Dorothy Allison, What Did You Expect?

Dorothy Allison writes on the topic of being photographed for a magazine; refusing to be pictured “sprinkled with powdered sugar,” the author settles for a more realistic image. The essay was first published in Allure magazine in April 1998.

Dorothy Allison

WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

The photographer is a professional; her pictures appear in major magazines. She has two assistants, five cameras, and a no-nonsense attitude toward the people she sets out to capture. She calls half a dozen times, and during each conversation presents more ideas for how she wants to shoot me. Sprinkled with powdered sugar— that is her favorite. I don’t think so, I keep telling her. But every time she calls, she brings it up again. “I read some of your stuff, all that food and southern cooking,” she tells me. “Really, it would be cool, just a knockout.”

“It would be a cliché,” I tell her. “Let’s just do a regular picture, an everyday picture of a woman writer who doesn’t like to have her picture taken at all.”

“Do I look like the kind of woman who should be dipped in powdered sugar?” I ask Alix when I get off the phone.

“Absolutely,” she says, laughing, and then flashes the smile that is one of the reasons we have lived together for almost ten years.

“You’d look funny, Mama.” Our son, Wolf Michael, is right behind Alix. At five years old, he likes the idea of sugar, but he can tell from my expression I am not enthused.

“Well, it’s not going to happen, angel-boy.”

What was she thinking, this photographer who wanted to sprinkle me with sugar? Who did she think I was? Was she planning some rude joke I only barely comprehended?

Whenever I have to deal with interviewers or photographers, I find myself wondering the same thing. Do they know who I am? Do they know what my work is truly about? I imagine the editor who sends them out, the one who tells them, “A southerner, she writes about rednecks, about child abuse and incest, battered mothers and gospel music. Supposed to be a lesbian with a child. Has a novel coming out. See if you can get her to do something interesting.”

It’s that word “interesting” that makes me nervous. They all seem to have it in their eyes. Say something interesting. Do something different, something
redneck or lesbian. What is it you imagine that to be? I want to ask. And always, 
Who do you think I am?

A few years ago I went to Charleston, South Carolina, on behalf of the Last 
Great Places project for the Nature Conservancy. I had promised to write about 
the marshes that my family had visited when I was a girl, but by the time I arrived 
I was, as usual, exhausted and worried about what I could possibly say about birds 
and rice plantations. I took a taxi from the airport to the inn where I was sup-
possed to stay, getting there near ten o’clock — too late, I knew, for dinner or talk-
ning to the man who was to drive me out to the coast the next day. I’ll eat some 
crackers and go right to bed, I promised myself as I staggered up to the checkout 
desk. The man behind the polished mahogany desk frowned at me. “I’m afraid we 
have no vacancies,” he told me sternly.

“1 have a reservation,” I told him. I pulled out my confirmation number on a 
page that had been faxed from the inn two weeks before.

He read the letter closely but kept looking over at me, his eyes moving down 
from my wrinkled jacket to my black tennis shoes. I travel a lot and have learned 
the hard way to wear what’s comfortable. For this trip I hadn’t even brought my 
usual dress-up outfit. I was, after all, going to be tromping through muddy 
marshes, not reading at a bookstore or talking to college students.

“Hmm,” he said, frowning. “Let me check on this.” He stepped into an 
alcove off to one side and picked up a phone.

I looked around. It was a very nice inn. The mahogany desk matched the 
breakfront by the staircase. Cut flowers were on every table. The carpet was deep 
and pale russet, nothing like the industrial carpet I see in most hotels. I felt my 
shoulders hunch and my neck pull tight. You don’t belong here, I thought, and 
looked again at the man whispering into the phone. When he walked back to 
where I stood, he looked even more uncomfortable than I felt.

“You’re Ms. Allison, the writer?” He looked at my suitcase as if there would 
be some label on it that would prove I wasn’t Ms. Allison at all.

I looked down at my comfortable shoes and loose rayon trousers, the carry-
on suitcase with its broken zippers, the satchel beside it with my notebook and 
emergency supplies of raw peanuts and vitamins. I wondered what kind of writer 
usually stayed at this inn, maybe the kind who dressed better and freshened their 
makeup before getting off the plane, maybe the kind who checked their luggage 
and traveled with their husbands, or even the kind who had matching luggage 
and a little computer in a snazzy leather bag. Was I really a writer, someone who 
had a reservation, who was here to do a piece of work and deserved a comfortable 
bed and a quiet room — or a fraud, a runaway from a trailer park who would steal 
the hotel towels and peel the shelf liner out of the drawers in the breakfront when 
no one was watching?

