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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS ROGER JOHNS, AUTHOR OF "RIVER OF SECRETS"

 OCTOBER 18, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Thanks for doing this interview, Roger. Your new novel, *River of Secrets*, is a sequel to *Dark River Rising*. Both novels feature Wallace Hartman, a detective in Baton Rouge. What drew you to the detective genre?



Roger Johns

RJ: Allen, thank you for interviewing me. It's a real privilege to be able to do this. The allure of the detective genre is rooted in my experience as a reader. Mysteries, in general, and crime fiction, in particular, have been a life-long favorite. The detective slice of that genre, whether it's a private eye or a police detective, holds a particular fascination for me, for a number of reasons.

The lawyer in me is attracted to the lone problem-solver who's out there looking for the reason behind the strange and the seemingly unexplainable. Plus, I'm drawn to a brand of fiction that so easily encompasses people and social structures at their best and their worst, where secret behaviors and unexpected motives are eventually unearthed and people

are revealed for who they really are. And then there's the chance to solve the puzzle presented by the story. I enjoy matching wits with the writer.

When it came time to write the story that eventually became *Dark River Rising*, I realized a detective novel, as opposed to a thriller-type story, would give me a chance to create all the things I enjoyed about the genre as a reader. The book revolves around something that threatens to disrupt long-settled expectations in the illicit drug economy. New winners and new losers will be determined by the struggles that take place within the chaos that comes, and that sort of danger seemed like a good way to test a detective both intellectually and emotionally. Especially one who finds herself isolated, and stressed, and in the midst of discovering things she'd rather not know about herself or the criminals she's after.

AM: Over the years I've been doing more and more interviews with lawyers-turned-novelists. I don't know empirically whether there's an actual trend, but it seems to me that lawyers, since John Grisham's breakout at least, have been drawn to fiction writing.

RJ: I have the same sense of this phenomenon as you. Since I've joined the fiction-writing community, I've become friends with quite a few other lawyers-turned-writer. The stereotype of the lawyer-raconteur is so much a part of our culture, there is surely more than a grain of truth to it. It may have something to do with the fact that so much of one's legal training is geared toward learning to persuade people to think and feel a certain way. Good story-telling serves the same purpose. And, if the depth and intensity of one's life experience is any kind of a predictor of whether someone will be drawn to writing fiction,

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then lawyering makes a lot of sense because problems are at the heart of interesting fiction and problems are the reason people hire lawyers. Even my time as a corporate lawyer, which some might not think of as super exciting, left me with a lot to think about, in terms of situations and characters that could serve as the basis of some sort of fiction.

AM: It's interesting to me to think about the sense of suspense and mystery your writing involves. On the one hand, you as the author know where the story is going, know the secrets beforehand, yet you've got to write for an audience who doesn't know. How do you consciously build suspense? And do you always know where the plot is going, or are you sometimes surprised by that?

RJ: I always know the endpoint, before I begin. I'm one of those people who has to have a destination in mind before I get underway, so my basic approach is to build a story that brings about the ending I'm shooting for. That said, there are many paths that can lead to the conclusion, and finding the best way forward involves a fair amount of trial and error.

The process starts with a scene list which functions as a schematic diagram of the story arc. My scene descriptions are very brief—I just identify the principal characters involved and note what they'll be doing. Once I begin writing, however, the list inevitably changes. Some scenes don't work, or I find there are other approaches that work better. This phase involves quite a bit of discovery.

The suspense-building part is the most fun. On a scene-by-scene basis, I work hard to maintain the dramatic point of the scene—to bring it right up to the edge, where it has almost happened, and either hold it there for a while, before I let it resolve, or leave it unresolved until later.

On a complete-book basis, I favor two methods for building suspense—character ambiguity and setting competing story lines on a collision course. Imagine a train wreck that begins in slow motion with the locomotives far apart but accelerates as the story progresses.

I write in close third-person from multiple points of view and one of those points of view will belong to the villain. I tend to put readers into the head of the villain very early, but the identity of the villain is withheld. Other characters are, at least initially, of indeterminate virtue. As the story moves forward, the outer layers of their personae are peeled back until their true identities and motives become unmistakable.

All the while, readers see the competing story lines converge. They know something bad is going to happen, but (assuming I've done my job correctly) they won't know exactly what, nor will they be able to identify the all of the bad actors behind the impending calamity, until I'm ready to reveal them.

