Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Contents

Dorothy Allison
1949-

(Full name Dorothy E. Allison) American novelist, essayist, poet, memoirist, and short story writer.

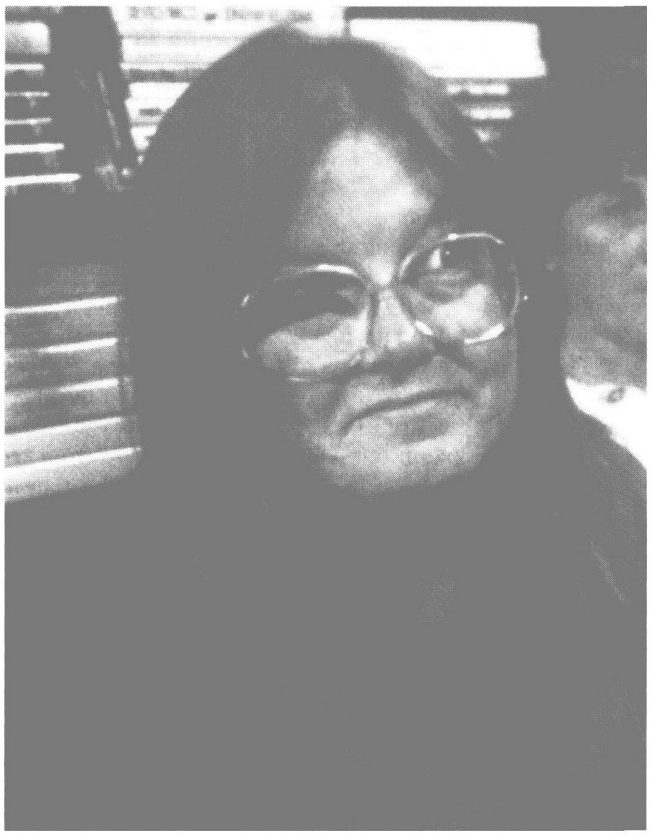
The following entry presents an overview of Allison's career through 2000. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC,* Volume 78.

INTRODUCTION

Allison is a highly regarded feminist writer who has garnered a large amount of mainstream recognition. An incest survivor and self-labeled "lesbian-feminist,"Allison heavily incorporates events from her life into her work. Best known for her partially autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Allison's work has earned widespread praise for its realism, objectiveness, vivid and multi-faceted characterizations, and laconic prose.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Allison was born on April 11, 1949, in Greenville, South Carolina, to Ruth Gibson Allison, a fifteen-year-old unwed waitress. Allison's father disappeared before she was born. Four years later, her mother remarried and when Allison was six, her stepfather began to physically and sexually abuse her. The abuse lasted for several years before Allison was able to tell a relative about her situation. The relative informed Allison's mother, who stopped the abuse, but chose not to separate the family from the stepfather. Allison was the first person in her family to receive a high school diploma, and in 1968, she earned a National Merit Scholarship. She left home to attend Florida Presbyterian College (now Eckerd College) in St. Petersburg, Florida, where she received her B.A. in 1971. She became active in the feminist movement and edited and wrote for publications that championed gay rights and women's rights. Allison moved into a lesbian collective in Washington, D.C., but found her views conflicted with those of other lesbians, so in 1974, she moved to New York. While there, she received her M.A. in anthropology from the New School for Social Research. Allison's first two publications, *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983), a book of poetry, and *Trash* (1988), a short-story collection, were highly praised—*Trash* earned two Lambda Literary Awards—but did not receive widespread attention. In 1992, Allison published her first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina,* and achieved, almost overnight, a large degree of critical success. *Bastard Out of Carolina* was a National Book Award finalist and was adapted into a television movie in 1996.



Allison divides her time between writing and teaching, and has taught at many universities, including Florida State University, Wesleyan, Rutgers, and the San Francisco Art Institute. She resides near San Francisco with her partner, Alix Layman, and their son, Wolf Michael.

