

# SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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## DONNA MEREDITH INTERVIEWS ALLEN MENDENHALL, EDITOR OF "WRITERS ON WRITING"

 MARCH 14, 2019 BY [DONNA MEREDITH](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**DM:** Thanks for taking time from your very busy life to be interviewed. You are an associate dean at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law, executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty, and editor of *Southern Literary Review*. You blog at *The Literary Lawyer*. Your books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *Of Bees and Boys* (2017), and the latest, *Writers on Writing* (2019). You have an astounding number of articles published in academic journals, as well as popular media outlets. How do you juggle work with family—and tell us about your family?

AM: I struggle to find the right balance and probably don't succeed. My son, Noah, is seven, and my daughter, Gabriela, is five. They are bright little bilingual rays of sunshine. I met my wife, Giuliana, in Rio de Janeiro many moons ago. We were staying in the same hotel on Ipanema Beach, so I laugh whenever I'm on an elevator or at a halftime show and the tune to "The Girl from Ipanema" strikes up. I was studying abroad there during law school and had just undergone surgery: a skin graft and the removal of two lymph nodes. When I got to Brazil, the last thing on my mind was finding a spouse. But there you have it. Fast forward over a decade and here I am. Everyone in the family puts up with my compulsive researching, reading, and writing. I suppose if those are your vices, things can't be that bad.

**DM:** You and I share a love for West Virginia. Both of us have earned Master's degrees from West Virginia University, yours in literature, mine in journalism. What propelled you into WVU law school after that literary background? And even after earning your JD, you continued to explore both fields, earning an LL.M. in transnational law from Temple University and a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University. It seems to be a trend, lawyers becoming authors; in fact, you interview several in this collection. How do you see the two fields as incubating each other?

AM: There's a lot to address there. I'll start with how I ended up at West Virginia University. The short of it is that I wasn't sure whether I wanted to be an English professor or a lawyer, and WVU—unlike other schools I had approached—welcomed my proposal to study for a master's in English in the evenings while I took law school coursework during the day. After I graduated from Furman University, I moved to Japan to teach English and, in truth, to delay my decision to pursue law or literature. During that time, I struck up a dialogue with Jim Elkins, a law professor at WVU whose scholarship focused on the intersection of law and literature. He encouraged me to attend WVU, and I jumped at the opportunity to study under him. I realized quickly how unique he was when he insisted that I skip an opening



Allen Mendenhall

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session of orientation for new law students to sit in his office and discuss Plato and John William Corrington, an author whose nonfiction essays I would eventually edit and collect as a book.

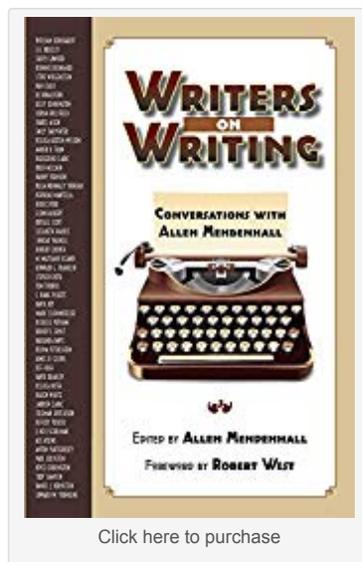
I've heard it said that lawyers read and write far more than novelists do, and I believe it. Law is denser and more complicated than, say, a novel. It requires rigorous thought and analysis, sometimes forcing you to read and reread the same passages several times, questioning the meaning of every word and considering the counter-argument to every contention. When I've been immersed in the law, I love picking up a novel because I can tear through it. The voice and the characters and the prose are so much more pleasurable than, for instance, an appellate opinion.

**DM: What motivated you to conduct these author interviews? What have you personally gained from them—and what do you hope readers will gain from this collection?**

AM: I'm sure I've gained much that is only subconsciously known and thus incommunicable, little experiences here and there that have contributed to my development in unobserved ways, but there is much, as well, that I can claim to have learned: the importance of tenacity, for instance, and routine; the need to carve out time to write; the benefits of networking and building an audience for your work. And I've learned to enjoy myself: not to fret over the many tasks that need finishing, but to have fun doing them.

**DM: Your wide-ranging collection includes poets, short story writers, novelists, essayists, and memoirists. You interviewed well-known authors who have won accolades and recognition in the literary world as well as lesser known writers. How did you go about choosing authors to interview? It is clear that you did preliminary research to form cogent questions and elicit real insights into their writing process. How much research was required? Please describe your process.**

AM: Well, the process differed for each author. There are forty-something interviews in this anthology, and I admit that I read some books more closely than others. Most of the authors contacted me to request interviews or reviews of their book. I just don't have the time to review every book that arrives in the mail—sometimes a book or two a day, and typically that many in a week—but interviews are manageable. I never know where the conversation will go because each question follows from the previous response. I try to ask questions that allow readers to get to know the authors—their quirks and personalities—and not just the books.



**DM: Were interviews conducted in person, by phone, by email, or by some combination of the above?**

AM: By email. Phone and in-person interviews have to be transcribed, adding another layer of work and complexity. So I conduct my interviews by email. This method allows authors to take their time before responding, to reflect on the questions and provide their responses without fear of those "gotcha!" tactics used by television pundits.

**DM: I noticed the interviews are not arranged alphabetically by author names. How did you decide to organize them within the book?**

AM: I tried to mix it up by genre. I thought about arranging the interviews chronologically, from the earliest to the most recent, but then decided that moving from history to politics to literature to whatever might keep the pages turning.

**DM: You are obviously an eclectic reader, but do you find yourself gravitating toward any particular genre? What are you currently reading?**

AM: I read different genres at different times for different reasons. I'm teaching a course called the Western Tradition that covers antiquity to the medieval period, so I've been reading a wide array of authors and texts this semester. On top of that, I'm leading a reading group for students and a reading group for faculty. The student group is covering Albert Venn Dicey's *Lectures on the relation between law and public opinion in England during the nineteenth century*. With faculty I'm reading Hayek's three volumes of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*. I'll attend a colloquium on *All the King's Men* at the end of this month, so I'm reading that as well. I've got a stack of P. G. Wodehouse novels on my desk that I want to read as soon as possible.

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Select Month

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Literature Tennessee Texas The Civil War

University of South Carolina Press Virginia

Walker Percy West Virginia William

Bernhardt William Faulkner

**DM: Are you working on another book? If so, please tell us about it.**

AM: Three, actually. If I could stick to just one at a time, I could finish much more quickly, but circumstances beyond my control seem to force me into one work or another for certain periods. One manuscript is a collection of essays on jurisprudence; the other is a collection of literary and cultural essays. I've only recently admitted to people that I'm working on a novel. I figured if I told people I might get motivated to finish it.

**DM: You have been editor of *Southern Literary Review* since 2011. What contributions do you see SLR making to the literary world? What are your goals for SLR?**

AM: I think we're like *The Millions* but for Southern literature. I want to draw attention to good books and interesting authors who represent our region well. I wish I had more specific goals, but ultimately that's what it comes down to: highlighting and supporting literature and authors who merit a closer look.

**DM: Thank you, Allen, not only for the interview, but also for all you do to promote good literature and to help writers find a wider audience.**

AM: Thank you so much, Donna.

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