

TRUTH TELLER

Dorothy Allison on being a Southern lesbian writer and the price of mainstream success

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Bastard out of Carolina drastically altered the path of Dorothy Allison's life. Heralded by *The New York Times Book Review* and other influential publications immediately upon its 1992 release, the semi-autobiographical novel—Allison's first—became an instant bestseller. But that's just the beginning. The book was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award; may become a film starring Winona Ryder; is being adapted for

the stage by Cherríe Moraga; and bought the author the house she currently shares with her partner, Alix Layman, and their 3-year-old son, Wolf Michael. The acclaim *Bastard* continues to garner has transformed Allison—the beloved Southern lesbian/feminist author of *The Women Who Hate Me* (a book of poetry), *Trash* (a Lambda Literary Award-winning collection of short stories) and *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (a Lambda Literary Award-winning compilation of essays, speeches and performance pieces)—into a beloved mainstream author whose forthcoming works are eagerly awaited by a readership of astounding diversity.

Books

Allison's latest offering is *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, a short memoir which began as a performance piece written in the months following *Bastard's* completion. "I decided, 'What if I only told true stories?'" says Allison of the book, which weaves childhood tales with old family photos.

The author recently spoke to me by telephone from her Northern California home outside of Guerneville. Despite the discomfort of a recently sprained Achilles' tendon—and the approaching deadline for her nearly completed second novel, *Cavedweller*—Allison was genuine, generous and more than willing to share a few laughs.

Tell me about *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

It was a way of clearing up my own confusion about finishing [*Bastard*]. If you've read the novel, I used people in my family, most of whom were dead. When I finished the book, I was very, very depressed, which is usual. You finish a book, you miss the people you've made up. But also, I was having some trouble clearing up in my own mind confusion between which were true stories and which were fiction. And this is a big problem within my family. [Laughter.] Nobody's ever been really clear about what's real. So I started with a poem that I made up: "I'll tell you the truth/I'll tell you a lie/ You will not know which is one, which is the other/You will not know, and it will not matter." That was the idea, but then I decided, "What if I only told true stories?" And that's pretty much what the book is, except for a couple of places where I needed to protect people.... The book is closure for me because I've pretty much made a decision to stop writing about my family for a decade. [Laughter.] I'm deep in this new novel that I'm finishing, and I need to do something different.... It's also my little lesbian book. It's very lesbian, and I had a lot of fun with that.... People don't really know how queers grow up in this society. They don't have an everyday feel for us. I wanted to publish a book in which being a lesbian is everyday, it's part of the family matrix, it's not something outside.

The family photographs peppered throughout add so much. Tell me about their selection.

Well, the story in the book is what happened: I got the photos. When my sisters and I divided up my mother's things, that's what I wanted. That's

the richness of her life that I can manage to acquire.... I wanted people to see what a working class Southern family really looks like. [Laughter.] Years ago I worked with Barbara Smith and people at [the lesbian literary journal] *Conditions*, and we used to talk about how nobody knows what our families really look like.... So I wanted those women in print dresses and those men in cloth caps and my sisters and I.... I also think they're extraordinary pictures; I think they're extraordinary people. But it's hard for me to be sure, because I can't look at them without remembering who they were and how they died.

Why must we tell our stories?

Because I don't believe this culture knows our true stories. It's like the photos. They have cultural images that have been handed to them from



Dorothy Allison

movies and television and jokes. We're the great secret of this society. The simple fact is that our lives are just as real as straight people's lives, but are not seen as such. We're either exotics or we're unimaginable. I think that the great secret of this culture is how pervasive lesbian and gay people are. One of the things I do as a teacher is get people to tell their stories, in either a seductive or horri-

fying or beautiful way, so they'll stay with the reader.

How has your life changed since the enormous success of *Bastard*?

I got a house. [Laughter.] We call it the house that *Bastard* built. It's pretty nice. I can make a living. It's pretty extraordinary. I've been poor all my life. I know how to be poor. But I've had a little difficulty figuring out how to be this person who can actually make a living. It's occasionally startling.

Is mainstream success all you hoped it would be?

I never *thought* about it; I *had* no hopes about it. I have found it somewhat difficult. It gets in the way of getting your work done. Queers love books. We understand writers to a certain extent—we have a niche in our culture for writers. We pretty much let writers do their stuff. I don't think that straight people really get it. They think you're a public thing. They don't understand that writing is actually this enormous, private, has-nothing-to-do-with-the-public-performance thing. But queers get it. So you can be a writer in the queer community and do your stuff for two decades and be perfectly fine. But man, when the straight people get you, they want you to do all kinds of odd things that have nothing to do with the work. So I have found that a little difficult.... It *really* interrupts being able to write.

Your dedication states that *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* is "For my sisters." Has there been a rapprochement since you became a mother?


Yes. My sisters finally understand something I did. And I finally did something that they knew more about than I did. So they've been extremely happy with me as a new mother without sleep or sex or normal life. They understand all that.

Tell me about your family life with Alix and Wolf Michael.

It's a good thing. Occasionally, Alix and I are like, "We don't really believe in this," you know? Neither of us believes in monogamy, neither of us believes in the so-called traditional family life. But here we are. We're living out in the country; we've got two dogs, two cats, a goldfish and a three-year-old; and it kinda looks like *Dyke Knows Best*. It's very funny. [Laughter.]

You truly are "out" in the country.

Continued on page 31

Sixth Annual Organic Harvest Fair
 Saturday, September 16, 1995 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

 2375 NW Thurman St.
 Portland, OR 97202-2572
 (503) 222-5658 Event sponsored in part by: **WillametteWeek**

- Organic Farmers Market
- Organic Food Tastings
- Free Drawing for organic T's, caps, and totes
- Live Reggae Music

GREG'S
 Gargoyles • Cards • Soaps • Icons
 3707 SE Hawthorne
 Portland, Oregon 97214
 503-235-1257

MT. TABOR FLORIST
 Announcing the opening of a second location

4848 SE Division St. 7819 SE Stark St.
 Portland, OR 97206 Portland, OR 97215
253-6876 256-2920




PETS ON BROADWAY OPEN 7 DAYS
 FULL LINE - FULL SERVICE
 Nutrition, Education, Maintenance, Care, Huge Selection Premium Pet Foods, Exotic Bird Experts / LARGE, LARGE Inventory of Hand-Fed Baby Birds Boarding for Birds, Rodents & Rabbits / Dog Obedience Training Aquariums - Fish - Pet & Fish Supplies Pelleted Bird Foods

EASTSIDE PETS ON BROADWAY
 282-5824
 2762 NE Broadway (Hollywood District)

WESTSIDE FUN PET
 246-0424
 4444 SW Multnomah Blvd. (Garden Home/Multnomah Village)



Fun Pet location only
\$4 off
 any 20lb. or larger size of IAMS Pet Food.