MAJOR WORKS

In *The Women Who Hate Me* and *Trash,* Allison recounted the shame and fear she experienced while growing up as a sexually abused child. The narrative voices in these two works describe attempts to escape painful childhood memories. The incest, abuse, and poverty that Allison suffered as a youngster figure heavily in her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* as well, a fictionalized portrayal of a young girl's life in a poor Southern family. The protagonist, Bone, lives happily, surrounded by a family of strong women, until her mother decides to marry. After the marriage, Daddy Glen, Bone's new stepfather, begins to sexually molest her. Bone endures years of abuse before her mother becomes aware of the molestations, but, moved by

Daddy Glen's pleas for forgiveness, Bone's mother chooses to stay with Daddy Glen rather than leave him for Bone's well-being. The book concludes with thirteen-year-old Bone abandoned by her mother, trying to reconcile her past and attempting to start a new life. In 1993, Allison's writing style changed with *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, & Literature* (1993). *Skin* is a collection of essays that details her sexual tastes and fetishes and condemn the "acceptable" practice of ridiculing working-class Southerners. The work also explains unapologetically to the heterosexual mainstream and the lesbian communities Allison's feelings and reasons for the content of her works. Allison returned to her blend of autobiography and storytelling in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). Written originally as a performance piece, this work is an embellished memoir in which Allison recounts not only the pain of growing up poor, abused, and with low self-esteem, but also the bonding she experienced with various friends and members of her family. Her writing became even more forgiving and hopeful in her second novel, *Cavedweller* (1998). In this novel, protagonist Delia abandons her two daughters while running away from her abusive husband. After being absent from their lives for several years, and despite her realization that she will face ridicule from the community and derision from her daughters, Delia returns to her hometown to claim the two girls. This decision stands in stark contrast to Bone's mother's actions in *Bastard Out of Carolina.* Delia chooses her daughters' welfare over her own, and while her return is a painful and traumatic experience for all three characters, Delia is determined to make the new relationship work.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical response to Allison's *The Women Who Hate Me, Trash,* and *Skin* was highly favorable in feminist and lesbian literary circles. Mainstream critics, although mostly positive, often appeared to be shocked and flustered with the vivid description of Allison's sexual preferences in these works. Both mainstream and feminist reviewers have lauded *Bastard Out of Carolina* for its realistic characterizations and sensitive depiction of incest and family violence. K. K. Roeder writes ". . . *Bastard*'s success is its emotional precision and irrepressible lyricism, forcefully combined. Allison relates the difficulty of Bone's struggles with intensity, humor, and hard-wrought rejection of self-pity, rendering *Bastard* a rare achievement among works of fiction dealing with abused children." While some reviewers felt that *Cavedweller* became repetitive and clichéd at certain points, many viewed the work as an accurate portrait of poor, rural, Southern life and a touching account of a family in difficult circumstances. Elizabeth A. Brown writes, "Allison's characters from the poor white South are fully drawn, fully human, because the author grew up with them. There are no saints or stereotypes in her writing. Her dialogue is real—terse and Southern." Overall, reviewers have found that Allison's merging of fiction with autobiography adds depth to her powerful tales of self-examination, survival, and the inherent strength of women.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Women Who Hate Me (poetry) 1983; revised as *The Women Who Hate Me: Poetry, 1980–1990,* 1991
Trash: Stories by Dorothy Allison (short stories) 1988
Bastard Out of Carolina (novel) 1992
Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, & Literature (essays) 1994
Two or Three Things I Know for Sure (memoirs) 1995
Cavedweller (novel) 1998

CRITICISM

Gale Harris (review date Spring 1993)

SOURCE: "Ashamed and Glorified," in *Belles Lettres,* Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring, 1993, pp. 4–6.

