

The Roseanne of Literature

By Alexis Jetter
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Dorothy Allison WRITES EVERYTHING down: dialogue she overhears on buses, the stories of her dead aunts, fragments from old June Carter songs. She takes notes even while talking to friends on the telephone, typing bits of their conversation into her computer. "I have a terrible memory," she explains, a little defensively, when caught.

She arches one eyebrow and smiles wickedly, her bad eye squinting to see if I believe her. I don't. Her closet is lined with red, black and gray notebooks full of journal entries that became poems, then short stories and eventually, novels. "Watch out," she tells people, "or I'm liable to put you in a story."

Allison, author of the acclaimed semiautobiographical novel "Bastard Out of Carolina" and a new memoir, "Two or Three Things I Know for Sure," has been spinning tales out of overheard conversations and her own bitter experience for more than 20 years. Until recently, that work was published primarily by small lesbian presses and alternative magazines.

But today, Allison -- who calls herself a "cross-eyed, working-class lesbian addicted to violence, language and hope" -- has hit the big time: "Bastard," a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award, is being made into a Hollywood movie starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and directed by Anjelica Houston. Allison has appeared on CBS's "Sunday Morning" and the Charlie Rose show, and shared top billing with Hillary Clinton and Colin Powell at this year's American Booksellers Association convention.

Even the post-punk group Sonic Youth has taken note: its song "Bone" pays homage to Bastard's heroine, Bone Boatwright, a young girl who is sexually abused by her stepfather.

Other lesbian authors have received national attention -- Audre Lorde, the late black poet; Jeanette Winterson, the British writer, and Lisa Alther, the comic Southern novelist, among others. But Allison appeals to an unusually broad spectrum -- from readers of Southern fiction to incest survivors and lesbian sex radicals.

Allison takes great pride in her "white trash" roots; for her the ultimate tribute is that her books are on sale at Costco, the giant of warehouse clubs. "I think it's wonderful that people in pickup trucks are buying two flats of dog food and a copy of 'Bastard,'" she exults in her Carolina accent. "I want my view of the world to be right up there next to gallon boxes of Tide." Allison has made a career out of offending literary sensibilities. Even her titles assault: "The Women Who Hate Me," "Trash" and "Bastard Out of Carolina." Yet she writes with unparalleled tenderness toward those she says we are trained to despise. "She has an all-encompassing knowledge of what it's like to be the other, the outsider," says Studs Terkel. Critics have compared Allison to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Harper Lee, calling her the first writer of her generation to capture the lives and language of poor whites in the deep South. "It's as if the people in Dorothea Lange photographs, in the work of Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans, were able to speak," says the author and critic George Garrett.

But Allison is more comfortable being compared to Roseanne. "We are both willing to be fools in public, to be despised," she says, hemming a pair of pants at the kitchen table of the small house in Guerneville, Calif., that she shares with her female partner, Alix Layman, a trombone player, and their 3-year-old son, Wolf. "Being an out-front, almost obnoxious working-class person gives you cachet. You've got that Roseanne pose: Don't mess with me, honey. I'm liable to pour gravy on you."

And then there's revenge, "the thing that no one ever talks about," she says, with mock conspiracy and very real class rage. "Give us a little, and we're just like sharks. We want more. And we want you to bleed while we're eating it." She lays down her needle, reaches for a glass of Diet Coke and roars with laughter.

At 46, Allison is a plump woman with long, gleaming red hair, a velvety voice and an aura of raw pain that lingers even when she laughs. Part country preacher, part Janis Joplin, she defies easy categorization -- and she likes it that way. She has a closet full of rhinestone-studded black leather jackets and a desktop full of baby pictures. Legally blind in one eye, she can't even step off a sidewalk with much confidence. Yet she's a mean shot with a rifle, and her language is always dead-on: spare, beautiful and brutal. "For someone who has no eyesight," says Jewelle Gomez, a black lesbian novelist and poet, "Dorothy sees everything." She's warm, funny, astonishingly candid -- and at the same time wary, as if remembering at all times where her guns are locked. "Scare me," she tells students in her writing courses. "Tell me the forbidden story." But even she can't always tell where the truth ends and the story begins.