AM: And dialogue. How do you accomplish that? I lived in Japan right out of college, and I had a friend who was an aspiring author; she recorded random conversations in bars and then would replay them back, trying to learn how people actually talk. I think she learned that writing how people actually talk doesn't always make for the most readable prose. And, by the way, I think her method was ethically suspect because people didn't know they were being recorded.

RJ: This is a topic I could go on about forever, but I'll try not to. Bottom line: Dialogue is difficult. The experience of your friend in Japan reminds me of something someone told me during my long-ago, miserably-failed attempt to become a television comedy writer: Dialogue and speech are not the same. Dialogue must, above all else, "sound good," and the way people speak usually doesn't.

Listening for interesting speech patterns is an essential skill, but dialogue written exactly the way people talk will soon sound like the transcript of a deposition. To the best of my recollection, no deposition transcript has made it onto any bestseller lists.

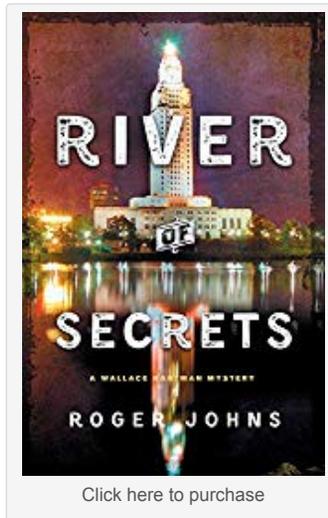
Pace, authenticity, and voice are the main attributes I keep a close eye on as I develop dialogue. One of the things that make dialogue sound good, that make it different from speech, is that it moves at a faster clip than actual speech. Getting rid of unnecessary words is essential. Even seemingly trivial subtractions can have an important influence on the pace of dialogue and a reader's reaction. For example, I never let a character respond to a yes-or-no question with a yes or a no. "Are you going to the bank?" will be answered with "I'll be there at eleven." A "yes" at the beginning of the answer is a

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dead word that kills the pace and adds nothing that isn't implied by the remainder of the sentence. Over the course of a book, all those dead words will add up to a poor reading experience.

To achieve authenticity, the use of slang, regionalisms, metaphors, idioms, and picturesque turns of phrase is indispensable, but writers today must exercise great care. These devices can be misused and overused, at which point they slide into stereotype. The reading public and the publishing industry have little appetite or patience for mistakes in this area, so it pays to be careful and thoughtful in the creation of dialogue for characters beyond one's own experience. Some publishers employ sensitivity readers to vet manuscripts for this.

For me, the most difficult part is making sure each character has a distinct voice. It helps to look for ways to conform a character's dialogue to the way a person in their position might think. For example, in my first book, *Dark River Rising*, the main character, Wallace Hartman, has a conversation with an engineer. His speech pattern is, in noticeable ways, more stripped-down and functional than Wallace's. And, in my new book, *River of Secrets*, Wallace finds herself in a tense conversation with the chief of police. The chief's manner of speaking illustrates his understanding of the friction that can exist between the practical concerns of community policing and the political dimensions of his job.

It also helps to be a smart-aleck. I suspect that everybody secretly wants to be one and that we're all a little envious of people who have a bit of a smart mouth. For those of us who don't really have that skill, writing dialogue is a way to live that life vicariously. I figured out that can do this by making my characters smarter and cleverer than I am. The snappy comeback I wish I had thought of during the heat of a conversation—the one that didn't occur to me until much later—can be written to come out of a character's mouth at exactly the perfect moment, even though it might have taken me days to think of it.

And, getting back to an issue you raised in your question, like you, surreptitious recording makes me very uneasy.

AM: May I ask about the publication process? Finding an agent, securing a contract—all of that. Occasionally readers will contact *Southern Literary Review* about these issues, and it would be great to point them to an explanation by an accomplished author.

RJ: As with so many things in my life, I did this one backward. I "sold" the book and then found an agent. Several years ago I began attending the Atlanta Writers Conference, where I got manuscript critiques from, and pitched my book to, agents and editors from New York and California. On the third or fourth try (all previous attempts having failed), an editor from St. Martin's Press liked the pages she saw, requested a look at the entire manuscript, and after reading it ended up offering me a publishing contract. I contacted an agent whom I had met at another conference—this was someone I knew and felt comfortable with—and asked her to take me on as a client, which she did.