[*In the following review, Harris offers a positive assessment of* Bastard Out of Carolina, *noting the novel's vivid descriptions and skillful use of vernacular.*]

Bastard Out of Carolina is a novel wrung from the heart. Here in Greenville County, South Carolina, members of the extended Boatwright family often subsist on flour-and-water biscuits and move from one ramshackle house to another. Men drown their disappointments in the fleeting sweetness of life in drink and brawls, and women hide their disappointment in their menfolk behind a bitter indulgence of male destructive behavior. People often seem to suffer as much from too much pride and too many second chances as they do from too little pride and too few opportunities to prove themselves. Children are exposed to unspeakable brutality and overwhelming tenderness. For those with roots in this world, ***Bastard Out of Carolina*** may add compassion to harsh memories. For those unfamiliar with what it is like to live in such an environment, ***Bastard Out of Carolina*** is a guided tour across the tracks. Now available in paperback, the novel deserves every glowing review, every literary honor, and every enthusiastically twisted arm that it has inspired.

The Boatwrights are constantly fighting the label "poor white trash," the stamp of "no-good, lazy, shiftless." Their weapons include the loving kinship of family, stubborn pride, and anger. But the family's way of adapting to scorn and poverty has created an environment that injures as much as it supports.

> *Family is family, but love can't keep people from eating at each other. Mama's pride, Granny's resentment that there should be anything to be considered shameful, my aunts' fears and bitter humor, my uncles' hard-mouthed contempt for anything that could not be handled with a shotgun or a two-by-four—all combined to grow my mama up fast and painfully.*

Fierce pride drives Anney Boatwright, Ruth Anne's mother, to fight for the removal of the oversized, red letters ILLEGITIMATE from her daughter's birth certificate. Anney's loneliness and hunger for love compel her to marry Glen, whom she needs "like a starving woman needs meat between her teeth." But when Anney is faced with conflicting demands on her love, she is unable to shield her daughter from her husband's violent rages.

Determined to protect her mother from recrimination, Ruth Anne (known as Bone by her family) begins a lonely odyssey to discover not only what makes her a Boatwright, and thus capable of survival, but also what makes her special and worthy of love. She becomes passionately absorbed in gospel music because it "makes you hate and love yourself at the same time, makes you ashamed and glorified." She considers a religious conversion because she wants the way she feels "to mean something and for everything in my life to change because of it."

But another force building in Bone is an anger that is directed against not only her stepfather, Daddy Glen, but against people who think they are better than the Boatwrights. One manifestation of this anger is an uneasy friendship with another social outcast, the albino Shannon Pearl, who "simply and completely hated everyone who had ever hurt her."

Although Bone's "funny dose of pride" will not allow her to take anything belonging to more privistantly etch a character or situation. Bone's notorious Uncle Earle "looks like trouble coming in on greased skids." Another uncle warns that Daddy Glen "could turn like whiskey in a bad barrel." When Glen does turn on Bone with emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, she falls "into shame like a suicide throws herself into a river."

But a flawless style does not account for the hold that ***Bastard Out of Carolina*** has on the heart. The emotional intensity and honesty of this book, along with its complex and compassionate portrayals of even the most villainous character, allow the reader to trust the author and enter her world. Even when a succession of tragedies descends like a storm in the mountains, we are not allowed to withdraw. We care too deeply about all the characters, because they have vital lessons to teach us—lessons about prejudice and pride, love and anger, family and protection—and we know that we need to stand by them.

Allison's characters show us that we all are vulnerable—children, women, and men—and that we all want "the simplest thing, to love and be loved and be safe together." The efforts people make to cope with the frustrations of this desire form the transforming struggles of life and the basis of this novel. Dorothy Allison has given us what will undoubtedly become an American classic.

E. J. Graff (review date September 1994)

SOURCE: "Nothing but the Truth," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 11, No. 12, September, 1994, pp. 10–11.

[*In the following positive review, Graff praises Allison for writing about such controversial subject matter in* Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, & Literature.]

