# Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina

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# Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison s *Bastard Out of Carolina*

*by Vincent King*

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a lyrical yet fiercely disturbing portrait of a South Carolina family besieged by poverty, violence, and incest. Narrated by young Ruth Anne Boatwright—or Bone as she is called by her family—the novel begins, ordinarily enough, with her birth and early years and quickly focuses on the relationship between Bone and her violent stepfather, Daddy Glen. Glen's abuse of Bone reaches a fever pitch in the eighth chapter. There a young intern, who is treating Bone's second broken clavicle, notices that her coccyx has also been broken. Confronted by the angry doctor, the mother finally admits (if only temporarily) the seriousness of Glen's mistreatment of Bone.

But at the beginning of chapter nine, the novel takes a surprising—and potentially misguided—turn. Glen, who has played such a pivotal role in the novel, becomes little more than a peripheral character. While Bone's world is still haunted and shaped by the threat that he poses, Glen no longer figures prominently in the action. And the story of Bone's abuse, which has heretofore dominated the novel, does not fully resume again until chapter seventeen. Although Bone spends some of this time with relatives—to escape the pawing hands of Daddy Glen—neither this nor Glen's promise to become a better father adequately explains why Allison stops the story of Bone's abuse so quickly and for so long. It is even less clear why chapters nine through sixteen focus so heavily on gospel music, Bone's friend Shannon Pearl, Bone's violent sexual fantasies, her reading and storytelling, and her midnight escapade at a local Woolworth's. Not only is it unclear how these eight chapters fit into the main narrative, but



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also these chapters appear to have little connection to each other. Allison's kitchen-sink realism seems to have run amuck. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Mary Hawthorne complains that in *Bastard* "one sometimes hears the clunk of fiction not sufficiently dissembled, and an indulgent meandering of plot into subplots that lead nowhere . . . diminishes the book's potency" (18). The novel's unusual structure might suggest that Allison isn't fully in control of her narrative—a problem one might expect in a first novel. On the other hand, a more cynical reader could argue that these middle chapters have been included to bolster a slim volume with proven set pieces and folksy asides about gospel music and southern storytelling.[1] This view seems to be supported by fact that the story of Shannon Pearl in chapters eleven and thirteen is an adaptation of a short story that appeared in the 1988 collection *Trash*.[2]

Worse, by interrupting the story of Bone's abuse, Allison appears to be sensationalizing her already shocking subject matter, simultaneously promising and delaying the inevitable rape scene. Commenting on the prevalence of incest in contemporary fiction, Katie Roiphe complains that the incest story is "our latest literary vogue," "the stock plot of a culture obsessed with sexual abuse" (65, 71). Roiphe acknowledges the use of incest as a plot device by southern writers such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell and, more recently, by African American women such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison; but she insists that "what may once have been a daring subject, what took our breath away in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, has now become a paralyzed literary convention" (71). She continues:

> It's possible that the incest scene could be made new, but at this late date we can't help suspecting that the scene is the product of cultural opportunism, a sign that the author has lost sight of what separates literature from *Melrose Place*. Beneath the swelling prose, the panties and the nightgowns, one feels the selling principle at work. Sex sells and perverse sex sells more. . . (71)

But it would be a mistake to categorize *Bastard* as an example of this kind of lurid, cultural opportunism, although it may explain why *Bastard*, despite the fact that it was a National Book Award Finalist, has generated so little critical attention. To her credit, Allison is fully aware how easy it would be to sensationalize a story of incest. Sounding much like Roiphe, Allison explains in an interview that she too "'hates' the 'pseudo-porn' of most books on incest, which trade on 'the reader's held breath and sweaty shame'" (Graff 43).

Ironically, it this "indulgent meandering" into the minutiae of Bone's life in chapters nine to sixteen that *prevents* the novel from exploiting the subject of incest or Bone herself.[3] By temporarily halting the story of Bone's abuse at the end of chapter eight, Allison refocuses the novel. Up until chapter nine, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is primarily a novel about the horror of incest—what Daddy Glen does to Bone. Beginning with chapter nine, though, the novel focuses on Bone's awkward efforts to survive, and even transmute, these horrors.[4] But to do so, Bone must rewrite—and in some cases simply reject—the names and stories that make her vulnerable to violence. She instinctively understands that her identity, far from being stable or fixed, is transactional—the result of the ongoing conflict between the names and stories thrust upon her by others and those she creates for herself.[5] In short, familial and social pressures force her to acknowledge "the postmodern insight that identity is constructed, flexible, and multiple" (Best and Kellner 174). While this realization initially threatens to overwhelm her already-fragile psyche, it also gives her the freedom to rewrite the relentless linear narratives that threaten to silence her. So, instead of accepting the language of Daddy Glen (and most of the other Boatwrights), which confers upon her a singular, and particularly constricting, identity, she must replace his coercive, linear narrative with ones that are more liberating. Bone's obsession with gospel music, her complex sexual fantasies, bizarre tales of violence, and avid reading are not subplots that lead nowhere; they simply reflect her attempts to create stories (read identities) that will provide her with what Allison describes as "the hope of a remade life" (*Skin* 219).

