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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS TIM POLAND, AUTHOR OF *YELLOW STONEFLY*

 FEBRUARY 19, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



AM: I'm glad to have the opportunity to interview you about *Yellow Stonefly*, Tim. I've known, if only tacitly, since I was a kid—back when I fished avidly and first saw the film *A River Runs Through It*—that something about fly fishing is inherently poetic. I was reminded of this as I read these lines from *Yellow Stonefly*: “Unwinding from the spool, each turn of the yellow drubbing thread tight and continuous with the turn it follows. Turn after turn along the shank, beginning to hint at a body,” and the sentence, and passage, goes on from there with trancelike rhythm.

TP: I heard somewhere once that the two sporting activities most prone to poetry were baseball and fly fishing. I agree, certainly, but I'll stick to fishing for now. The passages in the novel set at Keefe's fly tying work bench, such as the one you cited, are intended as a space to, among other things, examine the intersection of artifice and practicality in fly fishing and fly tying, as well as art. The trout fly that an angler casts to a rising fish is a product of careful observational analysis and a certain amount of fanciful whimsy. It's mimesis—attempting to construct a viable imitation of a real thing—an insect that a trout will eat. It's also, as I said, artifice and an act of imagination—to construct out of a varied assortment of artificial materials a simulation of a living thing in the living world. And that's art. And as is the case for many artists, for Keefe, his artful fly-tying is a medium through which he can engage in dialogue with his world, define his relationship to it, and, as the novel unfolds, maintain his grip on that world.

More specifically in relation to the novel, and its deployment of fly fishing as a dramatic element in fiction, perhaps what most nudges fly fishing toward the poetic, the artistic, is that fly fishing, like fiction, is a narrative act. When the angler stands in the river and casts to a rising trout, that simulated fly and its delivery by the angler is an act of storytelling—the angler constructs and presents a story to the fish, and though it is a fabrication, if the story is well told and believable, the fish will rise.

And that story can flow in both directions. In a way, this is what's occurring when Sandy is fishing. Yes, she seeks the fish, and she's remarkably good at that—she skillfully tells the contrived story to the fish and it comes to her fly. But she also seeks another story from the fish and the river—if she fishes well, she's granted access to dialogue with a wild creature and a wild place, in their own language. And that dialogue will, hopefully, lead her to a deeper, more lasting understanding of her connection and

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responsibility to that creature and place, and to the human creatures in her life, and how they all combine to define her.

Yeah, I guess I'd have to agree that fly fishing is "inherently poetic."

AM: I take it that you also fly-fish?

TP: I do, certainly. Though not nearly so often as I'd like. One drawback to writing about characters who spend much of their time fly fishing is that I'm not left with nearly as much time and opportunity to fish as my characters have.

AM: Do you have any writing tics?

TP: Writing tics? Do you mean, something like having to wear my lucky socks when I write or write standing up as Hemingway claimed he did? No, I'm afraid I have no interesting tics when it comes to writing. My wife would gladly tell you I have plenty of tics, and she'd be right. But when it comes to writing, no.

My approach to the work of writing is probably closer to the opposite of tics. I see the act of writing fiction as work, something more along the lines of a craftsman or artisan—imagining an object you hope to make and then, step by step, assembling a collection of parts and materials (words and sentences) until that imagined object begins to take shape.

One principle I always hammered my writing students with (hammered them a bit too hard, I suspect) is that good fiction is not the result of inspiration nor a place to express your deep feelings or eccentricities. Quite the opposite. Fiction is dramatic art. Stuff needs to happen, characters need to get into trouble, and then the writer's job is to see how or if they can get out of that trouble. For that to succeed, you need to focus not on yourself but on your characters and situation, stay clear-eyed and honest about who and what they are and what they might or might not do.

For me, the work is about the story, the characters. And to do that work, the writer needs to show up for work, regularly—to sit his or her ass in the chair, as they say, keep the fingers on the keyboard, the eyes on the screen, and put one sentence after another until the story takes shape. For me, tics would only get in the way of the work to be done.

I can assure you, to watch me at work would be a decidedly boring sight.

AM: Was teaching writing as rewarding as actually writing?

TP: They're both decidedly rewarding but in fundamentally different ways. The act of teaching is both instructional and collaborative—learning can only really be effective and meaningful as a dialogue between teacher and students. There's also a long-term element to the rewards of teaching—seeing those students go on to rewarding lives of their own and knowing you made a small contribution to those lives.

The act of writing is largely solitary, though still quite fulfilling. There's a great deal of satisfaction in imagining characters and plot, then setting them in motion to the point where their lives come to a viable dramatic denouement. If you work hard at it, and are a little lucky, the characters "get legs," as I call it—they start to have lives, to walk around and talk as if on their own—that's when the act of writing is its most wonderful and fulfilling.

And, of course, it's quite rewarding for your work to become a book and go out into the world where a reader enjoys it, where the world you've imagined can become a satisfying dramatic space for the reader to enter, too. That's a great joy—but still, a largely solitary one for the writer.

