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WRITERS ON WRITING

Conversations With Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall

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BOOK REVIEW

A collection of question-and-answer sessions that offer in-depth insights into the writing craft.

Mendenhall (*The Southern Philosopher*, 2017), the editor of the *Southern Literary Review*, has long been drawn to interviews with creatives and artists—an interest that he’s fueled over the years by perusing the hallowed archives of the *Paris Review*. As an associate dean at the Jones School of Law at Faulkner University, it’s perhaps unsurprising that he’s also highly aware of the various ways in which “people respond differently to probing inquiry.” However, one never gets the sense that the 46 writers he interviews in this book are being put on the stand; on the contrary, Mendenhall’s lines of questioning are subtle, and he successfully fulfills his stated intention of letting “the writers do the talking.” This collection will familiarize readers with the approaches, techniques, and concerns of a diverse set of authors in a broad range of genres. Mendenhall’s interviewees include crime-fiction writer D.J. Donaldson, historical-romance novelist F. Diane Pickett, and (twice) poet and essayist Julia Nunnally Duncan, among many others. The Q-and-A’s touch on a spectrum of issues and offer rich and varied discussion as well as powerful sound bites. Memoirist Robert P. Waxler, for instance, offers compelling commentary on the importance of books in a world increasingly dominated by “screen culture”: “Screens invite us to watch, to surf the current that pulls us along. By contrast, books, especially literature...slow us down, offer an opportunity...to become self-reflective.” Historical novelist Steve Wiegenstein speaks of the exhilaration of writing: “It’s the closest I’ll ever get to walking the high wire.” And YA novelist Colleen D. Scott writes of her desire to expose the impact of social segregation: “I fear that lately we are showing the signs that we might forget how important it is to recognize our similarities and cherish our differences.” A foreword by author and Mississippi State University professor Robert West, which ponders the construction and meanings of the words “discover” and “interview,” is mildly interesting, if superfluous. Overall, though, this is a delightfully engaging collection that will educate and inspire other writers.

A fruitful discussion of authorship.

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