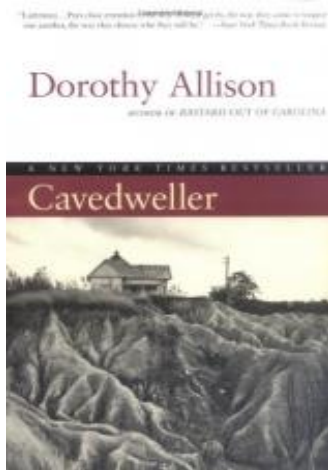


Cavedweller

by Dorothy Allison



About the Book

The Village Voice has called her "a hell of a writer-tough and loose, clear and compassionate." George Garrett, author and critic who reviewed **Bastard Out of Carolina** for *The New York Times Book Review* wanted to "blow a bugle to alert the reading public that a major new talent has arrived." Critics have likened her to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Harper Lee, naming her the first writer of her generation to dramatize the lives and language of poor whites in the South. "She has an all-encompassing knowledge of what it's like to be the other, the outsider," says Studs Terkel. Garrett agrees: "It's as if the people in Dorothea Lange photographs, in the work of Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans, were able to speak." But with a dead-center look that says "Don't mess with me, honey. I'm liable to pour gravy on you," Allison defies easy characterization, as one writer for *The New York Times* put it. And she likes it that way.

Part gospel singer, part country preacher, Allison often jokes that as a girl she wanted to be Janis Joplin. She has a wardrobe full of rhinestone-studded leather jackets and a desk drawer full of family snapshots. She's a mean shot with a rifle, and her language is always dead-on: lush, beautiful, and brutal. "Dorothy sees everything", says Jewelle Gomez, the poet and novelist.

Allison has spent her entire life telling forbidden stories, pulling her best fiction out from the edge of terror and the courage to heal. In **Two or Three Things I Know for Sure**, a short memoir she published in 1995, Allison writes,

Where I was born -- Greenville, South Carolina -- smelled like nowhere else I've been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit 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.

Allison wants the hard and terrible stories, she demands them from herself. And her readers wait for them.

Readers might call **Cavedweller** the blazing daughter of **Bastard Out of Carolina**, but even that will not do justice to the mystical story and landscape, the world of family, and the secret-filled South in which Allison has set in her new novel. Allison begins her absorbing saga about Delia Byrd and her three daughters with a simple sentence: "Death changes everything," and by story's end, Allison has uncovered the complicated cycles of sinning and atonement along an enormous expanse of births, deaths, and rebirths alongside husbands, lovers, families, friends. Young, beautiful Delia flees a whisky-soaked, violent man who loves her passionately and beats her within an inch of her life. On a dusty sideroad she meets Randall, a musician on his way to the top, and deserts her two baby daughters in Cayro, Georgia, land of biscuit franchises and backwoods Baptists. Randall and Delia form the band Mud Dog, and together they write music, hit the road, and have a child, Cissy. But even while pasting together a life of soul, drugs, truck stops, vodka shots, and credit card bills in the glitter of Los Angeles, Delia doesn't care about fame or money and cannot live with the fact that she left her two girls behind. When a motorcycle accident kills Randall, Delia quits the bottle and takes Cissy on a midnight drive-through mission back to reclaim her life (and reconnect with her original sin) in Georgia, where folks remember her as "that bitch [who] ran off and left her babies."

