

Dorothy Allison in conversation with Gary Shapiro by Gary Shapiro

Dorothy Allison has a son named Wolf. I am always suspicious of people who give their children weird names. Not having children myself makes me an expert on raising children, naming children and all other aspects of child rearing so I am not above pre-judging a person by the name they gave to their child. As it turns out the name Wolf was a compromise Allison struck with her partner, Alix Layman. "He was going to be Michael Allison Laymen, because he is named for his Uncle Michael and we combined our two names with no hyphen. I kept complaining that it sounded like a law firm! So in the context of a semi-argument Alix said 'What would you do? Call him Wolf?' And I said 'Wolf is not bad, Wolf could go.' And it's been a brilliant choice. It suits him." Allison added that it is easy to buy presents for him, because everyone buys the boy, now 15, "More wolf paraphernalia than you could ever imagine." Allison has a wonderful laugh and is generous with it. She is surprisingly funny given the serious topics of child abuse, class struggle and feminism that pervade her work. Dorothy Allison is best known for her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, published in 1993. That novel tells of the struggles of a poor white southern family very similar to Allison's own. Angelica Houston helmed a film version in 1996. In 1998 Dorothy Allison published her second novel, *Cavedweller*. This book was also made into a film in 2004 which won some awards and drew attention to Allison. Her new novel, *She Who*, will be published in 2009. Dorothy Allison was born in 1949 in South Carolina. She studied anthropology at Florida State University and the New School for Social Research and became a political activist. It was her involvement with the feminist movement that led her toward writing. I spoke to Dorothy Allison earlier this fall prior to her visit to San Jose State University, for my radio program, *From the Bookshelf*.

Your work is largely autobiographical and rather intimate, so what's it like for you when you meet people? Everyone you meet knows so many sensitive things about you.

Well, they think they do, but they often can't tell the difference between fiction and the biography, and that's occasionally a little daunting.

You think most people just assume it's all autobiography?

I think actually people assume that about all books, all novels. It's almost as if they just assume that you don't really invent anything. To write a book, you must have had some experience that triggered it, even if you're buried in there somewhere.

*In the case of *Bastard out of Carolina*, a lot of it is autobiographical, yes?*

The whole first chapter is a re-telling of everything I was ever told about how I was conceived and entered the world. The rest of it is fiction, but I'm an incest survivor and the dovetailing of that with the novel means I don't get any room. It means I just stand there with people staring, as if they are looking at your sexual private parts.

Exactly. That's what I'm asking. Most people who are incest survivors don't have to face the fact that everyone they meet knows this secret thing about them.

That's true, we are very rarely tattooed.

So, is it weird?

Sometimes. Sometimes it's very, very uncomfortable. Mostly when that happens I'm in the context and the context helps a lot.

If you're speaking at a school or something?

Or I'm doing something in public, and generally that means I've got my stance, and I know what I want to accomplish, and that makes it worthwhile.

It can occasionally startle you, there was a time about 10 years ago I went to New York to do a program and it was a live interview on television, and I thought I knew what the show was going to be about. And instead the woman, in an extraordinarily personal manner asked me what a question about sexual abuse, not generally, but specific to me with reference to my body, and I burst into tears. It was just like, "I didn't come here to do that today."

And she's just looking to get her show on the air.

Well, yes, but you know, you do a show on the air, and people want excitement. I think she thought it was great television.

I have a series of very personal questions I'm about to ask you.

Ok, I'll take a deep breath.

I kid! You've published two novels so far, and you're currently working on a third one. What's your process like? Do you write every day? I mean, there's 15 years between your novels.

Good God, is it that much? It takes me about a decade. It's a terrible thing to admit. I'd like to lie and say I wait until the last minute and write them in 20 minutes, and I'm a genius. But I'm a very slow writer. It takes a long time. I write every day and I throw most of it away.

Are you the kind of writer who has it all outlined or do you go sentence by sentence?

I go sentence by sentence and then I rewrite the one that I've left behind. I'm quite sure there are better and easier ways to do this, but they don't seem to work as well for me. But by the time I publish a book I'm ready to stand up in public with it, no matter how personal the questions are.

But you do write every day?

Yes, God help me. I also have two dogs, three cats and a 15-year-old boy. That tends to interrupt a lot.

Do you have a schedule? "I must be at my typewriter by 9:00 a.m."

No, I have to be out of bed by 6:30 a.m. to get the kid to school on time. The one thing I have to do is I have to avoid business. If I'm really writing, I have to avoid email or the mail itself. There's something about switching into that mindset where I'm answering mail or dealing with business that completely stops me in terms of being able to do any good writing. It would be wonderful to wake up kind of fuzzy headed, drink coffee and fall into story. But there are the dogs and the kid and there is an enormous amount of mail. To get work done, I stop the mail.

