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## "THE FINAL DAYS OF GREAT AMERICAN SHOPPING," BY GILBERT ALLEN

NOVEMBER 15, 2016 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Gilbert Allen

### Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall

With so many journals and genres available today, the dependable reviewer has a duty to warn off the noble optimists and advise the faint-hearted when a book is not for them. Obligation thus requires that I caution readers: Gilbert Allen's *The Final Days of American Shopping*, a collection of short stories, is intelligent, nuanced, poignant, and distressing—and hence not for everyone.

If you've read more than one Nicholas Sparks novel this year, this book isn't for you. If you think Oprah is a guardian of culture, this book isn't for you. If you believe Fox News and CNN are edifying, this book isn't for you. If you think David Brooks, Charles Krauthammer, and Sidney Blumenthal are men of letters, this book isn't for you. If you prefer Dr. Phil to Jung and Freud, this book isn't for you. If Joel Osteen inspires you in a way that Augustine and Aquinas cannot, this book isn't for you. If, in fact, any of the aforesaid are true of your case, you might just be the unwitting target of Allen's satire.

Having dispensed with the stereotypes and requisite preamble, I own that this is, in some respects, a personal review. Allen was my professor at Furman University and a man I continue to admire. He cannot be blamed for the way I turned out, and certainly not for my politics. But he is partially responsible for my love of poetry and aesthetics.

Allen, I recall, loved cats, as well as his isolated, sylvan home in Traveler's Rest, South Carolina, which is far from his native Long Island, both culturally and geographically. His spoken diction was always precise, as was the pencil-thin mustache that grayed above his lips. Tall and skinny, with belts so long they could've wrapped around him twice, he spoke softly and carried a big pen.

He commits poems to memory. I once heard him recite "Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening" to the tune of *La cumparsita*, a curious performance he allegedly repeats using other poems and tangos. Ancient or modern, free verse or rhyming, short or long, poetry is his lifework, calling, and passion. So, I suspect, he suffers, as honorable poets are wont to do. His suffering will surely escalate as he decides how to mass-market this latest book—his first one in prose—that's critical of mass-marketing.

The book depicts a self-indulgent American suburbia starved for money and materialism, where people try to purchase happiness and other forms of fleeting satisfaction while fixated on their own or others' sexuality. These 16 stories, told in chronological order from the recent past to the immediate future—



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and, at last, to the year 2084—are not directly about sex. Yet sexual anxieties, appetites, and insecurities bear a subterranean, causative relationship to the acquisitive urge and cupidity that complicate many of the characters in Allen's dystopian community, Belladonna, a gated subdivision in South Carolina, probably near Greenville.

Allen's opening story is a complex portrait of loving and loathing, and the fine line between the two. A childless couple, Butler and Marjory Breedlove, still in their early 40s, struggle to remain compatible as they degenerate into a life of stultifying domesticity, having suffered through three miscarriages and the abortion of an anencephalic child. Butler is an insurance salesman and a beer-drinking baseball fan who will pull for an aging veteran against his own beloved Atlanta Braves. Marjory, the silent, brooding type, obsesses over her luxuriant, blooming flowers, the fecundity and fertility of which contrast with her own barrenness.

Butler, as if to compensate for a sense of emasculation occasioned by his inability to sire offspring, sets out to install storm windows one Saturday morning while Marjory is off visiting her mother. If Marjory cannot be gratified through sexual activity, he presumably reasons, then she'll derive pleasure from his dutiful, manly labor. A client has told him that storm windows are "easier than a second honeymoon" because they require just nine "screws," so there's little doubt that Butler's chore is substitutionary: it fulfills the need for virile exertion that, we may assume, is not met through copulation.

The problem is, Butler procrastinates and leaves the windows leaning over Marjory's flowers for too long. Any boy who's used a magnifying glass to burn ants would've known not to do this, but not Butler. He doesn't consider what might happen to Marjory's flowers as he sets aside the windows to pursue booze and television. He does, however, manage to complete the window installation. When Marjory returns, he proudly reveals his handwork, announcing, "I did it myself."