Where I was born -- Greenville, South Carolina -- smelled like nowhere else I've ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby [expletive] and beer bottles, cheap makeup and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I've ever been. Beautiful and terrible. -- From "Two or Three Things I Know for Sure."

DOROTHY ALLISON WAS BORN a bastard in 1949 to a poor 15-year-old who had left the seventh grade the year before to work as a waitress. Dorothy was raised on dazzling stories and casual violence, in a culture where women were old at 25 and men never grew up at all. Girls, says Allison, "weren't even given the respect of despair."

"What's a South Carolina virgin?" the children joke in "River of Names," one of her short stories. "At's a 10-year-old can run fast." But that rough upbringing was not without its gifts. Ruth Gibson Allison instilled in her daughter a defiant pride; her aunts passed along their leathery, randy humor and animated

language, and her grandmother contributed an ornery insistence on telling the family stories any old way she liked. "I made a career out of hiding out under the porch, so I could listen to them," Allison says. "My aunts were healthy about sex, and they were despised for it. And so a lot of their sense of humor was about throwing off that despicability. But I didn't know that at the time. I thought they were just sure of themselves, outrageous, confident and horny. Which I admired, intensely."

The Gibson clan was affectionate, playful and plagued by sudden, senseless death. One adored uncle murdered his wife and the man she was supposedly seeing. A young cousin accidentally hanged himself playing in the barn. Others drove their trucks into trees, drank themselves to death and died in illegal abortions. The rest, Allison says, succumbed to the occupational hazards of the poor, "cancer, heart disease, emphysema, stroke, diabetes -- diseases that come from working in mills, bad food, stress, exposure to chemicals. My great-grandmother lived to 110. In the next generation, nobody reached 60." The loss of so many family members punched a hole in Allison's life that "Two or Three Things" seeks to fill. It is the "Spoon River Anthology" of trailer trash, a homage to people she fears would otherwise have died nameless and forgotten: the aunts, grandmother and mother whom she loved, but about whom she prayed every night: "Lord, save me from them. Do not let me become them."

A pained ambivalence runs throughout her writing. In "Two or Three Things," she asks: "The women of my family? We are the ones in all those photos taken at mining disasters, floods, fires. We are the ones in the background with our mouths open, in print dresses or drawstring pants and collarless smocks, ugly and old and exhausted. . . . Wide hands marked workhorses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species."

Moments after I arrive at Allison's redwood-shaded house near the Russian River, north of San Francisco, she takes me into a small room and lifts a cardboard box off a shelf. Inside are aging, slightly out-of-focus snapshots of men in blue jeans and women in polyester pants, sitting on porches, smiling sadly and looking away from the camera. "The bottom line," she says, "is I'm writing to save the dead. I'm writing to save the people I have lost, some of whose bodies are still walking around."

But she's also writing to save herself. For Allison's stepfather, who raped her from the time she was 5, left her with an enduring sense of shame. "Most of my life I have despised myself, the child who didn't tell her mother she was being raped," Allison says quietly. "The only defense I ever found was sending my little sisters in to him, because I knew he wasn't as bad with them as he was with me. So I grew up convinced that I was an evil creature. Because I put people in harm's way to escape harm just a little bit."

When Allison was 8, her stepfather beat her so badly that her mother took her three daughters to a motel for two weeks. But Ruth Allison, who worked for 40 years as a waitress -- "teasing quarters out of truckers and dimes out of hairdressers" -- couldn't support her girls on her own. When she ran out of money, they all went back home.

Only when she was 11 could Dorothy tell a cousin that her stepfather was raping her. The cousin told Dorothy's mother, who packed up her daughters again. But the stepfather swore he'd stop, and they returned. "We sat in her Pontiac, in the driveway, and she explained to me why we were going back," Allison recalls. "She promised me that it would never happen again. She kept her promise. He beat me for five years after that, but that particular kind of sex stopped."