Who writes you? Why do you get so much mail? I get nothing.

Really? You should publish a novel about your childhood sexual experiences. I'm sure that they would all want to write to you. I get mail from young writers, lesbian and gay people who just discovered me, I get mail from young academics who can't get published. I get mail from people who have started magazines. Good Lord. It's the kids that really grab you. Young people who have just realized there is something funny about them and are sure I understand. Or who are just beginning to be able to talk about the worst thing that happened to them and they want someone to talk back or just listen.

And they feel that because they've read your work that they know you?

Yes, absolutely.

How does your involvement with gender issues and sexual abuse issues inform you at work as a writer?

The problem is I came to writing out of enormous political and personal conviction. And I came to writing also during a period when the anti-war movement and the early feminist movement and the early gay and lesbian movement were going on. That means that I think of stories as having purpose, and that tends to shape a lot of my focus and that tends to draw people to me and give me something to talk about

So you think of yourself as a political writer?

I do, I do. I've been reminded about that issue a lot since Grace Paley died. She's one of my culture heroes, and I knew her and worked with her some, and she was just noble. She was very adamant that all writing is political. All writing has a context, and the only people who object to that are people who are hiding it. And I think she's probably right.

Gender issues have changed a lot in those years that you've mentioned. They've gotten very complicated.

Let's talk about homosexuality for a minute, if you don't mind. In the 50's, when you and I were growing up, I think the view of homosexuality was that it was a disease that people were afflicted with. In the 60's it was thought of as a lifestyle choice. Now I think people think of it more as genetic or who you are.

Well, it depends on who you are talking to. You've got to remember, I grew up in the rural South, and they were pretty clear it wasn't a disease, it was a sin and you were going to hell. Throw that in with those other contexts, and I run into that one, still, all the time. Go to any website and it's still the major argument of a lot of Christian Fundamentalists.

And they have a lot more power now?

They have a lot more power now. It's more complicated for me dealing with people who have redefined gender to pretty much erase homosexuality, just to go to polymorph. Everybody has sexuality and anyone can do anything with anyone, which always makes me want to giggle. I don't find that to be my experience.

In terms of America, do you think we're more conservative now or less so than say 25 years ago about these gender issues particularly?

Remember, 25 years ago...

I know, that was only 1982...

That was the disco era when all the boys were wearing eyeliner.

That's right, there was a kind of a David Bowie androgynous thing...so we're more conservative now?

I think we're more conservative now, but in different ways. Also the country is different. We have these coastal communities: New York, San Francisco, L.A. And those communities are far more accepting, of diversity and homosexuality, and then we have the great middle of the country where you can still get beaten to death for talking about the wrong stuff in public.

It's interesting, I don't know about your son, but I teach middle school so I work with young people all the time. I think racism is not a problem with them, but they are extremely homophobic.

Extremely homophobic.

I guess that's part of what we're talking about in terms of this conservative moment and also the growth of Christian Fundamentalism with President Bush's support.

Well, the reaffirming of Christian Fundamentalism seems to go in and out in terms of the hegemony and violence. It's as if people wake up and say, "Oh, how foolish, we were going to hurt people for that?" and then some spell is cast over the population and it comes back.

Twenty-five years ago you were one of the founders of the Lesbian Sex

Mafia...

Yes, something my son has enormous difficulty with.

Is it some sort of a fetish group, a support group?

Actually, it was a feminist group in NYC, to really open up discussion of sexual expression that was concentrated in the lesbian community. But as soon as we announced it, we got everybody, everybody! From cross-dressing stressing straight men, from queens, fetishes of the most exotic qualities. It was a very interesting education for me because I was a fairly easy-going lesbian feminist. I didn't really know a lot other than to have read a lot of anthropology. And to suddenly meet all these perverse people who really wanted talk about the details of their sexual experiences, it shook my world right down the core.

Are you still involved with the Lesbian Sex Mafia?

I get mailings every occasion. I think I'm a foremother at this point. A lot of that has...people are not so invested in defending sexual expression, at least not sexual communities; they are more invested in defending a range of gender expression. But often those groups become more prominent when someone's in trouble, when you need a defense committee, when there is a health issue or a legal issue, that's when those groups become more focused and become revived.

Do you think America's view of gender issues are skewed by that fact that, for the last 10 years or so, Jerry Springer and all those programs take the most extreme cases of people and put them on television?

I don't think it's limited to the last 10 years and I don't think it's limited to just Jerry Springer. I think it goes back to Kinsey. I think as a nation we are completely obsessed with sexuality and sexual expression and very dictatorial and puritanical about it. And we all secretly suspect that someone is having better sex than we are, and we resent it of us.

