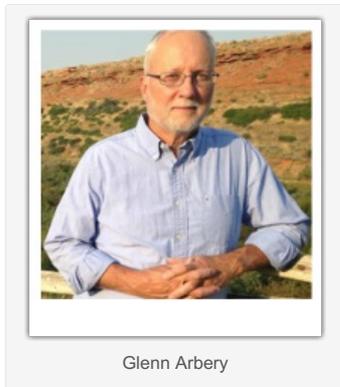


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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS GLENN ARBERY, AUTHOR OF "BEARINGS AND DISTANCES"

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AM: First of all, congratulations on the publication of your novel, *Bearings and Distances*. You've got deep roots in the South but haven't lived here in some time. Do you ever feel a sense of, pardon the term, alienation?

GA: Thank you. As for a sense of alienation, sure I've felt it, but less in Wyoming than in New England. Alienation is a funny thing to try to describe. I suppose at its root it's the sense of being the *other*, the one who doesn't fit into the world per se, like Raskolnikov up in his little coffin of a room during the white nights of Petersburg, that artificial and archetypally modern city.

Full-bore alienation like that is hard to sustain when you're the father of seven girls and one boy and now the grandfather of thirteen. But I have to say that the times I have felt less at home were during the sixteen years we were in New England rather than the twenty in Dallas (and I don't consider Dallas the South).

What was it about the Northeast? Despite having many very good friends there, I always felt like an outsider. I think it's like the experience Mowbray anticipates when Richard II exiles him: "My native English, now I must forego." I'm kidding, but not entirely. There's something in the very idioms of living in New England that I never "got" or wanted to get, whereas I always recover my native idioms of being—instantly, effortlessly—when I return to the South. Being in New England drove me deeper into my Southern identity. That's where I wrote this novel. Living in Wyoming, on the other hand, reminds me in many ways of being in the South. It's no accident that *The Virginian* is set here.

AM: You're a scholar of Southern literature. *Bearings and Distances* is not necessarily a regional book, but global, although it is, I submit, Southern literature. The opening pages jump from the Deep South to Italy and reveal a familiarity with African literature, to give just one quick example of the breadth involved. The book is both deep and wide in its themes and allusions—from Christian to classical. If forced to put a genre label on the book, what would you choose?

GA: I definitely think of it as a Southern novel. When I talk about genre per se, I'm influenced by my teacher and friend Louise Cowan, who draws her genre theory from Aristotle's four major kinds or types: comedy, tragedy, epic, and lyric. I think that in its depths my novel *wants* to be comic—not just funny, but Dantean and purgatorial. Yet it certainly contains an action that tends toward tragedy, especially in the sense of repetition and a Greek feeling of fate. Because of the 40 years that it encompasses in the main character's return to his Southern hometown, it also has an epic cast in a biblical sense.



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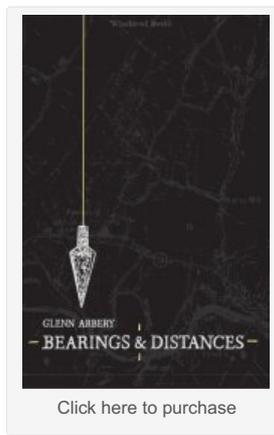
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Before the election in 2008, Obama made a point of comparing himself to Joshua, who takes the Israelites into the Promised Land after their forty years in the Wilderness. His allusion was of course to Martin Luther King and his “mountaintop” speech the night before his death forty years earlier in 1968. Set in the summer of 2009 and looking back to 1969, the novel tests the heady claim—many people felt it in 2008—that we’ve made it past the issues of race and guilt that haunt the national psyche.

AM: Your novel deals with racial tension, right down to the fact that its main character, Braxton Forrest, shares the last name of the notorious Confederate general. Did you feel a sense of trepidation at approaching this subject?



GA: If you don’t feel some trepidation about approaching the matter of race, you’re not paying attention. Chattel slavery was a kind of original curse that we’ve had to work out in our national history, and the effects of it, because of its visible heritage, will not go away in our lifetime and perhaps not in the lifetimes of our great-grandchildren. This is one of the most intractable problems of our lives as Americans, not because of race per se, but because of the associations with slavery. I have no desire to rewrite – to use your excellent word – the problems of this history. I think they will never be completely solved by legislation or reparations, but they will be overcome, as they have always been overcome on a personal level, by love and loyalty and trust and generosity.

AM: All the rage in Southern studies involves the “global South,” which makes sense to some extent in our increasingly globalized world. How do you feel about this trend, and how do you think *Bearings and Distances* both implicates and challenges it?

GA: I once had a student whose mother came from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. When this student read Faulkner—*Absalom, Absalom* and *Go Down, Moses* in particular—she said that these novels took her inside the world of her mother’s childhood, because her mother’s French colonial circumstances (the big house, the servants) had been so similar to those recounted in Faulkner’s novels. I think there’s a common experience deriving from Rome that the South has always shared with French, Spanish, and Portuguese Central and South America, including the Caribbean, though for a long time its prevailing Protestantism kept it from admitting an affinity with its brethren.

Garcia-Marquez certainly looked to Faulkner, as did Edouard Glissant and many others. In the century after the Civil War, the South was so caught up either in trying to be like the rest of the country (the complaint of the Fugitive-Agrarians) or in claiming the status of defeated Troy or in asserting a discreditable difference, particularly in matters of racial politics, that it didn’t see those larger dimensions.