Writing became an act of resistance; only in that way could she control how the story ended. But until the age of 24, Dorothy built a ritual fire each year, and burned every page. "One or two things I know for sure," she writes in her memoir, "and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make."

Allison spent her childhood telling stories to her younger sisters and to herself. "I believe that storytelling can be a strategy to help you make sense out of your life," she says. "It's what I've done. 'Bastard out of Carolina' used a lot of the stories that my grandmother told me and some real things that happened in my life. But I took it over and did what my grandmother did: I made it a different thing. I made a heroic story about a young girl who faces down a monster."

And yet Allison refuses the temptation to write morality plays. "She puts the uncompromising horror of physical and sexual abuse out there for everyone to see," says a fellow South Carolinian author, Blanche McCrary Boyd. "But she writes about these people as if they're not monsters -- even the stepfather."

Allison says she has made peace with him. "I decided to let the son of a bitch live," she says. It has been far harder to reconcile her tangled feelings toward her mother, who died of cancer at the age of 56, just months before "Bastard" was completed. "My stepfather broke her, broke her in a way that she couldn't imagine life without him," Allison says softly. "Still, she gave us a sense of ourselves, helped us to stave off an enormous amount of hatred. My mother brought us out of there almost sane. That's a triumph."

Allison says she can write about her early life only because she was able to escape it. In the late 1960's, with glasses donated by the Lions Club, a dress donated by the Jaycees and pocket money from an after-school job provided by the War on Poverty, she went off to Florida Presbyterian College on a National Merit scholarship. "Thank God it was the 60's and everybody was pretending to be poor anyway," Allison says. "But I had to start dating upper-class girls to learn about shoes."

She walked away from her own family and embraced a new one, formed around a feminist collective and a succession of female lovers. Exposed for the first time to the writings of the early women's movement, she became a fervent convert. "Feminism saved my life," she says. "It was a substitute religion that made sense." But she was hiding pieces of herself. After dark, she writes, she'd "sneak out of the collective to date butch women my house mates thought retrograde and sexist."

For close to a decade, Allison stayed away from her family and her past. She moved to Brooklyn, took graduate classes in anthropology at the New School for Social Research, "pretended I didn't have an accent and that I didn't watch TV," she says.

"You can't write poetry in that academic, dead language," she says. "The Women Who Hate Me" wouldn't have happened if I hadn't started talking to my mother and my sisters again."

In 1981, Allison went home. She visited her mother in Orlando, and later her Aunt Dot in Greenville. "You have to go back," she says. "Otherwise you're cut off at the root." Slowly, fitfully, she started to write the poems that would become "The Women Who Hate Me" and the seeds for her later writing.

Next came "Trash," a collection of angry short stories about demon lovers, biting monkeys, pork fat and albino outcasts on the gospel circuit. It dealt forthrightly with the scars of incest and the joys of raunchy sex between women. "Trash" won the Lambda Literary Award for best lesbian fiction, but it didn't exactly endear her to the folks back home. Trash "would be an apt description of the book itself," sniffed the reviewer for The Anderson Independent-Mail in South Carolina.

Some feminists didn't care for it either. Her work was labeled pornographic, and she was heckled at readings by anti-porn activists. But Allison refused to be silenced. "The huge issue for any incest survivor is learning to enjoy sex. It is why I do the sexually explicit writing that I do."

By April 1992, when Allison finally published "Bastard," which she had worked on for 10 years, she had \$200 left to her name. She and Alix were living on grits. "If Alix hadn't sold her motorcycle, we would have starved."

But with a speed that seems to daze her still, Allison's luck began to change. Critics, with near uniformity, hailed the book. And when, at year's end, it was selected as a National Book Award finalist, the literary world suddenly embraced her.

Most authors would have uncorked the Champagne. "I started throwing up," Allison says. "I saw myself as a living affront to a kind of literature that I despise. How could the people who were the pantheon of that literature think I did something right? I thought I must have screwed up bad."