We're jealous. We're very sexually jealous.

Exactly. This is a nation that believes in sexual expression, but not too much expression.

You can express anything you want, as long as it's not that.

Right, and what they'd really like is a manual. Well, think about it. I think Jerry Springer's Guide to Better Sex would sell big, to me. But I'm sure that there is someone who would be excited about the notion. No, all that stuff is about stereotyping people and to a certain extent, caricature. Be your worst self in public has always been an American impulse.

Well, let me tap into another issue in your work, and that's an issue of class, and I wonder how that's changed in America since you were a child?

Absolutely, and not at all.

Do you think people care now if someone is a bastard or not?

Yes.

You think they still do?

I think people care if you're poor. People are afraid of the poor. They're afraid of a scary, different people, and how they see those categories may have changed a little bit. There's more information, in part because of novels and television and more cultural information, but the fear is basic. The only thing that I think for a while there we had some huge shifts in this country in terms of being more accepting of different classes and actually doing some work that made it possible for the children of the working class to get a good education and to make some shifts. But I swear to you in the last decade, what I've seen happen is a retrenching, and the fear of the poor is just horrific. It's gotten meaner. I think it's an equivalent to when I was a kid and I was born in '49. So my childhood was in the 50's where the level of contempt expressed at poor people was pretty omnipresent and we're right back there.

As someone who grew up in the 50's, do you resent the romanticizing of the 50's that's taken place. We don't hear about it so much as the romanticizing of the 80's, but when we were in our twenties, they romanticized the 50's as something it never really was.

It's much easier to romanticize something you're not surviving, so at the distance. The music was a terrific. The day-to-day life of women and people of color and kids was horrible, really deeply horrible and violent.

For white men it was good.

Well, yes, I suppose, although, have you seen that TV show, Madmen?

Yes.

A girlfriend of mine kept saying watch it, watch it and then she finally forced me to sit down and watch six episodes. And it's fascinating because it is quintessentially a representation of that time period. It's set in 1960, but what it's showing us is that very class-stratified, racist, profoundly patriarchal culture and how miserable everybody was, and how self-conscious and afraid and manipulative everybody was. It's interesting to me because it's a good story and the characters that they are presenting really are resonant for me.

Speaking of films, were you happy when your first novel, Bastard out of Carolina, was made into a film for Showtime by Angelica Houston?

It was made originally for Ted Turner and TNT, but he found it so horrifying he wouldn't broadcast it. Showtime bought it. That's how Showtime got their slogan, "No Limits;" because they would show something that broadcast stations wouldn't dare to show, which was Bastard out of Carolina.

The film was completely banned in Canada, wasn't it?

For a while, yes, actually.

They wouldn't release it on video; you couldn't see it at all?

Yes, you couldn't get it because they have a lot of pornography laws and anti-violence laws are very strict there, regardless of whether you are using a program to speak about real events in the world or not.

What was your involvement with the film?

I met Angelica Houston. They paid me money.

That was it?

I liked the people. They tried very hard to make a good movie, and I think now that I look at the film I can see that, actually, I was extraordinarily lucky, both in the people who bought it, the people who put it together, the screenwriter, Angelica Houston herself; that they did what they thought was a great effort at being responsible and respectful of the material. It's still hard for me to watch.

Because it's just such a fraction of your book?

That, and also because it's just extremely sad. One of the things about the book is that it's constructed with such an enormous amount of humor and forward motion. But you have to have a sense of humor to do that sort of thing, and I don't think filmmakers come by one naturally.

That was one of the things that was sacrificed possibly in the editing the material?

Apparently so.

So you wouldn't call yourself one hundred percent happy with the movie?

Considering how bad it could have been, I'm grateful.

It's probably the thing that most people who know you are familiar with.

Yes, I think so. I think actually people watch TV and movies a lot more than they read books, so you get a much wider notoriety. But I think the ones who go find the book, they're the ones I can really talk to.

And your second novel, Cavedweller, was made into a film also?

Yes, I was again lucky.

And were you a part of that process?

I actually liked the director, Lisa Cholodenko, and I had a number of conversations with her. And she did a very fine film in many ways, but it was a Kyra Sedgwick project. Sedgwick bought the rights and commissioned the film, and to a large extent it's a project that she controlled. It's just very hard, movies. I think movies are much more difficult than books.

I guess possibly it's because when you're writing a book, it's you and you're responsible for the last page.

Well, you have one artist who has a vision. As far as I can tell, movies are committee work, and if you get anything good you're lucky. I actually think Cavedweller is a pretty good film.

Yes, of course, when you're collaborating you're only as good as your worst collaborator.

And I'm a terrible collaborator!