I moved East in 1980, fresh from a small-town university "women's" community whose worst splits were over who'd slept with whose girlfriend. So I was surprised when, in Boston, I saw odd, wounded looks on women's faces when they talked—or declined to talk—about recent political history. Someone's restaurant had been boycotted and failed. Someone else refused to meet me, ever, at the women's center, site of an infamously vicious community meeting. Someone else's phone was tapped. Apparently here not "women's" but "community" belonged in quotes. I quailed as I realized how serious were questions of what it meant to be a woman—or more to the point, a feminist. Knowing I was not emotionally constructed for controversy, over and over I backed away. I was a coward, perhaps, secretly devoted as much to literature as to feminism, unwilling to be disemboweled for either.

Dorothy Allison—whose novel ***Bastard Out of Carolina*** (Dutton, 1993) was a National Book Award finalist, putting her on the national literary map after many years as a lesbian feminist writer and activist—has published a collection of essays that looks back from the other perspective: the true believer who at every opportunity dove into the fray, who abandoned much of herself for her era's utopian ideas, and who has reconstructed herself and her politics to reject simplifications the revolution (or some adherents) seemed to require. As ***Skin*** makes clear, Allison now believes—with a writer's passion—in truth in all its particularity, the truth of each individual's life. In her theology truth may not necessarily be beauty, but the telling of it changes the world. And changing the world remains Allison's goal.

Some of the essays are breathtakingly thoughtful, essays I'd hate any feminist to miss. Allison's ability to think through the complexities of personal experience can be piercing, linking class shame, family expectations, sexual taste and behavior, revolutionary fervor, and the failings and possibilities of literature. At her best, she clarifies how dangerous it can be to abandon any part of one's own reality in the hope of a better world to come. And she writes heartrending memoir, evoking loss without erasing love's ambivalence, particularly in **"Skin: Where She Touches Me."**

The collection is unfortunately uneven. Some, particularly sketches that originally appeared in the *New York Native*, are so thin they seem to be only padding. In **"Gun Crazy"**

or **"Neighbors,"** for instance, why couldn't Allison have applied her formidable mind to drawing into fuller view her ideas about women, guns and power, or about being an "out" householder in a mixed neighborhood? Some are long outdated, rejecting ideas no longer current (who still believes in the "political" or "spiritual" lesbian invoked in **"Conceptual Lesbianism"**?). Perhaps inevitably in a collection of essays written for other occasions, the pieces can be repetitive; one gets tired of hearing about, say, Bertha Harris.

None of which undermines the best pieces. The first, **"A Question of Class,"** is most powerful, exploring how much of herself Allison abandoned to be a good feminist, and why. She prettied up her class background in droll stories, hid sexual tastes distasteful to her middle-class lesbian collective, and abandoned her love of crafted literature in the name of feminist egalitarianism. All this she links with her childhood's extremities—both severe abuse and her family's shame at being despised for what felt like hopeless poverty—which trained her in a desire to escape, a "conviction that the life you have lived, the person you are, is valueless, better off abandoned." Looking back at how sleeplessly and fervently she worked on every feminist endeavor, she asks: "If I had not been raised to give my life away, would I have made such an effective, self-sacrificing revolutionary?" Her question reminded me of *Under a Cruel Star,* the memoir in which Heda Kovaly explains how her generation of Czech Jews, feeling they'd only accidentally survived the Nazi camps, willingly abandoned their lives to a vision of a brave new world—leaving a selfless void from which emerged a dangerously totalitarian politics.

Does Allison call feminist politics Stalinist? Not quite. But she doesn't flinch from suggesting that internecine feminist battles warped her life. Like many, I first heard of Allison after the notorious 1982 Barnard College "Scholar and the Feminist" Conference, at which the anti-porn faction attacked Allison and others, setting the stage for the next ten years' "sex wars." **"Public Silence, Private Terror"** talks about how Allison conceived and founded the Lesbian Sex Mafia—a group for women whose sexual desires were then considered politically incorrect—in the same spirit as early CR groups, but was unprepared for the violent response when they first spoke out. Those who've followed the debate since then know how Allison and other "pro-sex" or "sex radical" feminists insist that a demand for sexual conformity betrays us all, personally and politically. "What kind of women might we be if we did not have to worry about being too sexual, or not sexual enough, or the wrong kind of sexual for the company we keep, the convictions we hold?"