Allison, then, *has* made the incest story new, for in chapters nine to sixteen it becomes clear that her gritty southern realism is part and parcel of a decidedly postmodernist feminism.[6] *Bastard* may be described as feminist because it exposes and seeks to counter the physical, emotional, and economic domination that women suffer within a patriarchal system. And it may be described as postmodern because Bone counters this domination by rewriting the stories/identities that demean and violate her. She is, in effect, acknowledging and responding to "the fictionality of meaning" (Maltby 39). Furthermore, Allison manages to put her own distinctive stamp upon postmodernism by imbuing it with a feminist ethic which declares that story alone cannot remake Bone's life.[7] In other words, Bone cannot transmute her pain by replacing the stories that have hurt her with the story of her hatred for Daddy Glen (or for others). In *Mother Night*, Kurt Vonnegut suggests that we are who we pretend to be. It is this recognition of the primacy of story in a world devoid of metanarratives that

shapes the fictions of male postmodernists such as John Barth, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, and Don DeLilo. Yet Allison, in accord with her feminist politics, contends that we are defined by our social relations. Consequently, Bone cannot rid herself of the hatred that threatens to consume her at the end of the novel until she learns that we are also shaped by who we pretend *others* to be. Allison explains in an essay entitled "Believing in Literature" that "telling the truth —your side of it anyway," must be coupled with the realization that there are "truths other than your own" (177). For Allison, storytelling has a variety of functions, but it only becomes "a moral act, a courageous act, an act of rebellion that would encourage other such acts" when it is based on what Linda Nicholson calls "epistemic humility" (Allison 177; Nicholson 84).[8]

Allison's postmodernist feminism, as I have sketched it here, is politically charged, highly ethical, socially aware and, ultimately, affirmative. Yet according to theorists such as Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Jean Baudrillard, postmodern art is characterized by depthlessness, pastiche, and the extermination of the real. Although he could just as easily be speaking for Eagleton or Baudrillard, David Herman observes that "despite Jameson's explicit claims to the contrary . . . we are implicitly asked to arrive at the 'moralizing judgement' that postmodernism, at least on one level, means a powerlessness to act positively and constructively within the present historical moment" (166). But this conception of an exclusively ludic postmodernism is shaped more by their nostalgia for (or, in Baudrillard's case, a loss of faith in) Marxist utopian politics than by a discriminating survey of contemporary literature.[9] Moreover, this monolithic and apocalyptic conceptualization of postmodernism is quickly becoming outdated. Critics such as Susan Strehle, Linda Hutcheon, Alan Wilde, and Paul Maltby identify an "oppositional postmodernism [that] strongly opposes the established society and culture and seeks new forms of critique and opposition" (Best and Kellner 27).[10]

Those who define literary postmodernism as an essentially ludic enterprise, and this includes both critics (Gerald Graff) and advocates (Ihab Hassan) of postmodernism, would also be uncomfortable with the suggestion that Bone "act[s] positively and constructively within the present historical moment" by fashioning alternate identities. As Jane Flax observes, "postmodernist deconstructors of the self empty subjectivity of any possible meaning or content" (231). But just as proclaiming the death of the author does not mean that all authors have suddenly expired, post-Enlightenment views of identity do not require us to completely jettison this concept either. In both cases, it simply means that the ways in

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which we *think* about authorship and identity have changed. In *Bastard*, for example, Bone's identity is not locked within her waiting to be discovered. Instead, it is created, fluid, and plural. Consequently, Bone must accept the ongoing burden of generating identities/stories for herself. In a postmodern world view, identity is actually *more* significant because it is generated and accepted by the subject rather than simply given to or imposed on him or her.

I have suggested that for Bone to remake her life she must acknowledge that she is responsible for how she imagines herself *and* others. But the novel begins by showing how Bone is shaped by the ways others imagine her. Indeed, one important function of the first eight chapters (besides setting in motion the story of Bone's abuse) is to introduce the names from which Bone will try to escape in the novel's crucial middle section.[11] Bone's given name is Ruth Anne. Although her mother, Anney, is unable to name her because of difficulties with the labor (which is brought on prematurely when Anney is thrown through the windshield of a car), Bone's Granny and Aunt Ruth select names which firmly link the infant to a loving, matriarchal world. Since Bone's mother is unmarried and the father has "run off," this gesture of female solidarity is especially important, though short-lived. Granny and Ruth cannot even decide on the spelling of Bone's middle name. Bone explains, "they hadn't bothered to discuss how Anne would be spelled, so it wound up spelled three different ways on the form—Ann, Anne, and Anna" (2–3).