That's why you're a writer?

I think that's it.

Will there be other film and television projects in the works for you?

If I continue to be lucky, yes. I have a very expensive teenager. You need anything you can get.

Would you say that the majority of your income, if you don't mind my asking, comes from those projects, rather than your writing?

No, no.

It comes from your writing?

Yes. Movies happen, they are like a flood. It comes in, it sweeps through and then it's gone. It doesn't even leave much behind.

If someone rents the DVD of Bastard out of Carolina, does that come back to your pocket?

No. If it shows on Lifetime, I don't get any money, but I get a lot of phone calls telling me, "Your movie is on TV!" I'm like, "Call Angelica Houston, tell her."

What work inspires you? Other writers, other artists?

Oh Lord. Other writers, language, fascinating stories, little tidbits of stories that I want to figure out how in the hell did that happen - and what are those people like that did that? I'm fascinated by that, and stories, lots of other stories. I read pretty steadily. It's a wonderful life to be able to read as much as I get to read.

Have you read any good books lately?

God, yes, it's the greatest season for books in years.

Tell us a few.

I just finished Junot Diaz, this new novel. It's just gorgeous. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Have you seen it?

I'm writing it down on my list right now.

And I've got Anne Patchet's, Run, on the side of the desk; and Andrea Barrett; and Alice Sebold's novel is coming. It's just a great season for books.

What did you think of Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones? Was that a novel that you liked?

I had heard her read a piece of it and loved it, and loved the opening. The first chapter is just wrenching and devastating. I think it's a really beautiful piece of work. You know, I can't see why the ghost had to reincarnate in order to have sex. That didn't make any sense to me at all.

Maybe she should have edited that part out.

Yeah, but she's an American, and sex had to get in there somewhere.

Can you tell us anything about your new novel, She Who?

It's about three women, one of whom is a young woman who survives an assault in a parking garage in San Francisco - what might have been a

queer bashing and might just have been rape. But she's in a coma for a year, and in the process of recovery, loses her memory and when she recovers is just a different person. Her mother becomes an anti-violence activist, and the two of them become involved with an ex-Salvadorian nun. So it's about the three of them. It's about violence.

When will we see this book?

Actually, we just scheduled it -- Winter 2009.

And you've been working on it how long?

A decade!

So, when that happens, you've been working on a story for ten years and things change in ten years, so things like cell phones...Do you have to go back and change things?

You know, it's very rare that cell phones appear in my novels, so that's not a big issue for me. But no, it changes completely. I started out writing about the young woman who gets thrown off a parking garage and goes into a coma and how, in fact, her family is broken when she is suddenly a different person. I had seen that happen and was fascinated by it. But then I wrote myself into this story and got lost and got in trouble and that was no longer the central piece for me; instead, it was what happens to her mother and what she starts doing, and then...Novels are like mushrooms - they just grow.

While you're working on a book, do you have the next novel or more stories rattling around in your brain?

Yes, I do. In fact, it gets very uncomfortable if you have too many stories rattling around in your brain. I also have a series of short stories set in Sonoma County, some of which, I really need to publish soon.

Do you regularly submit your stories, or do people come to you, or are you past the point where you have to submit things?

Everyone has to submit things. There is no safe haven as a writer in America. But I do readings and often what happens is there is someone who will say, "Could we publish that?" And I'll say, "Oh, thank God, I don't have to send it off and ask you?" That happens. I recommend it for young writers particularly.

To do readings?

To do readings where editors are standing around.

So they can hear your stuff?

Exactly. It helps a bunch.

When you're writing and you've written a chapter, do you immediately grab your partner and read it out loud? Do you read it out loud to yourself?

I read it to myself, I change things. I swing my arms in the air, then I get frightened and I put it in a box.

An actual box?

An actual file box folder. It tends to be --there are a bunch of folders in this office, and they are full of stories, and then what happens I'll start -- "What happened to that story," and I'll go looking for it. So if I don't read it out loud, they can sit in those boxes for a long time.

We haven't talked about your poetry. You publish poetry fairly regularly, yes?

I put a moratorium on it about eight years ago because I was writing a lot about children and I thought it had better wait. Also, I don't think I'm a great poet. I love poems, but they start as poems and then they tend to shift into stories. I tend to cannibalize a lot of my poetry

So you consider yourself more a novelist than a short story writer?

I consider myself as a writer.

So it's all of those things?

Yeah, but you can make a living as a novelist, or a kind of a living. It's

very hard to make a living as a short writer or a poet. In fact, I think all poets are saints. They are paid so little money, they should get something.

Dorothy Allison promised that when She Who is ready we will see and hear a lot more from her. "You won't be able to avoid me! I'll be in every mall in America."