

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[SUBMISSIONS](#)
[BOOKSTORE](#)
[CONTENTS](#)
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SEPTEMBER 28, 2017

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)
[READ OF THE MONTH](#)
[AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#)
[CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS](#)
[MISCELLANEOUS](#)
[NEWS & EVENTS](#)

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Steve Wiegenstein, Author of "The Language of Trees"

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS STEVE WIEGENSTEIN, AUTHOR OF "THE LANGUAGE OF TREES"

SEPTEMBER 28, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Steve Wiegenstein

AM: So glad *Southern Literary Review* has a chance to feature your work again, Steve. Thanks for doing this interview. I bet when you wrote this book, you couldn't have anticipated how timely a story about a post-Civil War 19th century community would be. If you turn on the news these days, you see ongoing debates and demonstrations involving the history of the period the book covers.

SW: Allen, it's great to talk to you, and I appreciate the opportunity to talk about my work.

Surely the events of the last couple of months have disabused us all of the notion that historical fiction isn't "relevant." Historians have rightly taken the lead in helping us understand the significance of the artifacts and memorials that surround us and which,

I suspect, many people never gave much thought to, but I think the novelists have a part to play in pursuing that understanding as well.

The historian can tell us how and why a particular event occurred, but the novelist probably has a better shot at expressing what it felt like to be there. Both perspectives are important. It seems to me that we are lately being reminded that the ownership of the past—including ownership of the stories of the past—is an important element in the control of the present.

AM: Reminds me of the Faulkner line: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." What drew you to this particular period? I should note for readers that this book is the third installment in a series.

SW: My novels are set in the Ozarks, and the years 1887-88, when *The Language of Trees* takes place, are significant in Ozarks history. That's when large economic interests from the East came and established logging and mining operations in the region on a scale much greater than ever before. This industrial approach to extraction (especially timber harvesting) altered the culture, devastated the landscape, and changed the way in which people could make a living. It was a kind of rapid-pace microcosm of the coming of the modern era in society, so for me it was a great time period to focus on.

So many themes just lying there waiting to be picked up, and a historical period that isn't overdone. The clearing of the Ozarks timber in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was one of those quiet, little-noticed environmental catastrophes that should be better known, so it made a good backdrop for the doings of my characters.

AM: Let's talk about those characters—the Turners and Josephine Mercadier and all the rest. Philip Roth once told an interviewer, "Beginning a book is unpleasant. I'm entirely uncertain

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[Contributors' Bios](#) (87)

[Essays](#) (15)

[General](#) (7)

[Grants and Contests](#) (16)

[News & Events](#) (78)

[Read of the Month](#) (102)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

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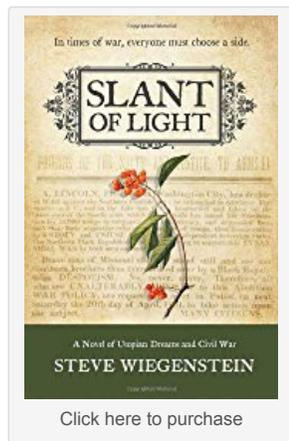
about the character and the predicament, and a character in his predicament is what I have to begin with." Can you relate?

SW: I can't say that I do. To me, the uncertainty one feels when working through a book is intensely thrilling. It's the closest I'll ever get to walking the high wire. And the comparison is apt: with major characters, I usually have a goal in mind—this one is headed for a moral failure; that one needs to fall insanely in love; this one is going to turn out to be much stronger than anyone ever expected—but how I'm going to get to that goal is not always clear. And focusing too much on the particular mechanics of a character's development is the writerly equivalent of looking down at your feet. You have to keep your eyes focused on the distant target and trust intuition to guide your steps. It's not like tightrope walking in that I'm not risking death or serious injury, and if I misstep I can always rip out a few chapters and try again, but it is an enormously exciting sensation to venture out into the unknown with a set of characters.

AM: *The Language of Trees* is your third book. I mentioned earlier that it's the third installment in a series. I've heard it said that the first book you write is always the toughest to finish. Has that been your experience? Have you found it easier to write these last two installments?

SW: Honestly, it's getting harder. The task gets more complicated with each book. With *Slant of Light*, I had a clean slate to create characters and a storyline, and *This Old World* was written in essentially a continuous run with it. But *The Language of Trees* jumps the story ahead twenty years, so although many characters persist from the first two books, I have to think anew about them while keeping them consistent with what's been established already. The book has to be rewarding for both first-time readers and repeat readers, with the widely differing demands of each type. And finally, I'm hoping that themes introduced in the earlier books will begin to show themselves in full, but that's the sort of thing you don't want people to notice in an obvious way, so I found myself doing much more of a juggling act with plot, setting, and story than I had before.

