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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS STEPHEN ROTH, AUTHOR OF "A PLOT FOR PRIDEMORE"

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Stephen Roth



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AM: Pridemore, Missouri—the setting for your novel, *A Plot for Pridemore*. Why this place in particular?

SR: Missouri has been my home for the past 26 years, so it made sense to write about a part of the country that was very familiar to me. I also felt that basing Pridemore in Missouri would allow me to start the story with something of a clean slate. Readers have preconceptions and expectations when you write about events that happen in places like Florida, Texas or Alabama. Few people living outside of the Show-Me State have a strong opinion about Missouri. I felt that could work to my advantage in portraying Pridemore as kind of a struggling Anytown, USA.

AM: *A Plot for Pridemore* is your first novel. What did you find most challenging about writing the book?

SR: I think the biggest challenge for a first-time author is the lingering fear that what you are producing is not quality work. While working on *Pridemore*, I felt that I had a compelling topic, and I enjoyed writing it, but I didn't know if it was any good until people starting reading the manuscript. It was very important to me that I selected a handful of professional writers to read my first draft, in addition to the usual collection of family and friends. When my writing colleagues reported back (some with surprised looks on their faces) that they thought my book was pretty good, I was genuinely relieved. Their feedback gave me the resolve to continue improving the manuscript and to seek a publisher.

AM: I can think of characters from history and literature who seem similar to Mayor Tolliver. I'm assuming this figure didn't spring fully formed in your mind in a single moment of creative genius. How did he come about?

SR: I would have to say that Roe Tolliver is a composite of a few different people I have known over the years. I was a newspaper reporter for much of my 20s and 30s, and I was blessed to meet a wide range of scoundrels, blowhards, narcissists, and all-around colorful characters while covering city politics and business. I also came to know many fine, capable public servants and business leaders. However, I leaned on some of the more outlandish characters from my reporting days to create Mayor Tolliver. Of course, a lot of his quirks and motivations came from my imagination as well.

Incidentally, I believe that reporting is a wonderful education on how the world operates when you are a young adult. The pay and career track aren't so great, but reporting is an excellent way to learn how to write, and what to write about. You also meet an incredible array of people. Neil Young once said that he would rather travel in the ditch than in the middle of the road because he "saw more interesting people there." The same could be said of newspaper reporting.

[Morgan O'Grady](#)

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AM: Tell us about your decision to divide the book not only into chapters but into parts. Is there any subtle significance to that decision?

SR: Since the book covers a full year, I thought it would be helpful to the reader to break the text into the three seasons when most of the action takes place: Summer, Spring, and Summer again. I have no idea if this approach added any value to *Pridemore*. You are the first person to mention the parts of the book to me.

AM: Where did you grow up?

SR: My father was involved in textiles, so we split our time between Georgia and South Carolina when I was growing up. Most of my boyhood took place in LaGrange, Georgia, which I consider to be my hometown.

AM: I lived in West Virginia for several years and came to know several “Pridemores.” It’s sad and sometimes eerie but also, in a way, strangely beautiful to behold once-thriving cities and towns that are now decaying, their buildings and roads in disrepair, their downtowns now ghost towns. How does this make you feel? Is this something you’re passionate about? Were you making any kind of political statement in your novel by focusing on Pridemore?

SR: I did not set out to make a political statement. However, I know Pridemore’s problems are shared by many American towns as the country continues its shift from a rural to an urban society. It’s a very topical issue, and you don’t have to look very hard to find a feature story in *The New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* about some spunky town in the middle of nowhere that is trying to get its act together, even though there may no longer be an economic reason for it to exist. I think those stories about people pulling together to save their towns are beautiful and inspiring. Hopefully, none of those towns go to the drastic lengths that Pridemore does to revive their fortunes.

I have always loved the intimacy of the small town. The ability to get from one place to the next in just a couple of minutes, and to run into someone you know everywhere you go, are things you take for granted until you live in a city. If the evening news is any indication, those places on the map where you can leave your front door unlocked or let your kids walk alone to a friend’s house are rapidly disappearing. In Pridemore, Missouri, I tried to create a place with that small-town intimacy that readers could believe and visualize. I’ve been told by a handful of readers that Pridemore reminds them of the towns they knew growing up. I love hearing that.

AM: It’s unusual to ask an author about his publisher, but I want to do so only because Mercer University Press seems to be coming out with several books, like yours, that readers of

[Southern States \(1\)](#)

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contemporary Southern literature will appreciate and enjoy. What caused you to submit to Mercer?

SR: A few years ago, I started sending out query letters to agents and publishers, but I had not considered pitching *A Plot for Pridemore* to a university press. Then, in 2011, I attended the Chattahoochee Valley Writers Conference in Columbus, Georgia, where I met Marc Jolley, who is director of Mercer University Press. He encouraged me to enter my manuscript in Mercer's annual contest for the Ferrol Sams Fiction Award. I submitted *Pridemore* and, a few months later, received an email from Dr. Jolley asking me to call him. Lo and behold, my book won, and part of the award was a publishing contract. I feel very fortunate to have run into Dr. Jolley in Columbus.

Mercer University Press does produce an impressive number of books, both fiction and non-fiction, that any lover of Southern culture would enjoy. You can check out all of their titles at www.mupress.org.

AM: Just a couple more questions. First, *A Plot for Pridemore* features an interesting relationship between Pete and Angela. What motivated this part of the book?

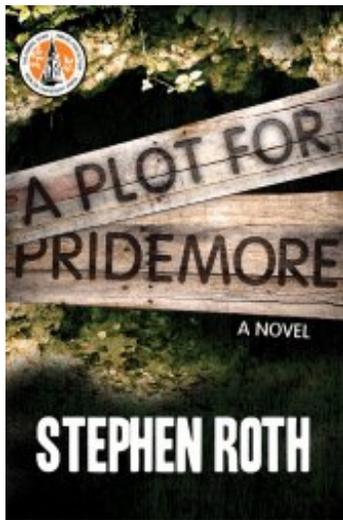
SR: One of my goals in the book was to give each of the main characters a dark side that would lend them more authenticity. There are no white knights arriving to save the day in *A Plot for Pridemore*. Pete Schaefer is the newspaper reporter for the *Pridemore Evening Headlight* whose job it is to unravel the mayor's devious plan to save the town. I could have drawn Pete as a bona fide good guy, but that just didn't seem right. His relationship with Angela reveals a different layer to Pete's personality that even he finds to be a little unsettling.

AM: You were born in LaGrange, Georgia, and now live in Kansas City. Do you feel that Southern authors are underappreciated at the national and even international level?

SR: Everyone has their own opinion of the South, much of it having to do with politics. I believe that many Americans have an appreciation for the rich cultural gifts the South has given us, from music to cuisine to literature. I don't think that Southern authors as a whole are underappreciated. I do think that some of the South's finest literary writers, from Ron Rash to Charles Portis to Terry Kay, have not received the public acclaim they deserve, but that's probably true of any genre of fiction.

AM: Thanks, Stephen. Here's to Pridemore getting the acclaim it deserves.

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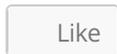


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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and educator. His book *Literature and Liberty* (Rowman & Littlefield / Lexington Books) was released in 2014. He blogs at The Literary Lawyer. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.



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