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Author Chat with Allen Mendenhall

Interview by Julia Nunnally Duncan



JND: It's a pleasure, Allen, to switch roles and interview you. As you know, you have interviewed me three times for *Southern Literary Review: A Magazine for Literature of the American South*. I remember that I initially contacted you about getting an interview in the journal. How do you typically select your authors for interviews? Do they contact you, or do you discover their books and then seek them out?

AM: Thanks so much for the interview. I hope I'm as good at this as you are. I don't have a method for choosing interviewees. Sometimes authors reach out to me; sometimes publicists do. Other times I reach out to authors myself. Editing *Southern Literary Review* is such a constant scramble that I'm sometimes not even sure how our processes and protocols work. We're just flying by the seat of our pants.

JND: It seems to me you are equally adept at asking questions about poetry and prose. Yet I wonder: is there a particular genre of literature that you prefer?

AM: As a teenager, and during my college years, I wanted to be a poet. Then one day I determined that my poetry, most of it anyway, wasn't very good, but I still read quite a bit of poetry. Now that I write professionally—that is, to get paid—I've turned toward prose. It's easier for me to review books about history, philosophy, and law, so I tend to stick to those subjects. I typically read between four to eight books at a time—not the most efficient way to get through books, but the diversity of subject matter holds my excitement. At least one of those books is always a novel. And I'm always working on one academic or scholarly piece of writing, which requires

extensive research, while doing my leisure reading. I'm fortunate to have a job that allows leisure and work to overlap, so much of what I call "leisure reading" ends up as a writing project—an article or a book review, for example.

JND: As editor of *Southern Literary Review*, do you think specific traits identify Southern writing (i.e., place, family, religion)? Is Southern literature changing?

AM: Southern literature is changing, as all genres always change to adapt to new circumstances, technologies, cultures, and experiences. At *Southern Literary Review*, we review books written about the South, situated in the South, or by authors from the South—and we define "South" rather loosely. If an author can make the case that his or her book is Southern, or that he or she is Southern, then we typically defer to the author on that judgment.

Southern literature, in my view, still retains certain qualities and characteristics that account for the "Southern" label: a focus on family, communities or towns, certain dialects and colloquialisms, race and racial conflict, class, and history. Much of the Southern literature that interests me focuses on the dark, weird, and strange elements of human behavior, on our catastrophic tendencies as rational creatures. But that goes for literature more broadly: my favorite book of the Bible is Ecclesiastes, and when it comes to Shakespeare, I prefer *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* to the Comedies. In the end, it's all just vanity, a striving after the wind.

JND: Do you find that authors generally embrace the tag of "Southern writer" or resent being categorized? Any thoughts about why either reaction might occur?

AM: I can't recall a specific instance when anyone objected to the "Southern" label for their book. Maybe it's happened—I just can't recall it if it did. More often, authors I talk to seem to embrace the "Southern" label. I don't know why that is.

JND: I have found your questions during our interviews to be clear and straightforward. In David Huddle's interview with me, which you published in *Southern Literary Review* in 2017, he notes my poems' "plain diction and uncomplicated syntax." Do you consider your diction "plain," or do you adapt your style of speaking to the interviewee's diction?

AM: I don't think much about the kind of language I use in interviews. When I'm interviewing authors, I'm mostly thinking about what questions will draw out interesting responses.

JND: In your new book *Writers on Writing: Conversations with Allen*

Mendenhall you have an impressive roster of interviewees. The forty-seven interviews compiled in this book attest to your extensive reading and ardor for literature. Could you explain how you chose selections for *Writers on Writing*? Did you have any particular criteria for inclusion?

AM: I included most of the interviews I had done up to a certain date. So, there are interviews that I've done after that date which may become part of a future anthology. Any writers who do not see their name in this book may very well see their name in a future anthology.

JND: I can envision *Writers on Writing* as a textbook for my Southern Culture class. Do you have a particular readership in mind for this book?

AM: The readership for *Southern Literary Review*. I figured our loyal readers would enjoy this anthology. Some of the interviews here appeared in other publications, and some on my blog, so I didn't include just Southern authors or authors of Southern literature. For the most part, though, I had our *Southern Literary Review* audience in mind as I assembled the interviews.

JND: In your "Introduction" to *Writers on Writing*, you note the different ways writers respond during an interview: "some grow defensive, some coy...others clam up." Have you ever found an author to be too temperamental to interview? Do you think writers, in general, are more temperamental than other people?

AM: To the first question: not *too* temperamental to interview, but temperamental indeed. I once asked a writer about what I perceived to be a character trait of his protagonist. He vehemently disagreed with my perception. But no, I don't think writers are more temperamental than other people—more sensitive maybe, but not more temperamental. I commute from Auburn, Alabama to Montgomery every day. That's a lot of highway travel, so I see a lot of road rage. "Writer" is not the first thing that comes to mind when I notice drivers honking at each other or flipping each other the bird.

JND: In your interview with Shuly Carwood about her memoir *The Going and Goodbye*, you ask, "Do you feel any misgivings or hesitation when you write about those who are close to you, or have been close to you?" Carwood ultimately explains, "In the end, I know I had done my very best to be both honest and fair." As a writer of personal essays and poems, I have often tackled the issue of how much I should say, especially about other people. In your own essay writing, have you struggled with what to reveal and what to keep private?

AM: Yes. I'm open and honest in my essays. Sometimes I feel squeamish or embarrassed about the way I've talked about family or friends. But I know, deep down, that that means the essay has conveyed feelings that might connect with readers—that the essay is relatable. Who wants to read about a person with no regrets, embarrassments, fears, vulnerabilities, or weaknesses? I suppose there are people who enjoy reading the platitudes, fulminations, and résumé recitals in politicians' memoirs, but not me. Of course, there's always the risk that you hurt other people when you write about them. I am sensitive to that possibility, and do my best to balance their feelings with my desire to write well.

Because you mentioned Shuly's book, I just want to say how powerful it is. I mean, really powerful. It sticks with you. It's enchanting. I've never met Shuly in person. We haven't emailed or spoken since we did the interview. I've never seen her. But I feel I know her intimately. Her writing has that effect on you. How odd to have such affection for someone you've never met, all because of the way they think and relate their experiences. For some reason, I associate her book with the film *Boyhood*. The two works don't have much in common besides the portrayal of aging and growing up. But that is the saddest part about life: that it doesn't happen differently, that it moves inexorably in one direction, that you're inevitably the sum of your experiences, however painful or happy or whatever they may be. Before I read it, I didn't expect to like Shuly's book. Boy, were my expectations upended.

JND: I know from reading your essay collection *Of Bees and Boys* that your grandfather, during his boyhood, knew Harper Lee in Monroeville, Alabama, and you have had a lifelong affection for Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you could have interviewed Harper Lee, what would you have asked her?

AM: What my grandfather was like as a child.

JND: In your years of interviewing writers, is there an author or a book that especially stands out in your memory? Is there an author whom you aspire to interview?

AM: There are many that stand out—but for different reasons. I hesitate to list authors or books because I don't want to appear to be ranking hierarchically. Suffice it to say that if I've interviewed an author, then I found his or her book to be sufficiently interesting to merit the interview. If I could interview *any* author, it would be William Wordsworth. He's long dead, of course. But if only I could.

JND: Thank you, Allen, for allowing me to interview you. And

thanks so much for your years of supporting your fellow writers.

AM: Thank you, Julia. So grateful for your friendship.