

BOOKS

She who

The passion and the compassion of Dorothy Allison

BY RODGER LARSON

The first things that strike me about Dorothy Allison are her intense honesty and her intense warmth. Her conversation is no-nonsense—full of ironic humor, cuss words and a definite caring of others. No bullshit here.

Her opening remarks as she sets her cafeteria tray on the table are about how a fan just came up behind her, grabbed her arm and told her how her book changed her life, causing Allison to spill her soda. She is not amused.

"No harm done," I venture.

"It's embarrassing as hell," Allison responds, "spilling shit all over the floor."

I take a risk to change the mood. "Other than that, how is your day going?"

Allison tilts her head a bit and looks at me out of the corner of her eye. She laughs loud and long and sits beside me.

"It's fine. It's just great." She picks the her chicken sandwich. "So what do you want to know?"

Allison, renowned lesbian teacher, activist, essayist and author of National Book Award nominee *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is in Portland at Reed College as part of the second annual Tin House Summer Writers Workshop. Writers of all ages are moving about the terrace in front of the dining hall. Small groups sit around metal tables and occasionally erupt with laughter and excitement. A literary agent sits alone quietly reading a manuscript.

I want to know about Allison's life these days.

"My son," she says, "Wolf Michael. He is 11. And my partner, Alix. We have three dogs, three cats." She goes on about fish and a couple of other odd creatures. The picture emerges of a most pleasant menagerie gathered together on acreage near Guerneville in northern California.

"I'm writing again," she continues, taking another bite of her sandwich. "I wasn't for a while, you know. Just couldn't. Couldn't do it. It was a death of the soul. It was a fall into despair." Her words here are soft and gentle. She looks at me for a while...to check my level of understanding? "I thought maybe of being a waitress for a few years. But that passed. I'm writing again."

I ask her what happened.

"I lost faith," she says. It is an answer simple and straightforward—and complex and deep. "Now I get it back one day at a time. If I'm not writing, I'm not sane." She looks at me. "I had a couple years of that, of not sane."

She is telling me she has gone to the edge of the cliff, she has been to the brink, and she has looked over the edge. This sounds dramatic, but I believe what she is telling me.

But Allison is writing again. She says she's finishing a novel with the working title *She Who*, "but it is definitely a working title."

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



"Teaching in workshops is like eating caviar," says celebrated lesbian novelist Dorothy Allison, in town for the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop

"She what?" I say, attempting humor.

"I like that," Allison exclaims. "That could work."

Allison is heading a workshop at the conference on "Making a Life as an Artist."

"I have a great time teaching," she shares. "This is the day job, and I love it. It is enormously satisfying...."

These people are serious students. They are fully focused and dedicated."

Allison does a number of workshops in and out of the country. She has just returned from teaching at the Aegean Writing Circle on the Greek island of Andros, one of the Cyclades.

"Most college students don't know what they want to say yet. But in this workshop people are driven. They have something they need to say. They are passionate, and they take time

to glory with the word. Teaching in workshops is like eating caviar."

Allison did a benefit reading July 14 for Bradley-Angle House during her Portland stay. "When I go somewhere, I see where I can fit

"I'm writing again. I wasn't for a while. Just couldn't. It was a death of the soul. It was a fall into despair."

in, where I can help. I'm an old dyke," she smiles. "I have to be of use all the time. I got to be doing the dishes or starting the revolution."

"Sounds better to be starting the revolution," I say.

"The dishes have to be done, too," she responds.

For obvious reasons, same-sex marriage is on my mind.

"I don't need it," she says bluntly. "If other people do, they

should have the right. We need to separate, or detach, the religious institutions from the civil. I pierced my girlfriend's left tit, and I tattooed her thigh. That's married enough. But we do legal things to protect ourselves and for our son."

Allison has seen the second and third wave feminist movements from both their beginnings, and I wonder how she feels about feminism today. This makes me think of *The Swan*.

"I saw it once," Allison says. "There are these not bad-looking women, but they hate

themselves and they focus that on their looks. Maybe they turn out with slightly bigger tits or something by the end of the program, but they're not much different. They all look the same. I'd like to see them get some drag queen on there. Some drag queen with a beard, do a little gender fuck with those folks." She laughs.

I then wonder aloud what she thinks of another famous author who wrote about class and the working poor, John Steinbeck. As it turns out, the writer advocacy organization Poets, Essayists and Novelists has Allison working on a piece about him for a new publication. "He venerates the poor," she says. "He has an immediate awe of the working-class poor."

Allison is famous for her writing around class issues and abuse of women and children, something she suffered as a child living in poverty in South Carolina.

I was told in a writing workshop once that a writer must have something to say and that what they have to say must have meaning, some gravity. In her work Allison has that covered big time.

A few years ago, I heard Allison speak at Lewis & Clark College's Gender Studies Symposium. She was so angry, I was nervous about our interview. I want to know: Is she still that angry?

She looks me in the eye. "George Bush is president of this country. Shit, yes, I'm angry." Her eyes flash and she pushes a loose strand of hair away from her face. Then she smiles at me, friendly and sweet.

It's clear Dorothy Allison has a huge passion, which is present and yet never overshadows her even deeper compassion. The two qualities are with her in the way she thinks and talks. They are with her in the way she is in the world. ■

RODGER LARSON is a Portland free-lance writer and novelist.

- Best selection, 5 world-class brands with over 20 models!
- On-site parts and service
- **NOW Offering Financing!**
- Up to 100 MPG



COLUMBIA
SCOOTERS

1417 SE 9th Ave. Portland, OR 97214
503.872.8565 columbiascooters.com

OUT DANCING

Learn to Dance

503-238-5129
out_dancing@yahoo.com



We love you just the way you are.
Find your place with us!



first timers welcome!
all credit/loan types
free consultation
\$0 down loans

www.RoseCityMtg.com 503.768.4248

Rose City
Mortgage Specialists