Yet I found the sex essays unsatisfying. Some of them rehashed now-familiar ideas; some (**"Femme," "A Personal History of Lesbian Porn,"** or **"Her Body, Mine, and His"**) illustrated desires that today sound fairly tame, reasonably enough for someone who might not wish to invite more attack. I did wonder why Allison does not explore desire's contradictory legacies, which glare through her memories of how a life of "bare dirt yards" was sex's legacy for her family's lusty women, or how she herself once desired "mean" women who "were going to eat me alive." Clearly she knows that sex does not always lead to the good. Is she afraid such a discussion would be ammunition to her foes?

More than that, I was disappointed that Allison does not look much farther than the 1980s debates. She dryly notes that if the sex wars are over, she'd like to know who won, suggesting that her side has not. The reality seems to me more complicated. During the Gay Games in New York last June, lines snaked around the block waiting to get into the Clit Club; single and younger lesbian friends of mine talk casually about stopping in at the new women's sex shop, and take for granted the pursuit of sexual pleasure as an irrefutable good; "sex-positive" books and magazines sit openly on feminist bookstore shelves; Allison's own essays notice, as if it were news, that "dildo" is no longer a politically dirty word. And yet the mainstream media loves to represent the MacKinnon-Dworkin perspective as *the* feminist ideology about sex. It's as if MacKinnon's rhetorical distortions so conveniently fit the Carrie Nation censor/crusader caricature that the media need look no farther. As a result, the media centers can hoist on their shoulders someone as historically uninformed as Katie Roiphe. No wonder a number of my younger friends—straight, bisexual, lesbian—prefer a "pro-sex" ideology, dismissing feminism as Victorian and beside the point.

So is it our fault, not the media's? Have feminists somehow failed to explore and articulate sexuality's inevitable pleasure/danger fissure in a way that does not divide simplistically into pro- or anti-, that ignores neither rape nor joy, offering a synthesis intelligible to the mainstream? Perhaps I'm looking to the wrong person when I wonder what Allison thinks of such post-eighties complications, but I was disappointed that she didn't take us farther.

My heart lifts, though, when Allison turns her mind to literature, my own true love. I first saw her in person at OutWrite '92, the lesbian and gay writers conference, where she gave a keynote talk. As she demanded that each writer in the audience tell their hardest truths, her voice seemed to grip and shake me from inside my ribs. Embarrassed at being Young Hopeful Writer seeking Older Well-Known Writer, I pursued her almost desperately through the conference halls. I had written a story that terrified me; generously she invited me to send it. When I finally had the nerve to do so, she wrote an encouraging response.

That generous spirit of defiance—her word for herself is "stubborn"—comes through all her literature essays, including the OutWrite talk, published here. She makes explicit her faith: that by representing our lives in all their messiness, danger and disquiet, by refusing either uplifting lies or contemptuous simplifications, writing can heal the world's split of "us" from "them." She does not reject her political faith; she looks around and sees a changed world.

But she links that faith, now, with a writer's ambition that requires not just courage but also craft. In **"Believing in Literature,"** she writes:

> What did I want? I wanted the thing all writers want—for the world to break open in response to my story. . . . I wanted my story to be unique and yet part of something greater than myself. I wanted to be seen for who I am and still appreciated—not denied, not simplified, not lied about or refused or minimized. The same things I have always wanted.
>
> I have wanted everything as a writer and a woman, but most of all a world changed utterly by my revelations.
>
> (p. 180)

This is a faith so widely shared—not only by writers and women—that the essay above was excerpted last July in the *New York Times Book Review.* And Allison reminds us that such literature is not written by "good girls" but by those willing to lose others' respect, to say the unspeakable, to risk betrayal—as has she.