Delia fights off the urge to drink as she suffers the scorn of her family and a bitter community who despises her for what she did and who she became. She moves back in with Clint Windsor, her cancer-stricken husband, and offers to care for him on his deathbed if he will allow her to reclaim her two daughters, Amanda, 15, and Dede, 12, from their Bible-thumping grandmother. Evangelical Amanda takes after her grandma Windsor, and pursues the Lord and anti-abortion activism with the manic fervor of a zealot. Wild and slim Dede is every man's dream, redneck or not. Though not into Jesus, she is as passionate as her sister Amanda, and dreams of getting behind the wheel of a big truck and heading down the road, any road, out of Georgia. Finally, there's tough yet vulnerable Cissy, who finds her obsession in the dank sport of caving, where she finds strength to grab her future as she scrapes through the caves of Southern Georgia, through Paula's Lost and Little Mouth. All three girls are something to behold as they grow up into enraged yet empowered women. It is Delia, though, who is the real "cavedweller"--a woman whose deep past is gradually mapped and explored, and who is able to remake herself and her family through what she discovers. Led by the example of their determined mother, each daughter opens her heart a little wider to others and finds her own way in the world.

Discussion Guide

1. Anney Boatwright loved her daughters, but put her husband first. Delia Byrd fights tenaciously for her girls. What characteristics differentiate Delia from Anney? (Note: This question also relates to **Bastard Out of Carolina**)
2. Why do Cayro's inhabitants despise Delia? Do they see in her a reflection of loved ones who have abandoned them, or are they jealous of her for doing what they were unable to do, escape a dead-end town and abusive husband?
3. Which of Delia's daughters, if any, is most like her? What traits of hers do they have in common?
4. What kind of illumination does Cissy find in the silence and darkness of the caves?

5. What do Granddaddy Byrd and Grandma Windsor have in common? What are their reasons and methods of separating themselves from others, even those they claim to love?
6. What are the parallels between Nadine Reiter's behavior, which changes so radically after her stroke and Amanda's?
7. Analyze the friendship between Rosemary, M.T., and Delia? How does it help each woman?
8. Delia can take a run-down object, be it a woman ravaged by small town life or an old piece of furniture, strip away the ugliness and wear, and bring out the natural beauty. Does she, in fact, remake herself by the end of **Cavedweller**?

Author Bio

Dorothy Allison was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, to a fourteen-year-old unwed mother. The only father figure she ever knew was a violently abusive man who used her mother's desperate desire for respectability to tie the terrified family to him. Though it was Allison's mother who placed her daughter in these precarious situations by not challenging her husband, Allison credits her as an inspiration. While the Greenville community disdained Allison for being poor and illegitimate, Allison's mother insisted her child was bright. She kept a jar of money she called the college fund, and though she had to empty it on several occasions and Allison's college was paid for by a National Merit Scholarship, just the presence of that jar convinced Allison that she had a right to excel.

The first of her family to graduate high school, Allison went on to get a bachelor's degree from Florida Presbyterian College and a master's from New York's School of Social Research. Allison credits emerging feminism with much of her redemption. Suddenly, getting angry did not make her a misfit, and the movement gave her the strength to reclaim herself from years of put downs and abuse.

When she began her writing career, Allison kept close to the gay and feminist presses, distrusting the establishment and believing that "literature was written by men, judged by men." In 1988 Firebrand Press published **Trash**, a book of short stories, that started to win Allison notice. This was followed by **The Women Who Hate Me: Poetry, 1980-1990**, which secured Allison's stature as a respected talent within the gay and lesbian community.

When **Bastard Out of Carolina** was published by Dutton in 1992, Allison achieved mainstream success. **Bastard** was greeted with rave reviews from the *Village Voice*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, and nominated for the National Book Award. Allison returned to a small press with **Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature**, a critically acclaimed collection of essays.

In 1995, she published a short memoir, **Two or Three Things I Know for Sure**, using text and family photographs. In March 1998, Allison's most ambitious work yet was released. **Cavedweller** is an epic novel that chronicles the trials and victories of four strong women and the opportunities they wrest from the unforgiving terrain of small town Georgia.

In addition to her own books, Allison has contributed to many publications, ranging from *The New York Times* to *Harpers* and *Allure*. Allison lives in Northern California with her partner and their son, and continues to pursue "the thing all writers want--for the world to break open in response to my story...The same thing I have always wanted."

Critical Praise

"Impassioned prose...superbly salty dialogue...an altogether wonderful second novel."

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