

# Southern Literary Review

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

## Allen Mendenhall Interviews John Shelton Reed

October 26, 2012 By [Allen Mendenhall](#)



**Thank you for taking the time to do this interview, John. I know that readers of the *Southern Literary Review* are excited to hear from you.**

**Dixie Bohemia began, your Introduction explains, with the substance of the Fleming Lectures you delivered at Louisiana State University in April 2011. Here we are just a year and a half later, and the book is already printed, bound, and on bookshelves. How did you manage that?**

When I was invited to give the lectures, I had a choice: I could write the lectures and then turn them into a book, or write the book and extract the lectures. I had enough time to do the latter, so the year and a half after the lectures was spent tidying up, getting permission to use illustrations, and, of course, copyediting, proof reading, and actual production.

**Of all of the famous “Creoles,” which is your favorite?**

So many of them were fascinating characters. . . . Probably Natalie Scott. She won the Croix de Guerre as a Red Cross nurse in World War I, then went back to New Orleans to be a first-rate reporter as well as a society columnist. She wrote a play and several cookbooks, rode her horse to Mexico, was active in the Junior League, made a lot of money investing in French Quarter real estate, knew everybody, and turned up everywhere. Later, she moved to Mexico and did a great many good works there, then re-upped with the Red Cross for World War II.

**I take it that few people, save for the specialists and Faulkner aficionados, know a great deal about this part of Faulkner’s history—that is, the New Orleans part, before he was really famous and while he was living with William Spratling. I, for one, was surprised by what I learned from reading your book. Do you think there is more work to be done on this portion of Faulkner’s life?**

I don’t think there’s really a lot of research left to do: Those specialists and aficionados have documented his life damn near day by day. I drew extensively on Joseph Blotner’s huge biography, for instance. Anything that’s not in that biography, or Joel Williamson’s Faulkner book, or Kenneth Holditch’s articles, or elsewhere in “the literature” probably can’t be retrieved at this point. About all that can be done is to rearrange it and make it more accessible to the idly curious – which is pretty much what I tried to do.

**As a fan of John William Corrington, I had been more aware of the bohemian social spaces in New Orleans much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—these were ably detailed by Jeff Weddle in a similarly titled book, *Bohemian New Orleans*—but I was pleased and intrigued by your account of the Prohibition Era. At one point in your book, you ask the question “Why New Orleans?” I’d like to put that question to you here, even though the answer is, plain as day, in the book. You may object if you like—“Objection! Asked an answered!”—but I can’t help but ask.**

It’s not an easy argument to summarize, but I listed a number of factors that made New Orleans the Southern city most hospitable to an emerging Bohemia. First of all, it had Tulane, which employed and produced artists, writers, architects, and anthropologists who were part of the scene. It had four intensely competitive newspapers that also provided income and employment, as well as publicizing the circle’s activities and attracting new members. The city’s Jewish community – large, by Southern standards – was deeply involved in the arts; it provided both resources and recruits. The same could certainly be said about the gay community. The French Quarter was picturesque, and cheap, and full of exotic Sicilians who supplied bootleg alcohol in quantity. Finally, the city’s Bohemians shared an interest in historic preservation with older “Uptown” folks and a taste for les bon temps with younger ones; there was a sort of symbiotic relation between Bohemia and “Society” that I find hard to imagine in any other Southern town.

**What strikes me about your writing, here as elsewhere, is your ability to slip sociological insights into what would seem like entertaining history. You define “social circles,” for instance, and you take great pains to relate unique cultural phenomena to a distinct geographical space, all the while showing how the culture and the place relate to, and**

**effect, one another. Is this a result of your training as a sociologist? Do you make a concerted effort to avoid the academic, esoteric jargon that, in my opinion, plagues the writing of many intellectuals?**

Thank you for noticing the sociology, but also for saying it's unobtrusive. As for its presence—I've been a practicing sociologist going on 50 years now, and I reckon I can't help it. I'd like to think it adds something to what would otherwise be just a bunch of good stories. (Not that there's a thing wrong with just telling good stories.) But I don't want to scare people off or bore them, so I don't pound the sociology into them. I hope they'll just absorb it. I do work at my writing because I want to reach readers other than the half-dozen sociologists who are interested in the same things I am. I also try hard to make it look easy. I recently learned the word "sprezzatura." That's what I want to achieve.

**Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions, John. You're always welcome here at the *Southern Literary Review*.**