AM: *Yellow Stonefly* is divided into four parts by season: spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

TP: Yes. On the most basic level, dividing the novel into seasonal sections is simply an organizational device—a way to structure the passage of time and cue the reader that the novel is shifting into different scenes and circumstances.

That said, the seasonal distinctions are apropos to the characters and their situations. Feelings, actions, and options are shaped, in part, by the conditions of the seasons—as it is for all of us in our day-to-day lives. However, for the novel's protagonist, Sandy Holston, seasonal differences are significant—where, when, how, and if she fishes (something of profound importance to her), what fly she

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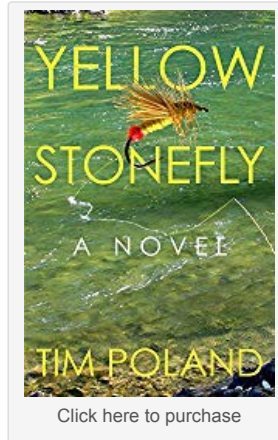
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chooses—all of these considerations are crucial to her actions and her emotional and psychological well-being. As she comes to realize throughout the novel, she is not separate from the place she inhabits. And seasonal conditions are, of course, a key component of place and time.

AM: You've managed to write a suspenseful novel that hits upon perennial themes—love, death, the relationship between humans and nature, memory, aging. This is the best combination of "literary" and "commercial" fiction I've seen in some time. Pardon those terms, which I dislike, but I admire your storytelling. You've authored short stories. When you're writing a novel, do you work differently to sustain a narrative than you do when you're writing a short story?

TP: First off, thank you for the kind words about the work. I appreciate that.

But on to your question as to differences in sustaining a narrative between the novel and the short story. There is certainly a difference, and that difference is mainly manifest in the issue I mentioned previously—time.

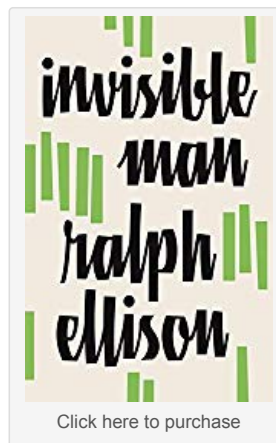
With the short story, time is typically more condensed and focused. A short story, to paraphrase Raymond Carver, is a glimpse into lives already in progress. The principal shaping events of a protagonist's life have already happened, for the most part, and the short story reveals rather than develops—reveals that character in the context of a particular situation. And when readers take up a short story, they have theoretically committed to a complete reading experience in, say, no more than an hour, in one sitting. Readers can, and should, expect from a short story a satisfying sense of a complete narrative in that brief period of time.

When readers pick up a novel, they've tacitly agreed to spend an extended period of time with the narrative—several hours, several days. Maybe longer. Accordingly, with a novel, you can be more patient with the narrative, allow it to build and cohere more slowly. You have the time in a novel to both develop and reveal a character or characters, to progress more slowly and deeply through a much broader range of situations and circumstances.

As for the actual composition of the two genres, for me, with a short story it's fairly easy to keep track of the elements of the narrative while writing and finish a short story in a few weeks to a few months. With a novel, obviously, more time is involved and there's a lot more to keep track of. With a novel, once the basic story has percolated for a while, composition usually takes a year or two. Writing a single work over that extended period of time, you have to stay on your toes, be sure to track the details of the text, be sure they remain consistent—even the little details.

AM: It took Ralph Ellison almost six years to write *Invisible Man*. He didn't publish another novel during his lifetime, although *Juneteenth* was published posthumously. Actually, Ellison didn't write anything nearly as great as *Invisible Man* for the rest of his life, which ended in 1994. I wonder if you have an opinion on whether authors should strive to produce fewer works of greater quality or more works of perhaps reduced quality in exchange for being prolific.

TP: As for Ellison's *Invisible Man*, it doesn't surprise me at all that he never really produced much else after that. A novel of such comprehensive scope, executed so well, I can imagine it could leave the writer of such a novel exhausted, emptied out. Damn, talk about leaving it all on the field.



Beyond that, I don't think it can be reduced to an either/or equation, a binary opposition of quality or quantity. This issue is particular to the individual writer. Some writers are loaded with energy and brimming with stories, to the point that the issue is whether or not they'll have time within the span of a single human life to get them all out—great writers like Margaret Atwood, Louise Erdrich, Ron Rash come to mind, out of many others. For other writers, the narrative warehouse may not be so overstocked, but they work diligently with what's at hand. Sorry if this is a bit clichéd, but it's relative to the individual writer.

Of course, I'm not talking about commercially successful, sort of "franchise" writers, with a large market audience for whom they produce a prescribed sort of work that will fulfill the audience's product expectations. That's something else entirely.

AM: How would you describe your work?

TP: This is actually a rather difficult question to answer, given that certain aspects of style and approach can vary, depending on the requirements of the particular story. But I think I can identify a few consistencies.