This confusion is heightened by the fact that Granny and Ruth cannot agree on the father's name either. Anney has just turned fifteen when she gives birth to Bone, and Granny is so angry that she refuses to speak the father's name. Aunt Ruth, on the other hand, "had never been sure of his last name anyway" (3). Consequently, the women give the hospital clerk two different names for the father. Catching the discrepancy, "the clerk got mad" and stamped "ILLEGITIMATE" "in oversized red-inked block letters" on her birth certificate (3–4). As Bone tells us, "there I was—certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (3). Beneath the humor of this opening scene, we see from the very beginning that Bone's identity is unstable. Her mother and father both fail to give her a name; Granny and Ruth do provide one for her, but their inability to come to an agreement about that name allows a petty clerk (who represents the callous patriarchy of the state) to give her a name that legally marginalizes her—bastard. Deprived of her father's name, the only name that the state will recognize as legal, these scarlet letters not only label her "illegitimate," but as "*no-good*, *lazy*," and "*shiftless*" (3).

The name Ruth also calls to mind the Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi has two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. After all three husbands die, Naomi plans to return home to Bethlehem. Despite Naomi's protests, Ruth insists on leaving her native Moab and following her beloved mother-in-law. Once in Bethlehem, a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband "redeems" these two women by marrying Ruth. The marriage secures the fortunes of the two women who, in a patriarchal society, are vulnerable without a male protector. While the story of Naomi and Ruth is a moving story of the mother/daughter bond, it is this very bond which breaks down in *Bastard*. Instead of "redeeming" Bone, her mother fails to stop Glen's abuse and even chooses him over Bone at the end of the novel. The name Ruth, then, is an ironic commentary on the relationship between Bone and her mother. It is also another reminder that Bone, like Ruth and Naomi, lives in society where one's "name" is determined by, and dependent upon, men.

Bone's precarious status in her family and in society is represented best, though, by her nickname. "Bone," while not a "masculine" name, is gender neutral, further separating "Ruth Anne" from her identity as a woman. And just as Bone's designation as a bastard can be blamed on Granny and Ruth, as well as the vindictive male clerk, the name Bone also has both a male and female source. Uncle Earle describes the newborn infant as "no bigger than a knucklebone" (2). (This image comes naturally to Earle, for he, like Bone's other uncles, spends much of his leisure time fighting.) Still, it is Bone's young cousin Deedee who gives the infant her name when she pulls "the blanket back to see 'the bone'" (2). Again, the sexes join forces to replace the name Ruth Anne with one which (no matter how innocently) demeans her. A bone, of course, is a thing, an object, something to be possessed, broken, or thrown to the dogs. In fact, this is exactly how Daddy Glen regards his stepdaughter. Granny, who disproves of Glen, notices, "He's always looking at me out the sides of his eyes like some old junkyard dog waiting to steal a bone" (37). Granny, however, cannot see that her daughter Anney is not the only "bone he wants" (37).

Bone, like Ruth, is also a name with Biblical significance. In the first account of creation in Genesis, God makes both man and woman in his own image. Not much later, though, we learn that woman is made from the rib of Adam. After God finishes creating Eve, Adam says, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23). Bone's name, then, is a family name in the largest sense, making clear that in the Judeo-Christian tradition women are, at best, an afterthought and, at worst, the possession of men.

In Daddy Glen's mind, Ruth Anne is *his* bone and *his* flesh, and in his relentless effort to possess his stepdaughter, he uses a barrage of names to "break" her. At different times throughout the novel he calls her "a little bitch," "a cold-hearted bitch," a "*goddam little bastard*," and "a little cunt" (106, 130, 284). Showing the power of such names, Bone asks, "What was it I had done? Why had he always hated me? Maybe I was a bad girl, evil, nasty, willful, stupid, ugly—everything he said" (252). Much earlier in the novel, Bone adamantly tells Granny that she "an't no fool and an't no bastard" (144); but, as the years progress, Bone has a harder time rejecting the horrible names that are given to her. Early in the novel, Bone recounts an evening when she is five and her cousin Earle is just a little younger. This scene is worth recounting in full because it illustrates how even those who most love Bone give her names that fuel her violent self-hatred. On this particular evening, Little Earle is the center of attention. Bone recalls:

> Granny covered her mouth with one hand to hide her teeth. "You ugly little boy," she teased Little Earle, almost laughing between her words. "You ugly, ugly, ugly little thing."
>
> Earle paused, crowed like a hoot owl, and rocked back and forth as if his momentum were too strong for him to come to a full stop without falling over. Temple and Patsy Ruth shook their wet fingers at his fat little belly while Grey and Garvey smacked their lips and joined in with Granny.
>
> "Ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly! You so ugly you almost pretty!"
>
> Earle squealed and jumped and laughed full out. "Ug-ly," he parroted them. "Uggg-lly!" His face was bright and smiling, and his hands flew up and down like bumblebees, fast and wild up near his ears.
>
> "Ugly. Ugly. Ugly."
>
> "You are just the ugliest thing!" (19–20)