Truth can vanquish shame; truth can overcome hatred; truth can heal the world. It's a belief for which many a writer, revolutionary and religious evangelist has signed up. That truth might be relative, constructed, or contested appears not to have occurred to Allison, but who am I—another earnest truth-seeker—to complain? While I would have preferred more new essays and a less historical collection, I'd go anywhere to have my faith reinvigorated by this preacher.

Dorothy Allison with Carolyn E. Megan (interview date Fall 1994)

SOURCE: "Moving toward Truth: An Interview with Dorothy Allison," in *Kenyon Review,* Vol. 16, No. 4, Fall, 1994, pp. 71–83.

[*In the following interview, Allison and Megan discuss Allison's past and the parallels between her life and works.*]

In March 1993 Dorothy Allison's novel, ***Bastard Out of Carolina,*** nominated for the 1992 National Book Award, had just been published in paperback, and she was at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on a reading tour. She answered the door to her posh suite dressed in T-shirt and jeans saying, "Look at this place! Grace Paley stayed in this room!" Readers were lining up in city after city to hear her read, but she was still becoming accustomed to her fame.

Her work includes collections of poems, ***The Women Who Hate Me***; stories, ***Trash***; and essays, ***Skin.*** A novel, ***Cavedweller,*** will be published in 1995. She lives in northern California with her companion, Alix, and their son, Wolf Michael.

[*Megan:*] *You've said you began* **Bastard Out of Carolina** *as a poem. It seems there are a lot of roots of* **Bastard** *in your collection of poems,* **The Women Who Hate Me.** *Does all your work begin as poetry?*

[Allison:] It's what I always do. Almost everything I write begins in some lyric form. It's how I began; it's how I learned; it's what I do. Almost never does it continue as a poem anymore because I have become much more interested in narrative storytelling. There are places in ***Bastard*** that are tone poems that somehow survived the editing process. My editing process is extensive. I go through a lot of rewriting.

It sounds as if you use your sense of sound and language in coming into a narrative. Does that change how you think of the narrative?

No, it doesn't. I think of it all as the same process. What was different was moving from short stories to a novel in terms of structure and language. It became such a larger canvas. Well, I don't know how in the world I thought I knew what I was doing. I knew I didn't know what I was doing. Maybe you just throw yourself in with total immersion. My trick was to get a book contract. With a book contract, you either give them their money back or finish it. On sheer nerve I started it and taught myself to do it. It changed everything, because a lot of the forms that I had learned in terms of working with poetry and short stories just did not apply.

So when you come into a novel, are you using the same sensibilities you came into your poetry with? I would imagine working in poetic form you begin with hearing the language.

I work a lot more with dialogue, which is the thing I moved into more and more from the poetry. But you can look at some of the earlier poems, and there are places where that happens. In ***The Women Who Hate Me*** you can see where people talk. But moving into short stories, what I would do is to get first the dialogue, and with the novel that became central. In a large sense, the book [***Bastard***] is structured so that at different points people are primarily talking. And they all tell stories, and they have a way of storytelling that in some way parallels gospel music. Like choruses that repeat . . . and essentially they repeat each other's stories to a certain extent. Just different versions. There are a whole lot of stories about the Cherokee great-granddaddy, and they all had their own view about it and they each had to have a different voice. So it became like a series of tone poems, slowly pushed further and further, getting into those characters. And everything was constructed around what these people, who were essentially the aunts and uncles, were giving to this Bone: a sense of who she was in the world—what her possibilities were.

And Bone seems to save herself by telling stories. There's a scene in **Bastard** *where Daddy Glen has broken Bone's clavicle, and Bone imagines an elaborate scenario in which she forgives Daddy Glen and then dies.*

Oh, high drama.

So storytelling speaks to Bone's survival.

That's what I intended. It becomes a technique whereby she retains a sense of power in a situation where she has none. And comfort, just sheer physical comfort of retelling herself the story in which she is not the victim. She learns that from her family.

Bone is retelling stories even when she masturbates. She becomes the perpetrator and the victim all at once.

She becomes the heroine. Even when she's the martyred heroine, she's still the heroine and they love her fiercely.

