

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS SUSAN CUSHMAN, AUTHOR OF "FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY"

 JUNE 27, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Susan, so glad we get to do this interview. *Friends of the Library* is your latest book, a collection of short stories. This is the fifth book you've published in just two years. What's going on? How have you become so productive?

SC: Hi, Allen. Thanks so much for the opportunity to chat. And yes, it's been an amazing couple of years! But these books didn't all start and finish at the same time. I did get three book deals in one year, which was kind of crazy but fun. I was in various stages of edits and production for my novel *Cherry Bomb* (Dogwood Press, August 2017), which was six years in the making, and I got bored during the waiting periods between deadlines, so I decided to compile eight years of blog posts into a memoir, *Tangles and Plaques: A Mother and Daughter Face Alzheimer's*, which ended up coming out first, in January of 2017 (eLectio Publishing).

Even with two projects going on, there were still times of waiting, so I invited twenty women authors to contribute essays to an anthology, which I edited. *A Second Blooming: Becoming the Women We Are Meant to Be* came out in March of 2017 (Mercer University Press.) It was so much fun putting together the anthology (and so much easier than writing a book!) that I decided to do another one. This time I invited thirteen women and thirteen men to contribute essays for another collection. *Southern Writers on Writing* was published in May of 2018 (University Press of Mississippi.) But again there were those "slow" months just before publication—you know, when the manuscript has been edited and turned in and most of the marketing is in place—so I decided to try my hand at another genre. I wrote a collection of short stories and found a publishing home fairly quickly for *Friends of the Library*, which launches in August from Koehler Books.



Susan Cushman

AM: You say that the characters in *Friends of the Library* "came to me as gifts from a muse." What do you mean by this? While we're at it, why don't you explain to readers how and why you've framed each chapter by character?

SC: After my books came out in 2017, I went on a book tour to ten small towns in Mississippi—often to speak to Friends of the Library groups. I fell in love with the towns themselves and researched their history before writing the stories. And then when I started the first story, an amazing thing happened. First let me say that over the years I have often rolled my eyes at my writer friends who have said things like this, "I start my characters out and they take on a life of their own," and "I don't know where the story is going when I start." I had never experienced that. In fact, I outlined the entire book (sixteen chapters) before writing the first sentence of my novel. I thought I had to be in control. But these short stories

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really did come to me as gifts from a muse. I finally experienced what my friends had said, and what William Faulkner wrote about: "It begins with a character usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does."

I've never had so much fun writing! All of these stories came quickly. A few of the characters were inspired by people I met in the towns, but most of them just came from my imagination. And the stories themselves are completely fictional. I chose to have the narrator interact personally with the protagonist in each story to engage the reader's sense of empathy.

AM: Tell readers about your narrator, Adele.

SC: I chose to link these stories by having a fictional author, Adele Covington, visit each town and become involved in the lives of the eclectic and often wounded people she meets. Of course I draw from my own personal experience with the issues in most of the stories, like Alzheimer's, adoption, interracial relationships, addiction, cancer, sexual abuse, and eating disorders. The only subjects in the stories that I haven't experienced personally are homelessness, domestic abuse, and kidnapping. The characters in the stories share their struggles with Adele because of how candid she is with them about her own struggles—many of which she has written about in her books and shares with them when she speaks at their meetings.

AM: Short stories used to be a common form of entertainment. Literate people discussed them over dinner parties and in social settings. The book review sections of newspapers and magazines featured short-story collections. Do you think short stories will make a comeback? Or is our culture so digitally and technologically consumed—so *distracted*—that video games and social media and so forth have harmed the reputation, or at least the popularity, of short stories?

SC: I think short stories are already making a comeback, for several reasons. The obvious—due to the distracted nature of our culture that you mention, short stories appeal to people who won't make time to read the longer form narrative. And living in a technologically-evolving world might be shortening people's attention spans, which is another reason for the rise in the popularity of short stories. I have a friend who has published over one thousand short stories in dozens of print magazines, online, and also in hardback collections of his stories. I believe the form is here to stay.

AM: That's good news! You're at the center of a vast network of writers. How has being part of a writing community—or communities—helped you with your own writing?

SC: I'm not sure I'm "at the center" of a network of writers, Allen, but I'm certainly blessed to have made friends with writers in several writing communities since I started writing in earnest, in around 2006. My first writing communities were writing groups that met monthly to critique each other's work, and to encourage each other. As I participated in writing workshops and conferences over the years, that circle of friends grew, and now I'm blessed to have friends in several writing communities, including the AlzAuthors.com, which has over 150 authors who have written and published books about their experiences with a loved one with Alzheimer's.

I'm also part of several Facebook author groups, and a large network of authors whose books have been selected for the Pulpwood Queens (750+) Bookclubs. Every January a number of members of these book clubs gather in a small town in Texas with about 40 authors for an annual convention known as the Pulpwood Queens Girlfriend Weekend. I've been three times over the past ten years and treasure the friendships I've made through this community. Writing is a lonely job, and these communities—and especially several very close writer friends within them—offer much-needed advice, support, social networking, and friendships.

AM: Does your faith influence your fiction?

SC: Very much so. As a convert to Orthodox Christianity (from a background in the Presbyterian Church as a child and teenager) I am very active and enthusiastic about my faith. I try to let it flow naturally through my writing, not wanting to preach or proselytize with my books. I am a Christian who is a writer. I do not write "Christian fiction." There are scenes in my novel *Cherry Bomb* and in a couple of the stories in *Friends of the Library* that involve weeping icons, Orthodox churches, monasteries, priests, and nuns. And there are elements of hope, healing, and redemption in my fiction.

AM: What about the South? Clearly small Southern towns are central to *Friends of the Library*. Is there something uniquely Southern about your writing?

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SC: As a native of Mississippi who has lived in the South my whole life—including the time I spent as a coed at Ole Miss in Oxford—I think it’s safe to say that my writing is southern, but I don’t know that it’s “uniquely” southern. In the anthology I edited and mentioned earlier, *Southern Writers on Writing*, twenty-six southern authors talk about their work, and many address what makes it “southern.” Setting is an important aspect of southern fiction. My novel is set mostly in Georgia and my short stories and memoir are set in Mississippi. On the inside flap of *Friends of the Library*, it says that Adele is “chasing her demons through the Christ-haunted South of her childhood.” I think that describes what I’ve been doing most of my life. The book blurb also says that the book “honors the heart, soul, and history of the Magnolia State.” That was certainly my intention.

AM: This is our second interview together, Susan. You’re so prolific that it’ll only be a matter of time before we do another one. Can’t wait!

SC: Thanks, Allen. I always love to talk with you. And . . . I actually have a sixth book coming out this fall. I was asked by Kathy L. Murphy, founder and director of the Pulpwood Queens Book Clubs, to edit a collection of essays by authors and book club members to celebrate the club’s twentieth anniversary next year. *The Pulpwood Queens Celebrate Twenty Years!* (my third anthology to edit) will be published this fall by Brother Mockingbird Publishing. It contains sixty-seven essays and a Foreword by Robert Hicks, *New York Times* Best-Selling author of *The Widow of the South*. But I’m stepping out of my comfort zone a bit with this one—not all the contributing authors are from the South! People have asked me if I will write another novel or more short stories. If I do, I’m pretty sure they will be set in the South.

AM: Congrats on the new book. So happy to see you’re still hard at work. We’re all better off for it.

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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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