I draft it and if I don't sustain her interest, I hear about it immediately.

Elmore Leonard gave us ten rules of writing, the most important of which is to delete all the parts readers will skip over. My intention is to let the characters tell the story through dialog or action and to stay out of their way. Pace tends to drag when authors intrude on the story and throw in pages of straight narrative. I cheat on this one a bit by telling the story in first person so that when the protagonist is being introspective, it's still a character speaking.



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As writers we fear the middle-of-the-book doldrums. One way to avoid them is to overlap subplots and time them to climax at different points in the overall novel. In *The Undiscovered Country*, the murder occurs in the middle of the book, while other subplots are still being resolved.

I guess the answer to the question, then, is that I am very aware of pacing as I write and address it deliberately. My greatest fear is boring the reader.

AM: Let's talk about death. I'm talking about the process—something you write about—and not necessarily the murder you just mentioned. Do you think Americans today do too much to "hide" death, to sanitize it, to push it out of sight and mind and pretend it doesn't happen to us all?

MN: I do. No matter our beliefs about the afterlife, we live in denial and then paradoxically struggle for our last breath. Too often, death is too grim a subject to prepare for and we leave our lives in a mess for our relatives to clean up after we pass. More to the point of *The Undiscovered Country*, our rituals, laws, customs and innate behaviors intrude on the endings of the terminally ill, especially those of elderly patients. Doctors, children, lawyers and clergy all influence the disposition of dying patients but the person whose wishes are least likely to be honored are those of the patient herself. All the elderly really want is to die with

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dignity but too often we don't allow it.

AM: Do you have any kind of medical background? Did you do some medical research? I'm thinking of the hospital scenes.

MN: Like so many people, I learned more medicine than I wanted to know when a loved one suffered the same heart problems as the character in *The Undiscovered Country*. I took copious notes, forced doctors and nurses to explain every procedure, every decision, every drug, in detail. In our case, our loved one made a full recovery. Our daughter is a nurse and she's my second reader, so I was confident I was portraying the medical scenes accurately. The challenge was to convey enough detail and medical jargon to make the story exciting and realistic but not so much that it became a medical textbook.

AM: Well you've certainly succeeded. I hope our readers will enjoy *The Undiscovered Country* as much as I did. Thanks again for the interview.

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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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