Is the writing what saves you?

Oh, absolutely. It became the way out of an enormous amount of guilt. It became the way I figured things out. When I couldn't find my story, I wrote it. I trusted books; I grew up that way. And so I made my own story, writing it down so that it would be real, and I could see it and step outside of it. It was some kind of comfort, and yes . . . sometimes the whole purpose is to make yourself a heroine.

The prologue to your collection of stories, **Trash,** *also reflects writing as a means of survival. The narrator says that one day she decided to live, and that living meant telling her stories.*

Kind of a truth telling. Whereas I would not guarantee that all the stories the aunts and uncles tell are true, Bone is moving toward a kind of truth, and that's real important. She's caught in a network of lies and misrepresentation. All the things she's being told about herself by Daddy Glen are horrible. And she takes those things, and we watch it have an impact on her. The only thing that saves her are the stories, the ones that she needs to make for herself.

Anger seems to save Bone. Is that true for you: Is anger where your writing originates? Has taking on anger saved you?

Not only to take on anger, but to realize the justification of it. The thing that happens with you if you're poor, or you're powerless, or you're in the situation that Bone is in, suffering any kind of physical or emotional abuse, is that you begin to feel kind of numbed. You get so wounded that you freeze up; you don't get angry. Which is really hard for people to understand. And if you do get angry, all the anger is inner-directed. What I tried to do in the book was to show Bone taking all that in and believing it, believing herself a monster . . . thinking that it was her fault, trying desperately to protect her mother, to hide what was going on, just to find some way to stoically endure it. I knew that in my life, and that nearly killed me. But I didn't get angry until I was in my twenties. When I constructed this novel, I constructed it in such a way that Bone gets angry at thirteen, and I think it'll save her. I think it is the best ending I could put on the book. She begins to hold people responsible.

How were you able to deal with your anger and to hold people responsible on your own?

I didn't do it on my own. I had a great deal of help. It was in 1973, so I was twenty-four, and I went into the women's center in Tallahassee, Florida, and walked in on a consciousness-raising group. I had never been to one before. The center was forming a magazine, and I had misread the schedule and got there a little early. I was too embarrassed to leave, so I stayed. And everything changed . . . everything changed. I wasn't the kind of person that would seek out help. I had been raised to be really fiercely independent. Never ask for help, never go for it . . . but this wasn't that anyway. It was people sitting around basically telling stories, and I knew how to do that. But there were people telling stories that I had never heard before. And there was a woman there who started to talk about her own experience of incest. And it didn't matter that she was using a lot of early feminist rhetorical language. What mattered was that it was my story, and she was so different from me—middle class—she was wearing pearls, for God's sake. She had one of those amazing, elaborate flip-up hairdos, and she was at the university. And she was telling a story that I knew in my bones absolutely.

It was the first time you had heard the story?

First time from anyone else. I had read a lot of books, all those case studies, all the stuff that was available then. But I had never sat across from another human being that I could look at and see that this is not a crazy person. This is not an evil, monstrous human being . . . this is your average everyday normal girl, and she's survived the same thing I have. It made it all different. It made me different. So I kept coming and talking and became a rabid feminist. I just spent a few years of my life just figuring out what the hell happened to me . . . how I had gotten into this enormously tight, walled, closed place.

Did writing help you figure that out?

Writing helped me break out of it. Writing became the way that I could say things that otherwise I had no other way to talk about. Mostly, to begin with, I wrote really bad poetry, something I had done for years actually. I did it as a child, but it became a way to talk about emotions that were terrifying, dangerous. And then, as is the way of such things, I became an editor. I helped start a magazine called *Amazing Grace* in which I published my first poem. (The first since my mother had submitted a poem to the JFK Library when I was eleven.) Then I started working at it, but it was something I did on my own time. I started working for the Social Security Administration; that's how I got to Tallahassee. I did the same thing Kafka did: Social Security during the day—writing stories at night. But writing was, it seemed to me, kind of private and in someway