He's not fully aware of what *it* is until Marjory, ignoring the windows, says, "My flowers." She stares at her garden as if peering into an "open grave." The flora that were adjuncts for her lost children, that were little leafy lives she had created and sustained, are now dead. She can't bear the loss. Tragedy compels her to mourn on a closet floor in her nightgown. It's an intolerable image—her sitting there, grieved and defeated—that captures the sad inability of two people to live out their most primitive desires.

The seemingly banal agonies in this story of strained marriage are subtly and quizzically meaningful. What is the significance, for instance, of Marjory's decision to serve up a scrumptious breakfast for Butler while she munches on blackened toast? Such a small gesture, but so gravely significant.

With moments like these, impressively numerous in such a short, short story, Allen achieves, I think, the right amount of ambiguity: neither Butler nor Marjory is the "bad guy," and both seem thwarted from intimacy and happiness by forces beyond their control yet caused by their own deliberate action. They mean well, mostly, but they're the same poles on a magnet, destined, it seems, to repel one another. Even their surname—Breedlove—raises interpretive puzzles, since breeding and loving seem foreign to their relationship. Whether it's their childlessness or an accumulation of small disappointments that causes their desperation and despair remains unclear.

Perhaps they recognize, as most of us do at some point, that they'll never become the people their younger selves wanted to be—and that this, whatever *this* may be, is all there is. Youthful aspiration is bound to become dashed hope, and once we've made ourselves what we are, there's no unmaking us.

John Beegle, the protagonist of the following story who happens to have purchased health insurance from Butler Breedlove—each story is delicately linked—faces a different problem, or problems: a growing estrangement from his wife and the incapability to connect with his teenaged daughters, one of whom has grown increasingly flirtatious in proportion to her budding breasts. John likes "to understand things, piece by piece," but he can't make sense of the females in his family. They move so fast, and he so slowly.

This all changes when he discovers, in the garage of his new house, an "autogyro," or small helicopter, circa 1961. This antique machine remains operational, and the more John works on it, the more his daughters take to him. He even revives his libido, surprising his wife with a "midday tryst." The restoration of the helicopter refurbishes his own spirits, and he eventually takes the perilous contraption for a ride, rising high into the air until he can "see everything." Like Frost's wistful narrator who imagines himself climbing a birch tree up toward heaven only to be set back down again, John, hovering in the sky, "begins to dream of his landing, of his own house." He thinks of his family and his return to the ground. Earth is, indeed, the right place for love.

The book is full of characters like these: the widowed Priscilla Knobloch with her twelve-year-old, one-handed daughter; Ted Dickey, whose numerous speed-dating partners represent different social ailments from materialism to decadence; the unnamed hick hair stylist who likes to rear-end Porsches (just a "love tap") and talk about blow jobs; a thrift store worker and his wife, the menopausal Meredith,

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who start a non-profit corporation for religious “bedding”; Jorja Sorenson, a painter, and her husband, Houston, who collaborate on the sculpture of a fetus that draws the attention of none other than Marjorie Breedlove; and on and on.

Through these hapless, heedless figures and their goods, interests, and acquisitions—television, cars, homes, designer shoes—certain symptoms of our national condition are projected: greed, consumerism, profligacy, extravagance, melancholy. It’s not overstating to say that, with these stories, Allen has tapped into our national consciousness and disorder. The quintessential American, restless and without a past, energetic and democratic, his works and beliefs at once enterprising and derivative—that iconic, preeminently rugged and relatable laborer—has, in our imagination, transitioned from self-reliant and industrious, always ready to “simply, simplify,” to dark and pitiful, burdened by the wealth and joy that forever elude him.

Although Americans once envisioned a vast frontier of possibility, an unknown and ever-widening expanse of hope and promise, imbuing optimism and idealism wherever we went, we now, sketchy and insecure, stumble along looking for opportunities that don’t exist, endeavoring to remain perpetually young and verdant, as if gray hair weren’t a crown of glory and splendor. We want what we can’t have and have what we don’t want.