With no authorial comment, Allison presents a scene of shattering domestic terror. The grandmother, obviously uncomfortable with her own looks (she covers her teeth with her hand), unwittingly passes down to her grandson her feelings of unattractiveness. And when the whole family joins in to chant "ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly," this scene is even more terrifying. Little Earle, unaware of what this name means, delights in the attention. But the reader, at least by the end of the novel, understands that this mantra helps ensure that Earle, like his father and uncles before him, will resign himself to a dead-end life, highlighted by desperate brawls and prison sentences.

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Bone also receives this nickname, this terrible family legacy. In the same scene, Bone, who is speaking of her grandmother, recalls:

> I could smell wet snap beans, tobacco, lemon juice on her neck, a little sharp piss scent, and a little salt.
>
> "Ugly," I repeated, and buried my face in her dress, my smile so wide the warm cotton rubbed my teeth.
>
> "Pretty ugly," Granny whispered above me, her fingers sliding across the back of my head, untangling my hair and lifting it up off my neck. "Almost pretty. Oh, you're a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure." (21)

Too young to discern the irony, both Little Earle and Bone smilingly accept the family's intense self-loathing. As they grow older, though, this self-loathing will turn into violence—against themselves and others.

The novel's middle chapters contain chilling examples of how names destroy the psyche. These episodes, which might seem extraneous to the casual reader, suggest what will happen to Bone if she ever fully accepts the names that others have given her. Shannon Pearl, Bone's "monstrous," albino friend is also the victim of vicious name-calling (155). While Shannon's sentimental parents call her things like "precious angel" and "miracle child" (155), her classmates refer to her as a "Cootie train" and as "Lard Eyes" (154, 156). And one man, surprised by her strange appearance, tells her, "Child, you are the ugliest thing I have ever seen" (165). Bone, who is with her at the time, witnesses firsthand the destructive impact of the word ugly. She reports that "Shannon froze. Her mouth fell open, and her whole face seemed to cave in as I watched. Her eyes shrank to little dots, and her mouth became a cup of sorrow" (165). Shocked by the man's cruelty and by Shannon's reaction, Bone screams, "You bastard! . . . You goddam gutless son of a bitch! . . . You think you so pretty? You ugly sack of shit! You shit-faced turd-eating—" (165). Bone is stopped mid-sentence, but she has obviously mastered the nuances of name-calling. Bone proves that she, like Little Earle, can parrot the verbal violence so common in her family. While we appreciate the fact that she defends Shannon, her outburst suggests that she has learned too well the damage that language can inflict. Ironically, she even uses the very word which she tries to escape throughout the novel—bastard.

Still, Bone uses her rough language to defend Shannon more than she uses it to hurt the anonymous stranger. This is why it is so disturbing later on when Bone and Shannon use this type of language against each other. Angry because she has slipped and used the word "nigger" instead of the

more "Christian" "colored," Shannon tells Bone that everyone knows that her family is "a bunch of drunks and thieves and bastards" (170). Stung by this assault, Bone calls Shannon a "white-assed bitch" and chants, "Ugly . . . ugly . . . ugly" (170, 172). If this refrain seemed harmless early on, it hardly does now. Following in the footsteps of Daddy Glen, Bone deliberately uses language as a weapon. Bone is no longer just a victim; she has become a victimizer, and, for the first time, she is truly ugly. Eventually the names become too much to bear for Shannon. At a family picnic condescending adults call her "Precious" and a cousin tells her she is a "fat old thing" (199). Unable to live with these and the other horrible names she has been called, Shannon pours so much lighter fluid on the grill that she is consumed by fire. Her story is hardly extraneous; it illustrates that the names we give each other—often without thought—can have terrible consequences.

Another example of the terrible power of names is Bone's Aunt Alma. Alma goes "crazy" after she loses one of her babies. She wrecks her home, frightens the children, and threatens to cut her husband's throat with a razor. Later we find that Alma, like Shannon, is driven to her desperate act by the harsh language of a family member. Despondent over the loss of her child, Alma tells her husband that she wants another baby. Alma recounts her husband's response: "'What you want an't what I want.' He said, 'You old and ugly and fat as a cow, crazy as a cow eaten too much weed, and you smell like a cow been lying in spoiled milk.' Said, 'I wouldn't touch you even if you took a bath in whiskey tonic and put a bag over your head'" (272). It is hardly a wonder that Alma goes "crazy."