The next book, which I am working on now, jumps ahead another fifteen years or so, but at this point it's not proving to be quite as daunting. Maybe I'm getting used to the added layers of complexity that come from multiple books in a connected series, or maybe I just haven't hit the hard part yet.



AM: Who's your favorite novelist?

SW: Can I say "for certain purposes"? Because I love a lot of novelists for different things. For his incredible word sense and ability to build entire worlds, and to encapsulate human history into an intensely local and specifically defined region, I have to say Faulkner. But for innovative structure and an absolutely hypnotic ability to draw me in and make me live in the novel for weeks at a time, I'd go with W. G. Sebald.

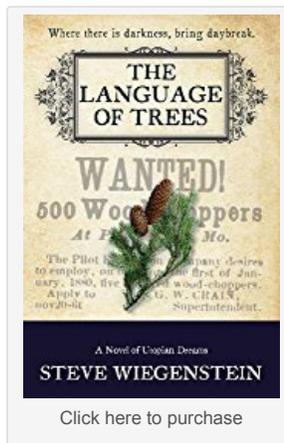
From my own part of the country, Donald Harington is my favorite. He's a remarkably audacious writer who has something new to say with each book, and I love his style even though we're nothing alike stylistically. I admire his willingness to discount the demands of plot, and that's not to say that his books don't have plots. But so many

writers seem compelled to advance the plot on every page, which has always seemed to me to be a very constricted approach; I suspect that's the influence of movies and TV, which are very plot-driven media, at work on the minds of writers.

Overall, though, for intellectual heftiness, outrageously perfect verbal choices, and unforgettable stories, I think Herman Melville is my favorite. You can see him straining at the bonds of possibility with every book.

AM: Do you find yourself reading to become a better writer, or do you just read for leisure and hope for sublimation of skill in the process?

SW: I'd have to say that I've never read with a conscious idea for picking up techniques or ideas, although like all writers, I'm sure there's a lot of unconscious osmosis. Now that I think about it, none of the novelists I mentioned earlier has a style anything like mine, so I guess I read them for the difference, not their similarity.



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I think my style was formed by my early days as a newspaper reporter, when economy and precision were the highest values, and the goal was to say as much as possible in the fewest possible words. I've always admired the style of John Williams, the author of *Butcher's Crossing*, *Augustus*, and *Stoner*. He's a classical stylist who rarely uses figures of speech, but when he brings one into a sentence, it always packs a wallop.

In terms of theme and subject, I draw more from nonfiction than from other fiction writers; Thoreau and Emerson have always been my touchstones in terms of the American heart, and I draw on a lot of contemporary history writers. I'd particularly call attention to David Thelen's *Paths of Resistance*, which is about the ways in which ordinary people resisted the relentless pressure of corporatization and homogenization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Aaron Astor's *Rebels on the Border*, which deals with the reintegration of the border states after the Civil War.

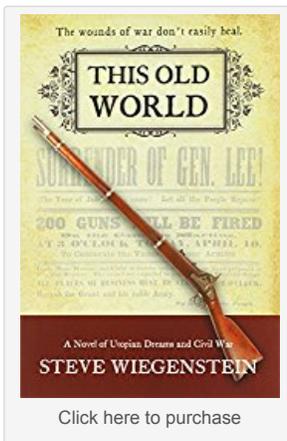
AM: May we expect more books from you? Are you working on anything in particular at the moment?

SW: I'm working on a novel that will bring the series into the twentieth century, specifically the years 1903-1904. That historical moment is meaningful to me because those are the years of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, better known as the St. Louis World's Fair, when American triumphalism was celebrated in a grand and ostentatious way.

The "American Century" was beginning then, and there was such faith in technological progress and the superiority of the U.S. way of life. Frighteningly dark undercurrents were also present in the fair, most notably in the exhibition of "primitive societies" that, frankly, celebrated white supremacy. The U.S. had recently acquired the Philippines in the Spanish-American War, and at the fair the Philippine exhibit was by far the largest. Other cultures, such as the Pygmy and Ainu, were put on display as well, so that white Americans could gawk and celebrate their "innate superiority."

In *The Language of Trees*, there's a sense that technology has replaced social culture as the chief driver of utopian sentiment, so this book will pick up that thread. The inhabitants of Daybreak, living just a short train ride from St. Louis, will be involved in the fair, and I'm looking forward to developing some of the themes of urban versus rural and agrarian versus industrial that have cropped up in *The Language of Trees*.

AM: I look forward to reading the next installment. Thanks for the interview. Happy writing.



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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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