“I am,” I told the man. “Is there a problem, or do you have my room?”

He gave me my key, but he did it reluctantly, and for the three days I was 
there he watched me closely every time I crossed the lobby. I imagined that 
when I left, he would count the towels and check the drawers to see if the shelf 
liner remained.
"I thought you were blond," the escorts say when they come to meet me at the airport. "I thought you'd be taller." "Older." "Younger." They hold out my book and look from the picture on the back cover to me. "You're much prettier than your picture," they say sometimes. Some say the picture doesn't look like me at all, though it does. There's my squint, my lips pressed together, my wide cheekbones and tired eyes. I look like my picture but not the picture they expect. Sometimes when I see them looking from me to the picture in their hands, I check myself out in the closest reflective surface. I am always the same, sometimes a little heavier or thinner, but always the same stooped, stubborn shoulders, ready grin, and ragged hair — my mama's replica, only in nicer clothes and better shoes.

For years I've been telling friends that the only place you really see working-class women is in pictures taken at disasters. Car wrecks and mining disasters. That's where you find women who look like me. It's kind of a joke, though it is not funny, and it's not entirely accurate. We're the stars of the tabloid talk shows, and we're typically seen covering our faces or sitting slumped in despair while our husbands, boyfriends, brothers, or cousins are hauled away in handcuffs on Cops. The first time I saw that television show, I sat through the whole thing with my mouth hanging open, unable to look away and barely able to stand what I was seeing. Family, community, memory, and my people — vividly rendered on videotape and in simple human anguish. Whenever I meet an escort in an airport, I remember how I felt watching Cops, the shame and the outrage. Do they recognize how much I look like those pitiful white girls leaning against the patrol cars? Is that what they see when they come to meet me, the assistant professors who teach my books, the graduate students who want to write their own novels and hope to learn how by making notes on what I say? Is that why they sometimes hesitate and check my picture again? Are you the writer? they ask.

This is what I look like, I tell myself when people hesitate at meeting me. This is who I am. This is what a 48-year-old woman looks like when she comes from my family but hasn't worked in a factory all her life, has mostly worked at desk jobs, hasn't given birth to children or had cancer yet, and sees a dentist fairly regularly. I know exactly how much I resemble my mother, and where the difference lies.

I have my mama's hips, full and lush, and her mouth, too often clamped stubbornly tight. I have the same shadows under my eyes she had and her square strong chin, but it is when I smile or laugh that I look most like her. I have trained

Book cover, Bastard Out of Carolina. The novel was published in 1992, hailed by critics and rave reviews, and nominated for a National Book Award. The narrator is a twelve-year-old girl, "Bone" Boatwright, who shares many of Allison's own experiences: illegitimacy, poverty, and rape. Book covers are marketing tools — the representation of the girl here tries to suggest the issues of class and sexuality and also to sell the book as a certain kind of literary fiction. (From Bastard Out of Carolina by Dorothy Allison, copyright © 1992 by Dorothy Allison. Used by permission of Dutton, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Photo by Elizabeth DeRamus)
myself not to drop my eyes, but even when I manage not to do it, I often find myself smiling crooked—an uncertain apologetic smile that is all about feeling uncomfortable with being looked at too closely. My mother would cover her mouth when she smiled, an effort to shield her stained teeth. Years ago I discovered that my version of that was to drop my hair across my eyes as if by doing that I could look out but the world could not see me clearly. I could be safe and hidden, as safe and protected as a woman covering her smile with her hand, or a girl looking away so no one can see her eyes. Nor safe at all, not protected, merely pretending to be so.

My mother worked as a waitress or a cook from the time she was a girl till just before she died. My earliest memories are of her sitting at the kitchen table with her little mirror and makeup bag, her short blond hair put up in pin curls, her fingers smoothing foundation over her cheeks. She wouldpluck her eyebrows into delicate arched lines and carefully fill in the shadows under her eyes with thick makeup. Only when her mask was in place would she release her hair and comb it into shape. Then she would smile at me and my sisters in her mirror.

"Ready for the world," my mother would announce, then flatten her lips together to even out her lipstick. "Ready for anything."