Subjected to language as brutal as any physical blow, Shannon and Alma both break under the stress. Bone, who is the victim of equally abusive language, in addition to her stepfather's physical abuse, is also in danger of breaking. As a result, throughout the novel, but especially in the middle chapters, Bone spends a considerable amount of time imaginatively renaming herself. This task is a vital one because the names that others have given her (Ruth, Ann, Anne, Anna, Boatwright, Bitch, Cunt, Bone, Bonehead, Bastard, Ugly, Thinboned, Shiftless, Lazy, No-good) lead to desperation and death. Fortunately, Bone intuitively understands that to change one's name is to change one's story. Consequently, she begins to look for stories/names that will better serve her.

For example, after the severe beating she receives at the end of chapter eight, Bone looks to gospel music for comfort. Standing outside a revival meeting, she listens rapturously to a gospel choir: "The sweet gospel music poured through me in a piercing young boy's voice, and made all my nasti-

ness, all my jealousy and hatred, swell in my heart" (135). Ultimately, though, this music fails to purge her of these emotions, and she realizes that gospel music—as well as the story of Christian redemption—is not a cure-all. Indeed, she recognizes that it is designed "to make you hate and love yourself at the same time," to make you both "glorified" and "ashamed" (136). Of course, what Bone needs is less shame, not more, and while the music does make her feel "glorified," that feeling does not translate into salvation or even real comfort. She comes "close to being saved about fourteen times" but never can go through with it (151). Bone explains, "The magic I knew was supposed to wash over me with Jesus' blood was absent, the moment cold and empty" (152). Eventually Bone's mother forces her to be baptized, but Bone reports, "Whatever magic Jesus' grace promised, I didn't feel it" (152). The only thing she does feel is the cold she comes down with afterwards. Like the gospel singers she admires (who are portrayed as amorous drunks), Bone loves the music. But, in the end, it amounts to little more than "a song of absolute hopeless grief" (203).

Bone finds more hope in the stories of her aunts and Granny. These stories, in which she is often the center of the narrative, reaffirm Bone's place and value in the family. Daddy Glen, who wants to portray Bone as a "bad girl" in his own lurid sexual fantasies, warns Bone not to listen to these family stories. Luckily, she ignores his warning and even creates her own. Early in the novel, when she moves to a new school, Bone lies about her name to avoid being pigeonholed as white trash. She boldly claims that she is "Roseanne Carter from Atlanta" (67). On another occasion, Bone tells her sister Reese a horror story about hitchhiking to dissuade her from "flagging down strangers" (75). But these stories are told early on, and most of Bone's tales are not this innocent; in fact, they reflect the increasing seriousness of her situation. In chapter eight, Bone has fantasies about being beaten by Daddy Glen. During the course of these daydreams, she tells us that she would "stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him" (112).

These fantasies do allow Bone to mark up imaginary victories against her stepfather, but they also lack the "magic" to liberate her. Instead of giving her the hope of a remade life, these fantasies—like gospel music—simply add to her shame. As she says:

> I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. I

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> lived in a world of shame. . . . I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but *I* was the one who masturbated. I did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it? (112–113)

These fantasies become even "more violent and more complicated" at the end of chapter twelve (112). While staying with her Aunt Raylene, Bone finds a trawling chain. She takes a hook from the chain and hides it under the house. One night, Bone tells us:

> I snuck out to get the hook. I took it back to my room, pried the chain off, and cleaned and polished it. When it was shiny and smooth, I got in bed and put it between my legs, pulling it back and forth. It made me shiver and go hot at the same time. I had read in one of the paperbacks Daddy Glen hid in the garage about women who pushed stuff up inside them. I held the chain and thought about that, rubbed it against my skin and hummed to myself. I wasn't like the women in those books, but it felt good to hold that metal, to let those links slip back and forth until they were slippery. I used the lock I had found on the river bank to fasten the chain around my hips. It felt sun-warmed and tingly against my skin, as shiny as the sweat on Uncle Earle's freckled shoulders, as exciting as the burning light behind my eyes. It was mine. It was safe. Every link on that chain was magic in my hand.
>
> I put my head back and smiled. The chain moved under the sheet. I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me. (193)

To Bone's credit, she understands that she is not like the women in Glen's "dirty books." More importantly, she sees that she has not yet imagined what she really wants. Nevertheless, these increasingly violent fantasies indicate that Daddy Glen *has* touched what she "really was." Not only is Bone not safe, but she is in danger of accepting the role which Daddy Glen has assigned to her—that of porno-vixen.

Beginning in chapter nine, Bone's stories not only reflect her sexual confusion but her hatred as well. As Aunt Alma observes, "Bone's gotten almost mean-hearted. . . . Something's got to be done" (119). Bone's mean-heartedness is demonstrated by the fact that she begins to tell her cousins stories which "featured bloodsuckers who consumed only the freshly butchered bodies of newborn babies" and "green-faced dwarfs

promising untold riches to children who would bring them the hearts of four and forty grown men" (119). Understandably consumed with hate, Bone finds herself less and less able to fashion the horror of her life into something more positive. Thus, her stories are now "full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives" (119). No longer do her stories provide her with an alternate, positive identity (Roseanne Carter) or convey important instructions (keeping Reese from hitch-hiking). Rather, they reflect the agony of life with Daddy Glen and Bone's limited ability to deal with the physical and verbal violence.