Once we were Franklins and Jeffersons, Emersons and Whitmans; today we’re Willy Lomans. Or Cher Horowitzes. Or Gordon Gekkos. Without guilt we can’t identify with Reverend Dimmesdale or Hester Prynne. Without abstinence, we can’t appreciate the allure of Rappacini’s daughter. As coddled, perpetual children, we don’t get Ishmael and Ahab, Frederick Douglass, or Jay Gatsby. We’re so phony that we don’t understand Holden Caulfield anymore.

So Allen has done us a great service. By mocking us and portraying our ominously recognizable and quotidian depravities, he’s exposed the warring desires to which we’ve fallen prey: extravagance and simplicity, envy and indifference, aspiration and defeat, conformity and revolt. He’s a spokesman for the disenchanting and disillusioned, for those who still possess the poetic vision about which Emerson intoned. He sees a double consciousness, a conflict of the mind, that drags us into woeful insipidity and angst. If reading his book isn’t like looking reluctantly and masochistically into the mirror, or less figuratively into your own split psyche, then you’re delusional or dishonest, or perhaps—just perhaps—the rare exception.

These stories are harsh, biting, titillating, disparaging, and sarcastic, but they’re also funny. Allen derides us, and perhaps himself, with humor. He’s a sensitive man, and very quiet. Who knew that, beneath his silent façade, there was a hilarious personality?

I did. Because his poetry reveals that about him.

His first collection of poetry, *In Everything*, was spiritual and serious, a sort of Buddhist mystical meditation on Nature and Being. As time went on, he eased up and relaxed. He moved from the intensity of numinous experience to the comic realities of everyday life.

It’s not that his writing became lighthearted, upbeat, or shallow. It remained pensive and complex and open to rigorous interpretation, sometimes even cosmic in scope. Yet there was something more playful and satirical about it. He came to enjoy social criticism as much as he enjoyed, say, the splendor of sentience and the complexities of the mind and soul.

This tendency towards the witty and quirky, as I have suggested, finds expression in *The Final Days of Great American Shopping*. It’s evident in a pick-up line: “Would you like to go on a corporate retreat next month? As my tax deduction?” It materializes in unsuspecting places such as the urinal, where a man talks on his cell phone as he pisses. It even surfaces in the epithet “Confederate Flaggots,” which implies a phallic fascination with flag poles that’s endemic among men “who dress up in nineteenth-century costumes to do unspeakable things to one another in public parks.”

But not every attempt at humor is successful: the narrator of the story “Friends with Porsches” speaks like a redneck, but not a *real* redneck—just a forced caricature whose colloquialisms and ungrammatical syntax aren’t quite believable as actual speech.

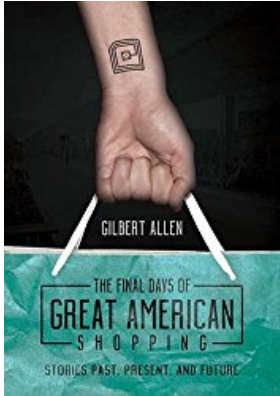
Allen’s sardonic, unpretentious fiction renders a society that’s abandoned the “errand into the wilderness”—as Perry Miller so aptly labeled the once powerful theme of American experience—for the errand into the shopping mall. Although some of the technology that appears in his stories is already dated—most of the stories were first published before iPhones and iPads made the Internet and email a ubiquitous, hand-held phenomenon—one senses in their representation a renewed and profane scrutiny that’s both subversive and daring.

Are we in the *final* days of American shopping, as Allen suggests? If so, is that an apocryphal singularity, the secular equivalent to the eschaton?

Maybe. Shopping, for Allen, is, after all, much more than merely examining and evaluating retail merchandise with an eye toward a trivial purchase. It's systemic and magnificent, a fluid cultural sickness with no immediate cure. Alike in severity to those idolatrous practices which demand prophetic ministry, it signals a coming destruction that necessitates oracular warning. Shopping has become the lord and king of us all.

As for the other events of shopping's reign, those which don't appear in Allen's book, are they not written in the records of the Internet, the annotations of our technology, and the annals of our digital media? Allen buries shopping with its ancestors. And he buries us, and our endless wants, with it.

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#### About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and educator. His book *Literature and Liberty* (Rowman & Littlefield / Lexington Books) was released in 2014. He blogs at The Literary Lawyer. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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