

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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AUGUST 23, 2018

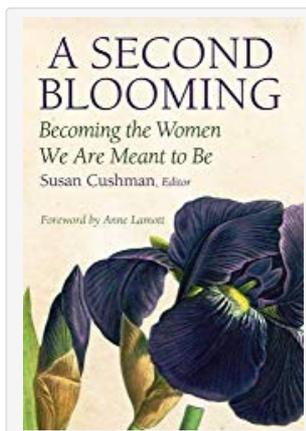
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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS SUSAN CUSHMAN, EDITOR OF "SOUTHERN WRITERS ON WRITING"

 AUGUST 23, 2018 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: I've been delighting in the essays in *Southern Writers on Writing*, Susan, and am so glad to see this book in print. I'm happy, too, that we're doing an interview about it. Tell me, how did you choose which authors to include in this collection?



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SC: I'm so glad you're enjoying the essays, Allen. I chose the authors to include using several criteria:

First, I wanted diversity. Having edited *A Second Blooming: Becoming the Women We Are Meant to Be* with Mercer University Press in 2017, which contained essays by 20 authors who were obviously women, I hoped to have an equal number of men and women for this collection, which worked out perfectly, with 13 of each. I also wanted racial diversity, and



Susan Cushman

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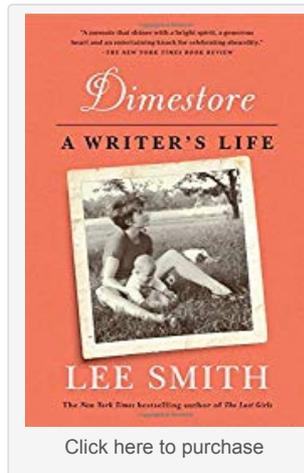
TOPICS

was pleased to end up with four African American writers. I cast a wide net across nine southern states, to hopefully represent a good portion of the literary South. And lastly, I invited southern writers who were fairly well known by their own published works in several genres including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

AM: You certainly succeeded there. You've stated that the inspiration for this book was Lee Smith's *Dimestore: A Writer's Life*. Could you say more about that?

SC: Lee's book was definitely one of the inspirations for this project. I've always admired her gift of storytelling. My favorite of her books is *Guests on Earth*, where she blends facts with fiction to write about art and mental illness. But in her memoir *Dimestore* she talks about writing and especially how her work is influenced by place. When I asked her to contribute an essay for *Southern Writers on Writing*, she graciously declined due to her busy schedule, but gave permission for me to reprint a chapter from *Dimestore*, "A Life in Books," which fits this collection perfectly. In this chapter she says that writing fiction—living in someone else's story—healed her grief after the death of her son. I believe that many writers—myself included—find healing through writing.

AM: And, I presume, through reading.



SC: Yes. I've read a lot of books about sexual abuse, because I was abused by my grandfather when I was little. But when I wrote a novel (*Cherry Bomb*) about a little girl who was abused, and also the two other major characters, that was more healing than the reading. I've also struggled with eating disorders and addictions, so I've read many books about both. One book led me to quit drinking last September. The written word is a powerful gift that we share with one another.

AM: That's a remarkable testimony. I'm so glad you shared. It seems the best writers are those who can appreciate the profundities and complexities of human experience and emotion and somehow render on the page words that inspire or provoke deep feelings. This is a book by and about Southern writers, so I have to ask: what has the South meant to you as a writer?

SC: I've only lived in Mississippi and Tennessee, so everything about being southern is ingrained in me—the good parts and the bad. The bad includes everything from racism, poverty, and obesity to extreme heat and humidity. Those elements seem to foster a good bit of evil—addiction, abuse, violence, and crime. But the good includes the big hearts of the people who have suffered and continue to suffer those things. I've got close friends that I've known for fifty years, and they would do anything for me, as I would for them. We southerners are fiercely loving and loyal.

AM: That reminds me of a comment Katherine Clark made in her essay, namely that "for the writer in the South today, southern literature is both a blessing and a curse." You're a patron of the arts, so to speak, in the South—the director of writing conferences and networker extraordinaire. You must enjoy meeting other writers.

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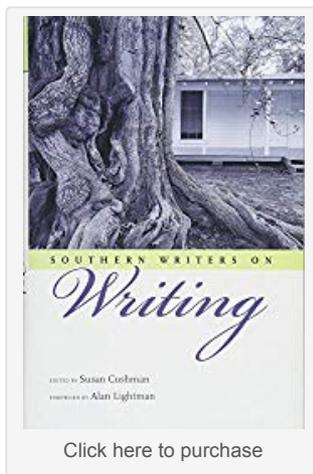
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SC: Yes. I have hosted numerous literary salons in our home here in Memphis, inviting authors to come and share with neighbors and friends. And I've organized and helped direct several writing conferences and workshops. In fact, I'll be leading another writing workshop on October 27 at Novel, a wonderful independent bookstore here in Memphis. Attending conferences and having my work critiqued at workshops over the past ten years has been an important part of my education, and I enjoy giving back, or paying it forward, to aspiring and emerging writers. And yes, I love meeting other writers, no matter where they are in their careers.

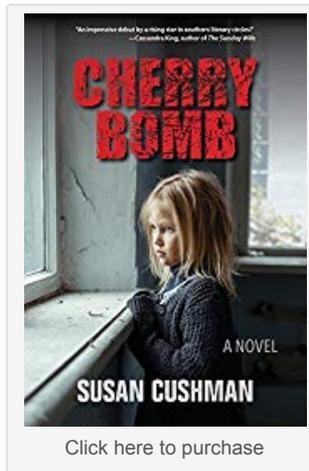


AM: Several contributors to *Southern Writers on Writing* have contributed as well to *Southern Literary Review*; a couple of them I'm reading for the first time. In your essay contribution to the book, you discuss your friendships with some of them, as well as a negative experience you had with an editor, or editors, before you finally placed *Cherry Bomb* with just the right publisher. This story will, I think, encourage aspiring authors while also pointing out the tenacity required to publish professionally.

SC: I was working with a New York literary agent on my novel *Cherry Bomb*. She sent it to two different editors, who in turn sent me conflicting information. For example, one encouraged me to completely get rid of one of the three main characters, while the other thought this character was the strongest in the book. One wanted me to read *Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* and make Mare, my protagonist, more hard-ass like Lisbeth Salander. I was holding onto my vision for the book to be Southern literary fiction, which it is. I felt that making the changes these editors suggested would kill the soul of the book. Yes, Mare does escape from a religious cult, where she was abused, and yes, she does get involved in graffiti with a street gang at one point, but the book is also about art and religion and redemption. I left that agent behind, along with my dreams of a book deal with a top publisher. Instead, I signed with a small press in Mississippi, but working with the editor was a good experience, and it only made the book better. Sometimes we have to make tough choices to protect the integrity of our work.

AM: I'm so glad you made that decision. And I'd encourage readers of *Southern Literary Review* to purchase and read *Southern Writers on Writing*. Thanks so much for doing this interview, Susan.

SC: Thanks so much for the opportunity, Allen.



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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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