Bone's stories bear an uncanny resemblance to the stories that Shannon Pearl creates before her death. Shannon's stories also feature "decapitations, mutilations, murder, and mayhem" (157). Unlike Shannon, though, Bone can still imagine alternate identities; but she is no longer interested in nice Roseanne Carter from Atlanta. Now, Bone more and more frequently imagines herself as an outlaw. Discarding their usual games, Bone convinces her sister Reese that they should play "mean sisters" (212). They not only play Dalton Girls, but they also play the mean sisters of Johnny Yuma, Francis Marion, Bat Masterson, Jim Bowie, and Broderick Crawford (212–213). While we admire the fact that Bone is no longer content to play the role of a boy, Roseanne Carter was no one's sister, and, most importantly, was not an "outlaw."

This is significant because, for Allison, stories, like names, have consequences. Immediately after playing mean sisters, Bone actually becomes an outlaw. Along with her cousin Grey, she plans and executes a break-in at the local Woolworth to strike back at the manager who has unfairly banned her from the store. Taken out of context, this episode has little import. In actuality, though, it reminds the reader that the stories we tell do have a tangible effect on our lives. Allison is not suggesting that telling or reading stories about outlaws will turn someone into a criminal. But Bone's case does suggest that imagining oneself as an outlaw or as ugly is a self-destructive act. Bone correctly seeks to recreate herself, but she must avoid adopting identities that are as limited and unhealthy as the ones that have been forced upon her.

What Bone is looking for cannot be found in her reading either, although her reading list is extensive. It includes *Black Beauty*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Secret Garden*, *Little Women*, *The Bobsey Twins*, *A Christmas Carol*, Zane Grey novels, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. These novels, with their easily overcome obstacles and Disney endings, offer little more than an unattainable vision of domestic bliss or the hope

of escape. And when she reads *Gone with the Wind*, Bone realizes that these romances marginalize her and her kind. She says:

> A sharp flash went through me. Emma Slattery, I thought. That's who I'd be, that's who we were. Not Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks. I was part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins, fighting with the darkies and stealing ungratefully from our betters, stupid, coarse, born to shame and death. (206)

Bone wants "to be more like the girls in storybooks, princesses with pale skin and tender hearts" (206), but she realizes that she could never be "that worshipful, dreamy-eyed storybook girlchild" (208). As a result, Bone also reads more adult novels, including *The Naked and the Dead*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *The Group*. But even these more serious and realistic works fail to address her unique situation.

As we have seen, Bone spends chapters nine through sixteen "looking for something special," "something magical," stories which can transform her and her world (207). Yet she does not find that magic in gospel music, in the mean-hearted tales she shares with Shannon Pearl, in her violent sexual fantasies, or even in her reading. It is Bone's Aunt Raylene who finally offers her that elusive magic. There is much to admire about the fiercely independent Raylene. When she was young, she called herself Ray (another example of renaming) and worked at a carnival. There, as the story goes, she "cut" a man who tried to take advantage of her. In addition to be being strong and independent, Raylene is also caring and nurturing, and during her stay with Raylene, Bone decides never to live again in the same house with Daddy Glen (274). While Raylene cannot protect Bone from Glen's final and most brutal assault, Bone has developed enough confidence during her stay with Raylene to defend herself physically and verbally. Not quite thirteen years old, Bone is still no match for her step-father. Raylene, however, is there to pick up the pieces and becomes Bone's surrogate mother when Anney runs off with Glen.

Raylene's greatest contribution to Bone, though, is that she teaches her how to create a different kind of story, one based on something more than hate. In a scene that occurs before Glen rapes Bone, Bone sees a bus from Bushy Creek Baptist Church "with flat-faced children pressed against the windows staring at me hatefully" (262). In response, Bone "glared back at them." "Anger," she explains, "was like a steady drip of poison into my soul, teaching me to hate the ones that hated me" (262). Raylene tells her, "You don't know who those children are. Maybe they're nasty and silly and hateful. Maybe not" (262). Raylene continues, "You're

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making up stories about those people. Make up a story where you have to live in their house, be one of their family, and pass by this road. Look at it from the other side for a while. Maybe you won't be glaring at people so much" (262). The novel ends before Bone can fully integrate this information. She does create one final story, but it fails to see things from the other side. And if it doesn't glare, then neither is it realistic:

> I closed my eyes and tried to make up a story for myself. I pretended we were back in that house over in West Greenville that Mama had loved so, pretended that Daddy Glen had joined the Pentecostal Church and gotten a cross-country trucking job that would pay him lots of money but keep him away from home. I imagined Mama getting a job where she could sit down all she wanted, where the money was good and she never got any burns or had to pull back her hair back so tight off her face that she got headaches. Maybe she could be a teacher? Or one of those women behind the makeup counter at the Jordan Marsh? I bit my lips and let it all play out under my eyelids—Reese in a new dress for Easter, me with all the books I wanted to read, Mama sitting in the sun with her feet up, Daddy Glen far way and coming home only often enough to make Mama smile. I fell asleep there dreaming, loving the dream. (263)

This happy ending that Bone imagines is as unlikely as the endings of *The Secret Garden* and *Tom Sawyer*, and this dream is quickly erased when Glen rapes Bone and Anney chooses Glen over her battered child.[12] As the novel closes, Bone, still suffering from her injuries, is little more than "a whisper in the dark saying no and hoping to die" (303). She believes that "the world was full of Daddy Glens" and, understandably, does not "want to be in the world anymore" (296). Like her friend Shannon Pearl, Bone longs to "disappear from this world" (201).

Before Anney leaves, she gives her daughter a new birth certificate, one that is not marked illegitimate across the bottom. Bone, then, is no longer a bastard; she has finally escaped the state-given name which identified her as "*no-good, lazy, shiftless*" (3). Considering what has just happened to her, though, this is little consolation. What is interesting about the certificate is that the "bottom third" of it is "blank, unmarked, unstamped" (309). This description indicates that Bone herself will be responsible for filling out the blank spaces of her own identity.

And the evidence suggests that Bone does just that. After the rape, she describes herself as "older, meaner, rawboned, crazy, and hateful." She

says, "I was full of hate. . . . I was who I was going to be, and she was a terrible person" (301). Although the novel ends on this bleak note, it is clear that at some point Bone recovers. She is "not even thirteen years old" at the end of the novel, but she is *at least* seventeen when she tells a story called *Bastard Out of Carolina* (282).[13] In the years following the end of the novel, she transforms herself from a Boatwright to a storywright, from the victim of a story into the author of one (282). In effect, then, she renames herself by writing a story that forces the reader to reevaluate names such as "bastard," "poor white trash," and "ugly."

But if Bone has finally succeeded in changing her name, she has also changed her story. The story Bone tells shows that she has rejected idyllic childhood romances as well as stories of senseless violence and sexual exploitation. Most important, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, unlike the other stories that Bone creates, is a tale that does not "glare" at anyone—not even Daddy Glen or Anney. Roiphe argues that "at its worst, incest fiction has the lifeless feel of a feminist textbook" in which "the characters tend to be separated in crude shorthand: father, evil; daughter, innocent" (69–70, 70). *Bastard* eschews such simplistic formulations. While Bone is clearly a victim, she is far from innocent—not (as Daddy Glen might imagine) because she deserves or encourages her stepfather's assaults but because Allison dares to make Bone responsible for the stories she tells about herself and others. To put it another way, Bone can only reject the legacy of hate which she receives from her family and Daddy Glen through what Thomas Docherty describes as an "*encounter* with alterity" (206). This encounter, Docherty claims, "is constitutive of a stronger—philosophical—version of love" (207). The evidence of this love is the *kind* of story Bone tells us, the way she imagines those who betrayed her. And it is only when Ruth Anne looks at her story from the "other side" that she is able to clear the bone of hatred from her throat and sing a gospel, not of hopeless, but of hopeful grief.

In "Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism," Linda Nicholson asks, "What is a postmodern approach to language that avoids the essentialist arrogance of much modernist, and some feminist, discourse but that also does not reduce feminism to silences or to a purely negative stance?" (80). "The answer," she says, "is a discourse that recognizes itself as historically situated, as motivated by values and, thus, political interests, and as a human practice without transcendent justification" (80–81). Allison meets these criteria. Her feminist politics is evident in that she focuses on women who have been marginalized by totalizing forces and ideas. At the same time, she reminds the reader—through the wide range

of women that she portrays, as well as their culpability in Bone's predicament—that we are as complex and various as the stories we tell. Finally, thanks largely to the novel's disruptive but essential middle chapters, Allison insists that we are all burdened with the responsibility of fashioning our own stories. While these stories will never offer the solace of transcendent justification, this constant negotiation between the word and the world avoids silence on the one hand and the purely negative on the other. And, if these stories are fashioned well, they will prevent us from passing on the debilitating glares we receive from others.

## NOTES

1. Chapters nine through sixteen account for 115 of the novel's 309 pages.

2. The short story is "Gospel Song." Although Allison has made some changes, the story appears more or less intact in *Bastard.* Many of the stories in *Trash*, including "River of Names," "The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee," "Mama," and "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know," feature characters and events which reappear in *Bastard.*

3. Interestingly, Allison herself has been critical of the novel's middle chapters, even describing them as "soft." But Allison's desire to write a "directed narrative"—the story of Bone's abuse—is at odds with her insistence that the book isn't about incest (Graff 46). See Allison's interview with Amber Hollibaugh (16) and her essay "Shotgun Strategies" (*Skin* 53–54).