What my mama wore seemed to me like war paint—armor and shield and statement of intent. Don’t mess with me, my mama’s sculpted eyebrows seemed to warn. I’m ready for you, her dark eyeliner announced.

My sisters adopted the family armor easily, developing the ability to apply mascara while talking on the phone or blush while pulling curlers out of their hair. I never did. I brushed my hair straight back and scrubbed my face, wore my hair long and loose, and declared my independence by refusing to sleep with my hair in curlers. Now and then I would use some black eyeliner or dab my lips with a tangerine lip gloss but with no real enthusiasm. I was going to be different. I wasn’t going to be anything like what was expected of me.

Like all the other girls I met in college, I adopted the uniform of blue jeans and T-shirts. I believed myself a new creature, a woman who would never wear a girdle or get up early to put on her makeup before going out into the world. The kind of girl who worried about makeup and split ends and the shape of her butt could never be serious. I wanted to be serious. I wanted to be a revolutionary. I wanted to remake the world. Women who were working at remaking the world were supposed to move through the world as men did, disdainful of foolish obsessions like weight or hairstyle or the size of one’s breasts. My ideal of the revolutionary feminist was a fantasy creature—a mixture of Wonder Woman, Joan of Arc, and the drawing of a samurai woman I found in a sketchbook. My ideal might not be beautiful, but she wouldn’t care. I wouldn’t care either—no matter if I did. I would act like I didn’t care what I looked like, what people thought of me. If I acted like that long enough, I believed, sooner or later it would be so. I would get past my embarrassment, my self-conscious smiles and hangdog expressions. I would look like one of the women who carried banners in parades in big cities, with their eyes trained on the horizon and their faces shining with pride.
and determination. A woman who could do the necessary and do it without worrying about what people thought, that was what I aimed to make myself.

I have failed of course. I still worry about what people think. That is why I have so much trouble standing still for the camera’s lens or choosing what to wear before walking across a stage or even biting my lips before answering the questions put to me by reporters. Who I think I should be and who I am are not quite the same, though I try to behave as if that is not so. I show up wherever I can with my mother’s smile but without the makeup she so carefully applied, with my straightforward fictions of working-class families and the brutal difficulty of achieving anything like redemption. My persona is as much a conscious rejection

Film still, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Starring Jenniffer Jason Leigh as Anney, the mother, the movie version of the book was directed by Anjelica Huston and funded by Ted Turner. Turner decided it was too graphic to be shown on his TNT network, however, and it was subsequently picked up by Showtime. The book itself has been banned from classrooms and school libraries for its graphic nature. The character of Bone is played by actress Jenna Malone, shown here. (Photofest)
of my mother's armored features as it is an attempt not to cater to the prejudices and assumptions of a culture that seems not to want to look at women like me. It is not seamless, merely stubborn.

I was finally photographed in a Laundromat leaning on a washing machine with a basket propped on one hip. Why am I doing this? I kept wondering. But I had turned down so many of the photographer's requests, this one seemed almost reasonable. I kept laughing at myself and grinning weakly at the women who were actually doing their laundry.

The photographer sighed as she packed up her equipment. "I sure wish you'd let me sprinkle you with powdered sugar," she mumbled one more time.

I pushed my hair back off my face and shifted my aching hips. "Maybe next time," I told her. And then I gave her one of my mother's smiles, strong and stubborn, a smile that, to anyone who knows me, clearly said, No one is ever going to get a picture of me like that.

MESSAGE
In the essay, what relationship does Allison establish between her life experiences and her attitude toward being photographed? What connections does she make between social class and photographic expectations? What do you think the essay's title means?

METHOD
Allison resists being constructed by a photographer's cliché appropriations of her background: growing up southern and poor. In a comparative essay, consider the 4 images included in this cluster as representations: the essay, the photo of Allison, the book cover, and the DVD cover. Is there a noncliché way to represent class? Which representation is the least problematic, do you think? Which method would you choose if you were trying to represent, most concisely, some element of who you are?

MEDIUM
Allison said in an interview that no one in her family read Bastard Out of Carolina but that everyone saw the movie: "When the movie happened, it was a big deal. Relatives checked in that had not been heard from in this lifetime... It was a hoot." Which would you say is a bigger deal, a book or a movie? Why is one medium more impressive than another? Who would you cast to play yourself in the story of your life?