On the other hand, I wince a little at the very term “global South.” Fashion so shamelessly dominates academic writing that I have a hard time taking very seriously anything that’s “all the rage,” as you put it. (One of the aspects of *Bearings and Distances* is satire of the contemporary academy, which deserves a Swift.) I did not consciously comment on the “global South” per se in the novel, but one of its characters, Hermia Watson, certainly welcomes such concerns. Her father, Braxton Forrest, would make fun of them.

AM: You have a deep respect for the South—its traditions, myths, literature, and culture. *Bearings and Distances* is in a way an exploration of these themes, is it not?

GA: Very much so. Since I first went to the University of Georgia in the 1970s, I’ve been steeped in the work of the Fugitive-Agrarians as part of my literary education in general. I read Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren alongside Eliot and Stevens and Frost; I was discovering Faulkner, Welty, O’Connor, Gordon, and Percy after reading Borges, Garcia-Marquez, and Nabokov. Marion Montgomery directed my Master’s thesis. At the University of Dallas, I studied with Louise Cowan and Mel Bradford. But growing up in the South predisposed me to Southern traditions long before I read anything other than the Hardy Boys and Tom Swift and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan novels. I’m probably in the last generation when it was still impossible not to “grow up hating Sherman,” as Shreve says to Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom*.

AM: You make no attempt to rewrite biological and sexual givens in terms of fashionable theory divorced from science.

GA: Well, it never occurred to me. I have considerable difficulty with the idea of “rewriting biological and sexual givens.” Those givens seem to me the source of anguish, yes, but also of wonder and gratitude—emotions I have felt daily with our Down syndrome daughter, who is now 28. If we’re talking about the moral and intellectual improvement of which we’re certainly capable, sure, but the kind of “rewriting” I think you mean comes out of a narrative of self-ownership that I find unfortunate and sometimes laughable. If we could bestow a single moment of *existence* upon ourselves, perhaps it would be creditable, but we live and breathe and have our being out of a mystery more than biological. “Givens” imply a Giver, and it seems to me more honest and certainly more rewarding to ponder the constitution of that given-ness than to assert too much for the will and to make the shallow claims of self-invention.

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AM: Do you consider yourself a religious writer?

GA: Ever since I grew up in a Methodist Church in Middle Georgia, religion has been very much a part of my weekly experience. When I was a child, it was simply part of the reality of things for everybody I knew, despite all our irreverence and merry transgression. Even after I began to have serious doubts as a teenager, the sense of religion never left me, and I came back to it as I matured. I have been a practicing Roman Catholic since I was 26. But am I a religious writer? I don't think so. I certainly don't intend to write homiletically. Simply as a *writer*, I can say that religion is now and has always been one of the central dimensions of human life; it pervades Homer and Virgil, for example. It's part of our nature to idolize if not to worship, to act in ritual ways, so much so that even those who reject religion tend to find substitutes that they don't recognize as religious. But by and large the South remains consciously and deliberately religious. To treat religious realities in fiction—including concerns about salvation—seems to me completely natural for a novelist; it's mimetically accurate; it's both in keeping with the traditions out of which we come and a way of thinking about the prospects, personal and cultural, that lie before us.

AM: How did you discover Wiseblood Books? I'm intrigued by the work it's doing.

GA: A friend in Massachusetts first told me about Wiseblood Books, and I was immediately interested. As I've told the founder, Joshua Hren, I wish I had had the gumption at his age to do something similar. Wiseblood offers writers who take their faith seriously a platform but it insists on literary integrity and truthfulness with respect to the way people really are, in all their sin and self-deception and vulnerability to grace. The name, too, felt like an appeal. The first real literary paper I wrote was on Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*—Enoch Emery with his little mummy and his gorilla suit, Haze Motes and his "Church without Christ."

AM: Do you prefer to write fiction or scholarship?

GA: Fiction, no question. I've been late coming to it, because my creative work in the past has been largely with poetry.

In the past decade or so, fiction has begun to call me more powerfully. I've never felt myself to be a scholar, I confess. I've never truly been a master of a body of material, though I suppose I come closest with some of the Southern writers. My sympathies have always been with Montaigne in this regard: I love to read, and my reading tends to follow my interests, and my interests have never been specialized.

AM: Have you always thought of yourself as a writer of fiction, or was your decision to write a novel something you came to through your studies of, say, Shakespeare and Homer and Dostoevsky and so on?

GA: I genuinely don't remember exactly when I decided to write *Bearings and Distances*. I'd been trying some short stories, then trying something longer that didn't take on form, and I incorporated some things into this novel when it suddenly took hold several years ago. But I can't say that I wrote it because of Homer and Shakespeare and Dostoevsky—or Aeschylus, or Dante or Virgil and so on. Since 1986, I've been privileged to teach in places that center on great books. These works are simply part of the way I see the world, the way I imagine things, as they have been for most educated men and women in the Western world for most of our history. Personally speaking, this novel comes more from a desire to come to terms with my Southern past in a larger American context than from any explicit desire to emulate my betters.

AM: Thank you for this interview and for this searching, complex novel.

GA: Thank you, in return, for your generous interest.

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