4. Thus, Allison avoids defining Bone as just a helpless victim. Allison is particularly adamant about avoiding such cliches. She complains, "Traditional feminist theory has had a limited understanding of class differences and of how sexuality and self are shaped by both desire and denial. . . . The difficulty is that I can't ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much-denied class structure of our society" (*Skin* 15–16).

5. Similar views of postmodern subjectivity can be found in Docherty's *Alterities* (41–68) and Norman Holland's "Postmodern Psychoanalysis." Although Docherty's approaches identity from an ethical perspective and Holland's approach is pyschoanalytical, both replace the unitary Enlightenment self with one which is both historically situated and defined by its relations or transactions with others.

6. In "Social Criticism Without Philosophy," Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson underscore the limitations of both postmodernism and feminism: "Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism. Thus, each of the two perspectives suggests some important criticisms of the other. A postmodernist reflection on feminist theory reveals disabling vestiges of essentialism while a feminist

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reflection on postmodernism reveals androcentrism and political naivete" (20). According to Fraser and Nicholson, "the ultimate stake of an encounter between feminism and postmodernism is the prospect of a perspective which integrates their respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses. It is the prospect of a postmodernist feminism" (20). As I will argue, chapters nine to sixteen allow Allison to make this prospect a reality.

7. Allison's feminist project in *Bastard* bears some resemblance to the "fourfold task" that Jane Flax describes. Feminist critics, Flax argues, "need (1) to articulate feminist viewpoints of and within the social worlds in which we live, (2) to think about how we are affected by these worlds, (3) to think about how our thinking about them may itself be implicated in existing power/knowledge relationships, and (4) to think also about the ways in which these worlds ought and can be transformed" (182).

8. Nicholson writes in "Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism" that "postmodernism can be characterized by the rejection of epistemic arrogance for an endorsement of epistemic humility. Such humility entails a recognition that our ways of viewing the world are mediated by the contents out of which we operate. This means that not only are our specific beliefs and emotions about the world a product of our historical circumstances but so are the means by which we come to those beliefs and emotions and by which we resolve conflict when dissent is present. This does not entail the position that there are no solutions to epistemic dilemmas, merely that there are no final ones" (84–85).

9. For a brief discussion of the origins of the long–standing antipathy between Marxism and postmodernism, see Best and Kellner's *The Postmodernist Turn* (4–11).

10. In *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (1992), Strehle contends that the works of authors such as Pynchon, Coover, and Atwood "while patently not realistic, nonetheless seem impelled to explore, celebrate, criticize, and engage the outer world" (4). Linda Hutcheon and Alan Wilde are even less reluctant to argue that postmodern texts are politically relevant. Hutcheon claims in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) that historiographic metafictions, such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, are "inescapably political" (4). And Wilde makes the case in *Middle Grounds* (1987) that the neo-realistic short fictions of Grace Paley (among others) are both postmodern and, at their core, ethical. Maltby's *Dissident Postmodernists* (1991) focuses on writers such as Barthelme and Coover who "explore the political and ideological implications of the fictionality of meaning" (39). For other discussions of oppositional postmodernisms, see Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* (1981); Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Thomas Docherty's *Alterities* (1996), and Teresa Ebert's *Ludic Feminism and After* (1996).

11. Although it will become clear that *Bastard* is, at least partly, an examination of the dangers and uses of language, the style of the novel suggests that it is an example of realism rather than postmodernism. Alan Wilde's notion of midfiction suggests how Allison bridges these designations. Midfiction, he says, "rejects equally the oppositional extremes of realism on the one hand and a world-denying reflexivity on the other, and . . . invites us instead to perceive the

moral, as well as the epistemological, perplexities of inhabiting and coming to terms with a world that is itself ontologically contingent and problematic" (*Middle Grounds* 4). In other words, "whereas realism illustrates, somewhat meagerly, the arts of coping and survival, midfiction responds, with a greater sense of risk, by acts of redefinition and creation, by an imaginative reinterpretation of the place human beings hold, or may hold, in the world" (108).

12. This fantasy is more realistic, however, than the one she creates after Glen breaks her clavicle in chapter eight. She imagines him distraught and begging for forgiveness. Taking her script from sentimental novels, she forgives him and promptly dies (116).

13. On the second page of the novel, Bone, discussing the car accident which preceded her birth, says, "My Aunt Alma insists to this day that what happened was in no way Uncle Travis's fault, but I *know* that the first time I ever saw Uncle Travis sober was when I was seventeen and they had just removed half his stomach along with his liver" (2).

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