If I may address your readers directly, on a couple of points: If you're at the find-an-agent stage in your career, remember that in addition to writing a good book there's a bit of luck involved. To give your book its best chance for success you absolutely must go where that luck is happening, and that place is probably not going to be your house. The odds are more favorable if you go where agents and editors are out in groups, shopping for new authors—and writers' conferences are some of the very best places where this occurs. Get involved with your local writing community where you will learn about conferences and how to maximize the conference experience.

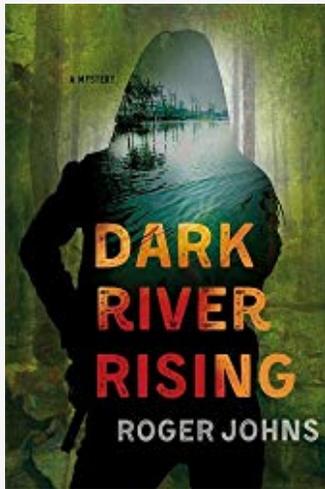
Cold-querying agents does work. I know writers who have been successful this way. But, there's a reason it's called "cold" querying. There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions and the chance to chat in a non-stressful setting. Most conferences have social functions where agents and editors and writers congregate for the express purpose of getting to know one another.

On the matter of contracts, even if a publisher offers you a contract for an unagented manuscript (and many small presses will do this), have a publishing contract lawyer review it and explain it to you before you sign it. By the time I was offered a contract I had been studying, practicing, teaching, and/or writing about the law for over thirty years, but I had zero experience with publishing contracts so I wasn't about to sign one without expert advice. My agent served that function for me. I can't say this often enough: If a publisher is willing to buy your book without you having an agent, you should have the contract reviewed and explained by an attorney who specializes in publishing contracts.

AM: That is helpful advice. I want to finish by turning back to *River of Secrets*. Did you find that writing it was easier than writing your first book, that maybe you wrote with less pressure, perhaps even with more familiarity with Wallace as a character?

RJ: It was actually a little bit of all of those things. Without a doubt, finishing the first book gave me a measure of confidence that I would be able to do it again. So, in that sense, writing *River of Secrets* was easier than writing the first book. But, as the conventional wisdom in the book business goes, second books are hard. And, there are a number of reasons for this.

With the first book, I could take as long as I wanted to write it, but with the second book came deadline pressures. I had to produce a manuscript that met contractually specified benchmarks, and I had to do so by a date certain. As a lawyer, I lived in mortal fear of missing a deadline, and that same sensibility is with me now, in my writing career, where deadlines for story edits, copy edits, and proofing edits are always on the horizon. I've heard that the surest way to sour an author-editor relationship is to miss a deadline. One of my goals in life is to never test the truth of that.



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It's also the case that, sometimes, readership falls off for second books, for whatever reason, and just knowing that that's a possibility can weigh on one's outlook during the writing process. Add to that the impostor syndrome with its occasional bursts of fear that the first time was a fluke, never to be repeated, and it's easy to understand why second books can indeed be hard.

However, despite all of these lurking second-book challenges, a very powerful positive came with writing the second book. The most interesting and fulfilling part of the experience, as you mention in your question, was the chance to create a story around a character with whom I had become more familiar—something I began secretly and cautiously looking forward to even before I sold the first book.

Because my novels are mysteries, they are (and must be) plot-driven. But, as I got deep into the later drafts of *Dark River Rising*, I began thinking less about stories involving a police detective who happens to be Wallace Hartman and more about stories involving Wallace Hartman who happens to be a police detective. She became the engine that drove everything. The second book, *River of Secrets*, simply could not exist apart from Wallace.

This change in my thinking along with the things I learned writing the first book allowed me to anticipate her actions and reactions and to construct a story more authentically centered on her. But with familiarity comes the risk of predictability and its terrible cousin—boredom. So, in *River of Secrets*, some aspects of Wallace's personal and professional life are on a different footing—stronger in some cases, weaker in others—because of events and decisions from the earlier story. Dealing with these keeps me on my toes and keeps the character fresh.

In any event, the joys of creating and developing such an interesting and inventive character far outweigh any difficulties that came with writing the second book. And this is all the more true because of my great good fortune to work with an editor at St. Martin's Press who is not only a superb story editor, she's also an excellent project manager, and (thank my lucky stars) very skilled at knowing how to dial down those second-book anxieties I mentioned above.

AM: I've enjoyed this interview, Roger. Thanks for imparting this wisdom and advice to our readers.

RJ: Allen, thanks, again, for the chance to be part of Southern Literary Review. I've enjoyed this immensely.

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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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