

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS IDABEL ALLEN, AUTHOR OF "ROOTED"

 JULY 18, 2017 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Idabel Allen

AM: The title of your book is *Rooted*. The first line signals that this word, *rooted*, will take on layers of meaning. "It all comes from the root," your narrator says. "And Grover McQuiston was the root of it all." What are you after here?

IA: The opening line of *Rooted* serves a couple of purposes. As there are three distinct voices or narratives—Grover, Slade, and Sarah Jane—the opening line is a way of tying these elements of

the story together. Feedback for *Rooted* encouraged me to write the story from one voice, not three. I'd tried that in earlier drafts and the story never quite came together until I developed the three narratives. "It all comes from the root," is something my son told my grandmother a few years earlier. When trying to think of a way to address workshop feedback, this line came back to me, and I knew it was exactly what was needed to tie the narratives together.

The opening line also informs the reader up front that everything to follow in the story had an origin and that origin is the patriarch of a powerful Southern family. Also, it indicates a deep, family story line with a strong connection to the land. *Rooted* is very much a regional story, specific to the Delta. The earth and crops and fields and river are all important to the story and the characters. They draw comfort from their surroundings and feel a deep sense of belonging on that plot of land more so than anywhere else.

Finally, I wanted there to be a sense that no matter where you go, the roots that bind you to a people and place never go away. We are always rooted, to our families, and our past and our histories. And, moreover, we are responsible for the health and growth of our own roots, and its offshoots.

AM: Fascinating that your inspiration for that line came from your son—and fitting, too, given that roots and family are so important to the narrative. Where are your own roots?

IA: My roots run deepest in the West Tennessee Delta—from Memphis in the southwest corner of the state all the way up to Union City, the northwest corner where *Rooted* is set. On my father's side, family reunions filled with plates of fried catfish, country ham, hush puppies and baked apples were held at Reelfoot Lake in this same area. My grandparents owned and still own a small farm where we children rode in the combine, the harvested soybeans raining down on us like pennies from heaven.

My mother's family followed an almost migratory path, from Memphis to California to Memphis and back; rolling along on Elvis, Memphis Soul and the sixties sounds emerging from the San Francisco area: Janis and Jefferson Airplane and more.

My mother's love of music carried over to her children. Just as my father's strong connection to the land laid the foundation from which we operate. It is safe to say, *I'm a little bit country and a little bit rock n' roll*. And I think that comes across in *Rooted*.

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Then there's a part of me that was influenced by the few years spent in Portland, Oregon, in middle school. Paper drives and field trips to the symphony and environmental camps were all new experiences that I took to and appreciated. In Portland, I realized that I would write books, and not just any books, but good books like the ones I devoured as a child—*Captains Courageous*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *East of Eden*, and anything by Ray Bradbury.

And that is what I am—a writer of books, drawing on the experiences and relationships and places that formed my youth.

AM: Reading, of course, is one of those experiences, and you mentioned some books you read during childhood. Are there particular writers who've informed or shaped your writing style?

IA: When I began writing *Rooted*, I was heavily into William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Truman Capote. Rereading *Rooted*, I'm struck by elements similar to Faulkner's *Sartoris*—the patriarch, banker grandfather, the return of wild-child grandson, even the feisty old aunt. I wasn't consciously aware of the influence *Sartoris* had on my book when writing, but it supports the old saying "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

My writing has been compared to Flannery O'Connor, a writer I greatly admire but came to know later in life after *Rooted* was completed. Other writers who have had an impact on my work include John Steinbeck, Charles Portis, Ray Bradbury, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf, Anton Chekhov, Jane Austen, Willa Cather and Cormac McCarthy.

Recently, I undertook Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and intend to do a deeper dive of his work.

My favorite book is John Kennedy Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*. I have a soft spot for lovable losers like Ignatius J. Reilly, Portis' Ray Midge in *Dog of the South*, and characters in Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*.

AM: When you say "deeper dive," do you mean you hope to study Dostoevsky or experiment with his influence in your fiction?

IA: I mean to read Dostoevsky's other books for enjoyment and to also better understand what he was trying to say through his fiction. Much of what he wrote about in *The Brothers Karamazov* in regards to this turn from religion towards science, or man's autonomy, and resulting isolation is very much a foreshadowing of the world we live in today—politically and socially.

I don't know that I would knowingly try to experiment with his influence in my fiction. But I certainly hope that his work would influence my fiction in a more natural, organic way. That is how it seems to work with me. I sponge up what I read, and then what I read seeps out onto my pages without any formal plan on my part.

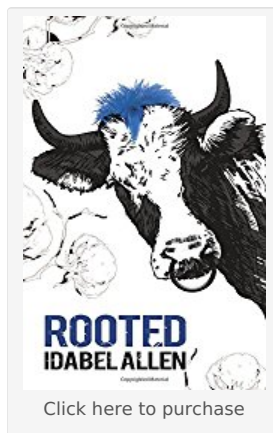
AM: When did words start seeping onto the pages of *Rooted*?

IA: They started seeping in the late nineties. I was completing a novel, my first but one I will never do anything with, when I started thinking about a character "stuck" in a small, West Tennessee cotton town in the late 1970s. I say "stuck" because there's not a whole lot going on in such a place and time. And if you weren't born there, I don't know that you'd appreciate the people or the culture. This character originally had a broken leg and no way to leave town.

It wasn't long before the character grew into a New York punk rocker, Slade Mortimer. With a nasty habit and nasty attitude, he is on the run from his dead girlfriend's revenge-seeking father. For the residents of Moonsock, Slade might as well have come from outer space, so foreign was he to all they hold dear.

When *Rooted* first seeped into my conscious and ultimately onto the page, I also had in mind a young woman who had a hard time connecting with people. This character was to work at the funeral home as a beautician. Her specialty was making women corpses up to look like country music stars: Dottie West, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette and Dolly, of course. This line of work did not make it into *Rooted*, as Sarah Janes developed into a darker, more damaged character.

From these two characters the plot developed and the story took on a life of its own. Between starts and stops and kids and jobs and other writing, I didn't finish *Rooted*



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until 2010. From there the book was with an agent in New York while I plugged away at another novel, *Strange Agonies In Some Lonesome Wilderness*.

AM: And is this other novel still in the works?

IA: *Strange Agonies In Some Lonesome Wilderness* is basically complete, or at least I thought it was until reading reviews of *Rooted*. Many people have remarked how easy *Rooted* is to read. This feedback has made me realize how much readers appreciate a story that is not cumbersome or difficult to get through.

Strange Agonies is a historical novel covering many periods: slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression. There's a great deal of hoodoo in the story and history of Natchez, Mississippi, and surrounding areas. It is by far the most complex book I've undertaken, and I want to make sure that the complexity of the story does not interfere with readability. To ensure the book is as enjoyable and easy to read as *Rooted*, I am taking another pass through the manuscript and removing or revising anything that may cause a reader to pause or to be uncertain about what they are reading.

Once this review is completed, the book will be ready to publish. I haven't decided on a release date, but believe *Strange Agonies* will be in stores by Christmas or sometime soon after.

AM: Well congratulations on the big push toward publication. Looking forward to reading this next book.

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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 of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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