But recognition didn't help her finances. (The \$25,000 for the movie rights to "Bastard," as well as a \$100,000-plus advance for her next novel, "Cavedweller," was swallowed up by debts and a down payment on a house.) Last year, the state of California closed Allison's bank account for failure to pay quarterly taxes. "All of a sudden, we had \$86," says Allison, grimacing. So last spring, she joined the lecture circuit. She hasn't stopped since.

AT A DIFFERENT LIGHT BOOKstore in San Francisco, the line winds down Castro Street, around the corner and down another block. Hundreds are waiting, although only a fraction will get inside. It's a mixed crowd, mostly young women, some young men and a smattering of bookish types and older women. Allison, wearing a red silk shirt and reading glasses, flirts with the crowd, then starts to read. Her voice swells and contracts like a bellows; the accent grows salaciously thick. She makes up half the words as she goes, for "Two or Three Things" began as a partly scripted performance piece and is best delivered that way.

After she stops, there's a pause and then a rush to the front. Two tall young women approach. "You look like a couple of working-class girls who ran away from home," Allison tells them. One smiles shyly: "Yeah, at 16."

A gray-haired woman with dark eyes speaks up. "I called you on the phone, and you really helped me," she confides.

"Remember me?" asks a stringy-haired British woman. "I fainted on you last time."

A young woman holds out her book to be signed, bites her lip and stammers: "It really means a lot to see people who survived."

Allison "is the Lourdes of writers," says Carole DeSanti, editorial director at Dutton and Allison's editor there. "People come to her to be healed." Allison is too much of a Southern Baptist to mind that. But she insists on playing against type. Asked to talk about Southern literature, she talks instead about being a lesbian. She has a habit, too, of walking into bookstores and reshelving her books under different categories, from literature to lesbian and vice versa. "Whatever they want you to do is the thing that you must not do," she says. "Because they're just trying to catch you like a goddamn butterfly. And if you let them do that, you're pinned down."

Despite that philosophy, some accuse Allison of pigeonholing herself.

Randall Kenan, a gay black novelist from North Carolina, worries that "she skates uncomfortably near the thin ice of stereotype, a feat at once worrisome and brave." Writing in the Nation, Kenan concluded that Allison's characters lack "the quiriness and subtleness . . . one truly encounters among farmers, mechanics, factory workers and waitresses who populate the Carolinas."

Allison hopes her next few books, which are departures in style and plot, put such criticism to rest. She is working on a collection of short stories, a novel about a woman who arranges her own murder, a fictionalized portrait of Janis Joplin and a pulp thriller about a serial killer obsessed with justice. "Cavedweller," due out next year, is narrated by Cissy, who goes spelunking in junior college and emerges transformed, determined to confront her family about her father's violence and her mother's abandonment. Allison writes the books simultaneously, switching from one notebook to another, speaking her characters' words out loud as she paces her small office.

Allison still wakes up in the middle of the night, plagued by survivor guilt. "The thing about working-class escapees is that they leave others behind," she says. "Neither of my sisters graduated from high school. The people who have money to give choose a worthy. And the condition is: you have to agree that your sisters aren't worthy. Well, honey, at 12 I was ready to flush them down the toilet for a chance to get out, and I pretty much did."

"I don't want a world like that. I don't believe in it. That's why I am the meanest writer I know how to be. Because, to change people, you have to crack them, and at the core of that is breaking their hearts."

Dorothy Allison is not a woman easily lulled by happiness. But these days, a certain contentedness has seeped in. Her relationship of eight years with Alix, a

handsome woman with a sly sense of humor and a strong sense of family, is a powerful root. And she's wild about Wolf, Alix's biological son, who has hazel eyes and black cowboy boots and insists on gnawing bones while watching TV. "I'm going to be for my son what my aunts were for me: a model of outrageousness," Allison says, rigging up a rope swing for Wolf in the backyard, then smiling as he pumps his legs skyward. "And I'm going to show him that you can enjoy your life while making other people uncomfortable. Just by virtue of who he is, the turkey-baster-bastard son of a writer and a trombone player, he's going to make a lot of people uncomfortable. And I'm going to raise him to take pride in it."

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