To begin, let me say what others have said. A couple of different reviewers over the years have described my work as “quiet” and “patient.” I like that. I strive for a narrative that builds slowly and doesn’t try to be overly flashy or explosive. So yes, I like “quiet” and “patient.” I’d say my prose style tends to be spare and stripped down, avoiding elaborate, ornate language or overdone metaphor. I try, as my wife puts it, to keep the “professor” out of my fiction. I want to draw the reader’s attention to the story, not the language I deploy to tell it.

I’d say that my fiction never really focuses on characters who are clever or sophisticated or accomplished. I have a bit of a blue-collar chip on my shoulder, so I’m drawn more to blue-collar folks, characters who don’t quite get it, who have to struggle a bit to slog through the obstacles of their lives, who make mistakes, like we all do, and who may not come to comprehend or articulate all the answers but do their best to progress to some degree of understanding.

Finally, I think place—both human spaces and wild places—plays a large role in my work. I live in the Appalachian mountain region. I’ve come to know the place over the years, in particular through the act of fly fishing the trout streams of the region. My connection to this place developed in tandem with my development as a fiction writer. One doesn’t exist free of the other, and this sensibility shapes my approach to fiction, most often. *Where* my characters are, the pulse and rhythm of that place, is crucial to *who* they are or become—their lives often unfold in terms of how well they understand their connection to that place or their lack of connection. Yes, I’d say the texture and tone of place is rather significant in my work.

AM: I love the name “Stink” for a dog—Sandy’s dog—and am tempted to ask if you have a dog and what kind and all that, but in the interest of time I’ll focus on Sandy herself. How long did you spend with her, developing her as a character, formulating her personality, figuring out what she was going to say and how she was going to act? Did you ever struggle as a male author trying to represent a female protagonist?

TP: Sandy. Hmm. How long did I spend with her? Sandy’s been around for a rather long time, actually.

She began as an unnamed character in a short story entitled “Escapee” from quite a few years ago. I was framing a short story about a prison break. There was a local news report about an attempted escape from a prison in the region. The news report noted that authorities suspected the convicts had an accomplice waiting to assist with their flight. I thought the suspicions of an accomplice rather obvious. Now, a prison break in itself I didn’t find all that interesting—a fairly stock narrative premise. What I found interesting was the accomplice. Who is it? Where’s the rendezvous? What does the accomplice do while waiting? So, I made the accomplice the wife of one of the convicts, and she agrees to participate, largely because she can’t think of a reason to say no or a way to dissuade her husband of his plan. That, and she doesn’t think he’ll ever actually pull it off. I put her in a clearing, by a stream, near the prison to wait for what she thinks will never happen. What’s she going to do while she’s there? I put a fly rod in her hands; she learns to use it and comes to love what she’s learned. Though she doesn’t have a name in that story, that’s how Sandy was born, so to speak.

She later showed up as a minor character in a couple of other short stories, but as time passed, her character continued to peck at me. I wasn’t done with her. There was more I wanted to know about her. What happens to her after her husband’s failed prison attempt?

So, the unnamed character of that original short story becomes Sandy Holston, the protagonist of my previous novel, *The Safety of Deeper Water*. That novel takes up Sandy’s life and struggles several years after the period of the short story, at the time leading up to her now ex-husband’s pending release from prison. The events of both the short story and the earlier novel are synopsized in Sandy’s opening chapter in *Yellow Stonefly*.

A friend told me after reading *The Safety of Deeper Water* that he thought he had a “crush” on Sandy. I told him that, apparently, I did, too, because I couldn’t seem to stop writing about her. After the earlier novel came out, I thought I was done with her, but she stuck around. I still wanted to know more about her—how her life would unfold after the events of the first novel, what she might learn about the place she’d found herself in and the people who had come to intersect with her life. She interested me, and I wanted to spend more time with her.

And so, along came *Yellow Stonefly*. Yes, Sandy has been around a long time. I think I’ve finished with her now, but I can’t be sure.



**The Safety
of
Deeper Water**
a novel
TIM POLAND

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As to the other part of your question, no, I wouldn't say I "struggled" as a male author of a female protagonist. I think I'm, perhaps, more careful with a female character, more attentive to getting things right and not assuming, but I wouldn't say it's a struggle. To me, the most important thing for a fiction writer to do—if their goal is to produce realistic fiction—is to pay attention. Watch and listen to the world around you, especially the people—how they move, talk, the things that matter to them. Women are, of course, part of that world, so if you listen, pay attention, let the women in your fiction speak and think for themselves, it's not too difficult. That is, after all, one of the things Sandy most struggles against—the version of her that's been imposed on her by certain men in her life. I try to be honest and pay attention, so Sandy's author doesn't become one of those men. And, lucky for me, if I get in a bind, well, I ask my wife, and she can usually set me

straight.

And yes, Allen, there are dogs. My wife and I have several dogs and have had many more over the years. My wife is active with a local animal rescue group she founded, and she's very good at her job. So there are always dogs. Don't know that I can imagine life without dogs. But Stink, as much as I love him, too, I'm afraid he's a dog that lives only in the pages of my books.

AM: I hope this interview will inspire readers to live in the pages of your books for a time.

Thanks for doing it.

TP: It's been a pleasure speaking with you.

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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*

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