

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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OCTOBER READ OF THE MONTH: "OF BEES AND BOYS," BY ALLEN MENDENHALL

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Allen Mendenhall

Reviewed by Yasser El-Sayed

Much has already been written about Allen Mendenhall's new book, *Of Bees & Boys: Lines from a Southern Lawyer*. The celebrated author William Bernhardt, who penned the forward to the collection of essays, states that "Mendenhall is an artist and writer of the first caliber . . . Time and again Mendenhall harnesses the lightning . . . This is a book for everyone who likes to think, who wants to contemplate the great questions of life." Bernhardt's words are an undeniably apt description, and in their simple honesty capture the core of these remarkable nine essays.

I am neither a lawyer nor from the American South. Where I grew up in North Africa, I remember more ants than bees, Arab Islamic as opposed to Southern Christian traditions, a family of military men and engineers in place of philosophers, preachers and lawyers, and I recall an environment of upheaval and turmoil in contrast to a landscape drenched in the very fundament American history. But the wonder of literature broadly, and Mendenhall's work particularly, is how seemingly static printed words on a page can transform their essence and become the meandering vasculature that nurtures and sustains our shared humanity, binding us to one another beyond the arbitrary restrictions of time and place. It is from this vantage point that I read and interacted with Mendenhall's work. Furthermore, while each essay could be read as a separate and articulate reflection of an experience, and engaged with intensely as such, I sensed in these narrations a recurring refrain. One that pulsed across the descriptive moments from boyhood into adult life, so that in the end the book's thematic continuity was part of that larger connectedness one feels from Mendenhall's writing.

In medical school, my embryology professor advised a tense lecture hall of first-year medical students cramming for exams to "never underestimate survival." I have thought of that line many times in my life when faced with challenges that seemed insurmountable, and I thought of it again as I read these essays. Survival and all that goes with it—struggles small and large; scars both visible and occult; illusory victories; losses that at first seem devastating in scope, but from which we rise up time and again; places and the memories we seek out for refuge; and what we learn or fail to learn about ourselves along the way. With survival comes the organic understanding of impermanence and transience, no matter how deeply steeped in the history and culture of a place we may be.

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In the essay “Unmasking,” Mendenhall describes the devastating moment when at the age of twenty-four he was about to learn he had cancer.

“My cell phone buzzed. An unknown number flashed across the screen . . .”

“Mr. Mendenhall.”

“Yes.”

“Are you in the car?”

“No.”

“This is the cancer center at St. Joseph’s Hospital. We need you to come in.”

What followed was terror, surgery, an immersive awareness of how “everything you know and love will come undone,” and then the submission to this knowledge in a visceral and real way, the utter embrace of impermanence, even with the ensuing knowledge that survival would be the outcome. Mendenhall writes of his experience, peering into the abyss and surviving, with poetic power: “You keep it close, so close it becomes part of you, so close it’s at your disposal, so close that without it, you’re nothing, nothing if not boringly, thoughtlessly, mechanically alive, which is just another way of being dead. You train and train and then it comes.”

Themes of survival, impermanence, resilience, while understandably most immediate and pressing in the mortality reflections of “Unmasking,” continue to echo throughout the book. In the opening essay, “Of Bees and Boys,” Mendenhall describes an incident in which a boyhood battle with a swarm of bees resulted in a massive retaliatory response by the yellow jackets, especially for his brother who took the brunt of the attack. But it is the bees’ imagined courage in the face of certain death that most stands out in the moment. Mendenhall writes, “I have come to admire bees for their tenacity and courage in the face of insurmountable power. . . Their body is a weapon, one that, once used, terminates everything . . . Even in victory, the bees lose. It may take a man to fully understand. And it might take bees, or something like them, to make a man.”

The past is present in these essays. It’s a ballast, an anchor, a place of return and asylum. We feel the power of history and rootedness in the essay “Harper Lee and Words Left Behind.” Mendenhall masterfully infuses his own family history in Monroeville with the stories of two icons of American literature, Harper Lee and Truman Capote. Mendenhall writes, “With Lee’s final tumultuous years came the passing of a part of me that I shared with my grandfather through stories . . . I’ll tell his stories about Harper Lee and Truman Capote and Monroeville to my children and, perhaps one day, my grandchildren, that they, too, might tell their offspring.” In this passage, there is a gentleness, an understatement in the description of these familial connections to Lee and Capote. As a reader we can sense immediately that the core of this narration is what we can leave behind in memory and language to those who come after us, those who survive us and must carry on.

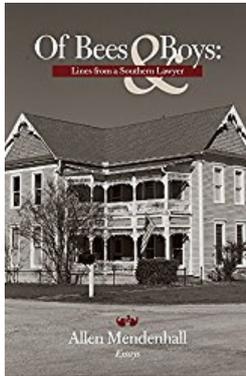
Memory and language are the twin buoys of survival, and everywhere in this book is the complex interplay between language and memory, language and work, language alongside the threats of a digitalized world, language amid the confines of a prison classroom. “We have been combing through the letters of our dead predecessors for some time,” writes Mendenhall in the essay “Is Hacking the Future of Scholarship?” The question at hand being not only matters of privacy in the digital age as our most personal actions are revealed by others through the myriad forms of E-discovery, but also the ability to control our own legacy framed in the words we write and consciously elect to make public. This concern for language and legacy, in contrast perhaps to the immediacy of language in the closed off world of a prison. In the essay “Teaching Behind Bars,” Mendenhall is admonished by an inmate about his choice of books for the class: “that play was a little too real for the guys in here – because we actually know what it is to wait for Godot.”

It is these visceral and complex connections to an existential and transient world that resonate most powerfully in this slim, elegant book. And yet one senses in the writing at times a struggle for something more permanent and enduring in the face of our mortality. Nowhere is this more directly expressed than in the final essay, “To Educate in the Permanent Things.” The permanent things being the canon of Great Works. It is as if simmering in the miasma of memory and survival, one can find in this body of work a navigational course towards greater meaning and a more informed public discourse. This may be true or it may not. Or it may be wishful thinking. Regardless, this book left me in a place with more knowledge and insight than when I started, and in this transient moment, I consider that achievement enough.

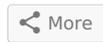
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